

Send Not to Know

by Subversa

An annoying event causes Hermione to choose to spend the Christmas break in seventh year away from her best friends, but Dumbledore feels she needs someone to watch over her. How will Hermione react to the appearance of the Potions master on her doorstep -- and how will they interact when cooped up alone together for days on end? **This story was written for the SS/HG Winter Exchange on Live Journal, for the prompt: A weekend alone for Hermione in the Granger's residence. Suddenly the Potions master turns up on her door step. For whom the bell rings, it rings for you.**

Part 1, Chapter 1: I'll Be Home For Christmas

Chapter 1 of 9

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No man is an island,

Entire of itself.

Each is a piece of the continent,

A part of the main.

If a clod be washed away by the sea,

Europe is the less.

As well as if a promontory were.

As well as if a manner of thine own

Or of thine friend's were.

Each man's death diminishes me,

For I am involved in mankind.

Therefore, send not to know

For whom the bell tolls,

It tolls for thee.

John Donne

Send Not to Know

Part I: Christmas, 1997

Chapter 1: I'll Be Home For Christmas

Hermione Granger thanked Stan Shunpike and Ernie Prang and wished them each a Happy Christmas before she stepped off the Knight Bus, with Crookshanks' basket in one hand and a rucksack full of clothing and personal items in the other. The week-old snowfall on her parents' lawn crunched under her feet as she made her way onto the walk and up to the front steps. Stomping her feet to remove any remaining snow, she used her key to open the door and slipped into the cold, dark house.

Dumping her rucksack at the foot of the stairs, she let Crookshanks out of his carrier and began to go through the rooms, switching on lights.

"It's really cold in here, isn't it, Crooks?" she said, rubbing her hands together.

Crookshanks gave her a disdainful glance from his baleful yellow eyes and turned his face pointedly away.

"I know you hate travelling on the Knight Bus, but it was either that or leave you at Hogwarts would you have preferred that?"

He flicked his tail once in answer.

"I've never seen you as angry as you were the one time I tried to Apparate with you. Even Mrs. Weasley couldn't heal the scratch on my cheek!" She reached up and traced a finger across her left cheek, the smooth skin belying the deep, angry mark that had been there at the end of the summer. She had gone to the Burrow, meaning to spend a weekend with the Weasleys before September first. Proud of her still-new Apparition license, she had decided to travel by that method, with her rucksack on her back and Crookshanks in her arms. Crookshanks had violently objected to the sensation of being squeezed through a too-small tube. Molly Weasley had fussed over Hermione for several minutes after she had arrived that day, healing the evidence of Crookshanks' displeasure, but Hermione had required a visit with the Healers at St. Mungo's to repair the deepest scratch.

"It's a good thing you came, dear," the motherly Healer had told her, smearing a thick, yellow goo over the newly-healed skin. "Otherwise, you would have had a scar on your face, and what young girl would want to mar such pretty skin, hmm?"

Hermione had flushed scarlet at the Healer's statement. It had been less from embarrassment over the words than from self-consciousness triggered by the warm look of agreement in Ron's eyes, as he had stood with Harry and Ginny at the side of the room. That very weekend, Hermione and Ron had shared their first kiss, which had quickly escalated into a rather awkward and dissatisfying tryst in Ginny's room, with Ginny and Harry locked in a heated embrace on the other twin bed.

Hermione shook herself out of her reminiscences and moved to engage the heater. Her parents had left it set quite low when they had departed for Switzerland for their skiing holiday. Neither they nor their daughter had anticipated that she would be coming home for the Christmas hols.

Hermione went to the fireplace in the sitting room and began to lay kindling for a fire. Now that her memories had been stirred, it would be just as well to let them flow and get it over with, she supposed.

Having a boyfriend had been a lovely novelty after six years of silent hoping. Viktor had been her only interlude in that time. Being the choice of a boy so much older, and one who was famous, as well, had been a huge lift to Hermione's status amongst the other girls at Hogwarts. His physical dominance and sexual aggression, however, had been quite alarming for her, particularly when she had not felt that level of passion for him.

Ron had been different: sweet, tender, loving as well as bull-headed, insensitive, and coarse. Hermione had very much enjoyed the hand-holding through the corridors, having a date for Hogsmeade weekends, and the desperate kisses, exchanged in the common room and at other odd places throughout the castle. What she had not enjoyed was Ron's insistence on frequent intercourse, a feat at which his only excellence was speed of completion. She had read several books about it, but could not persuade Ron to try any of the techniques listed there. She had begun to dread his entreaties and her reluctance had driven a wedge between them, in spite of her insistence that her lack of interest in sex had not indicated a lack of love for Ron.

The last weekend in November had brought about the first Gryffindor Quidditch match, during which they had soundly trounced Hufflepuff. Hermione had come upon Ron in a third-floor alcove, nailing Romilda Vane against the rough stone wall in a post-victory shag, his pale buttocks thrusting in time with Romilda's cries whilst his trousers hung at his knees. It had been difficult for Ron and Romilda to explain their subsequent injuries to their dormitory-mates: Ron had the word "cheat" traced across his bum cheeks as if drawn there by a sharp-bladed knife, whilst Romilda had the word "slut" gouged across the thigh which had been gripping Ron's waist as she had panted and moaned like the cow she was.

Hermione had been humiliated and infuriated; from that day forward, she had not spoken to Ron at all, in spite of Harry's frequent attempts to broker a peace between them. She and the boys had been set to spend Christmas at Hogwarts, where they would be the safest, but the rift between Ron and Hermione had brought out the git in the youngest Weasley boy. He had induced his mum to invite Harry, but not Hermione, home to the Burrow for Christmas.

Molly, having had the story of the break-up poured into her ears by her patently heartbroken son, had readily agreed, hoping that time would heal the friendship between Ron and Hermione, if not the romance. Molly had not, however, relished the notion of having feuding teenage lovers in her small house for the hols, so she had left Hermione out of her invitation, meaning to make it up to the young witch at a later time. After all, Molly had reasoned, Hermione had parents with whom to spend Christmas, but Harry had no one.

Ron had staged a loud conversation with Ginny in the common room, informing her of their mother's plans, all for Hermione's ears. Mindful, as always, of her Head Girl status, Hermione had bit back her scathing opinion of Ronald Weasley and his immature posturing. Instead, she had turned her mind to plans for her own Christmas holiday. With Harry and the Weasleys going to the Burrow for the winter break, Hermione would be the only Gryffindor remaining; she had no desire to kick around the castle on her own for the best part of three weeks.

Her parents had invited her to Switzerland for their skiing trip when they had planned it back in October. Hermione had declined, wanting to spend the holiday with the boys. It was far too late now to ask to be included in the Swiss trip; furthermore, if her parents became aware of her dilemma, they would give up the trip for themselves to spend Christmas with her. Hermione could not bear to be the cause of that kind of sacrifice. She had determined that she would wait at school until her parents departed for the ski lodge, then she would go home. It would be an excellent opportunity to really get a head start on revising for N.E.W.T.s, and she could indulge in the kind of comfort-food eating that was not possible at Hogwarts she *would* enjoy spending Christmas alone, she thought defiantly, with angry tears standing in her eyes.

Now she lit the fire in the grate with one of the long hearth matches, chuckling to herself at what a creature of habit she could be. Dropping the Muggle match in the grate, she tried her hand at a bit of non-verbal, wandless magic, and was gratified to see the flames leap up from the carefully stacked logs.

Now all she needed was a tub of chocolate ice cream and a pot of steaming cocoa, and her evening would be perfect! It was the Friday night before Christmas, the beginning of her holidays, and she could do anything she wanted.

The sour-faced man slumping in the chair before the headmaster's desk resembled nothing so much as a student who had been called on the carpet for a scolding. His shoulders were pulled in on his chest, his eyes were firmly fixed on his belt buckle, and a world-class sneer graced his lips. Oily black hair hung like curtains on either side of his sallow face, obscuring his expression from the patient man facing him on the other side of the desk.

Albus Dumbledore did not have to see Snape's face to approximate what his Potions master's expression would be. He knew that what he had to ask of Snape was uncommonly inconvenient, but it had to be done, and Snape was the only one who was both available and capable.

"If there were any other recourse, I would not ask you to do this."

"You might have given me some notice, Headmaster," the Potions master muttered, refusing to meet the older man's eyes.

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose. "You had plans for Christmas, Severus? I had no idea!"

Snape raised black eyes, fathomless as an abyss, to glare at his mentor. "You know very well I do *not*. Nevertheless, it is common courtesy to allow one's colleagues time for planning when asking a *favour*."

Dumbledore nodded sympathetically. "I apologise for the lack of notice. I am afraid that Hermione's decision to go home alone for Christmas took us all by surprise. And, as you are well aware, both Professor McGonagall and Nymphadora Tonks are conducting undercover surveillance assignments which it has taken us months to arrange. We do not have a single female Order member available to assist in this matter."

Snape sniffed. "I do not understand why you did not compel Miss Granger to remain at Hogwarts or, at the very least, insist that she go to with her *friends*." Snape infused the last word with such loathing that he might have been speaking a swear word. "Then she would be the Weasleys' problem, rather than *mine*."

Dumbledore studied him for a few moments. "No, I don't suppose you *would* understand, Severus. Take my word for it that it was a kindness to Hermione not to prevent her from going home but it is not safe for her to remain unprotected while her parents are abroad. I only ask that you remain until her parents return it is eight or nine days and then you will have fulfilled your obligation."

"You expect me to skulk about a Muggle neighbourhood inconspicuously for over a week?" Snape demanded peevishly.

Dumbledore laughed out loud. "Certainly not! It is very cold, even down south. Arabella Figg tells me that there has been snow on the ground in Surrey for days. No, you'll be staying in the house."

Snape stood abruptly. "I hope you have informed the girl to expect me."

Dumbledore stood also. "I have not she would only have objected. I mean to present her with a *fait accompli*."

Snape's lip curled in self-derision. "I'm sure she will be delighted," he said, his tone between anger and insolence.

Dumbledore extended an envelope, inscribed with Hermione's name and bearing the Hogwarts seal. "The letter will explain everything to her, dear boy. I'm sure that you will be comfortable at the Grangers' home. Happy Christmas to you!"

Snape turned on his heel, his robes billowing dramatically in his wake, and flung out of the room without deigning to respond.

A/N: Beta reading thanks to Snarkywench and Brit-picking kudos to MagicAlly.

Part I: Chapter 2: Home for the Holidays

Chapter 2 of 9

An annoying event causes Hermione to choose to spend the Christmas break in seventh year away from her best friends, but Dumbledore feels she needs someone to watch over her. How will Hermione react to the appearance of the Potions master on her doorstep -- and how will they interact when cooped up alone together for days on end?

Chapter 2: Home For the Holidays

Hermione watched the end of the Christmas movie with tears on her eyelashes; she felt silly, but she cried at the same movies every time she saw them. The empty pint tub of chocolate ice cream lay on its side on the coffee table with a spoon protruding from it; the weight of the spoon had been too much for the cardboard container and it had toppled over when she had set it down. The china teapot which had been full of homemade cocoa was empty, as well. Stretching, she spoke to Crookshanks. "I think it's about time for us to go to bed, don't you, Crooks? I want to be up early to begin revising."

The orange furball with a squashed face lifted his head and blinked at her, having been mollified by a can of real tuna tipped into his bowl. He had since cleaned himself, spreading the essence of tuna fish over his entire body, and was prepared to move his nap from the sitting room sofa to the bed upstairs.

Hermione jumped when the doorbell rang. Looking at her wristwatch in something of a panic, she stood up, her heart pounding. Who on earth would be at her door at ten

o'clock at night? Furtively, she crept from the sitting room into the hallway, placing her eye to the peephole.

Nothing but blackness.

She started again when someone rapped sharply on the door. Her heart now felt as if it were thumping in her throat.

"Miss Granger?"

She knew that voice.

Oh, surely not.

More pounding on the door, now impatiently.

"It's Professor Snape, Miss Granger. Kindly open the door."

For the love of Merlin! What had she done that was so bad that Snape pursued her from Hogwarts?

As she stood in the hallway, her wand at the ready but her mind blank of initiative, she heard a muttered imprecation, followed by the Muggle locks on the door twisting to disengage. At the same time, the wards she had placed came tumbling down as if they had been cast by a firstie. The door swung open, and Severus Snape swept into the hallway.

"Stupid little girl!" he snarled, slamming the door shut behind him. "Do you think it is a good idea to have me standing upon your doorstep entreating entry for all your neighbours to hear?"

Hermione gaped at him, her indignation nearly robbing her of the power of speech. She stood in her front hallway, her hair twisted up in a clip, wearing her oldest joggers, with colourful Winnie-the-Pooh slippers on her feet and her wand clutched at the ready in her hand.

Before her towered her Potions professor. His face, usually pale, was reddened from the bite of the icy wind outside, which also accounted for the disarray of the longish black hair. He wore a heavy black travelling cloak over his usual school robes, and his black boots were crusted with snow, which was melting and pooling on the hallway tile. Much more striking, however, was his physical attitude; as if in answer to his vexation, power radiated from his figure in waves, the flashing of his dark eyes and pronounced sneer accentuating the unwisdom of annoying him.

"No!" Hermione responded, her own irritation making her rather reckless. "I don't think it's a good idea for you to be on my doorstep at all! Why were you? What are you doing here? No one invited you! Go away!"

Snape's lips thinned at the disrespect of her tone. In answer, his eyes glittered dangerously. "We may not be at Hogwarts, Miss Granger, but I am still your teacher. You would do well to keep that in mind unless, of course, you *want* to spend the first week after the New Year in detention with me."

Now Hermione's mouth dropped open. "You can't do that! I'm in my own home! I will say what I please!"

Snape reached into his cloak and drew out an envelope which he then held out to her. "As you will," he replied indifferently. "You may refer to me as 'sir' or 'professor' and do so in a tone of respect, or you may spend your evenings in January sorting pickled newts without gloves."

Hermione clamped her mouth shut and glowered at him stormily. His lips stretched in a thin, triumphant smile, and he looked down at the envelope in his hand.

"Professor Dumbledore has sent a letter to explain my presence," he stated.

Hermione wordlessly snatched the envelope from his hand and ripped it open, reading the headmaster's words with furious indignation.

My dear Miss Granger,

Please accept the protection of Professor Snape during the absence of your parents. Your sudden change of plans did not allow us to make more elaborate arrangements for your safety whilst away from school. Professor Snape has graciously agreed to sacrifice his holiday to ensure that no harm will come to you. I sincerely hope that you can find it in your heart to receive him into your home and to make him feel welcome during this season of goodwill towards men.

Wishing you a Happy Christmas,

Albus Dumbledore

Hermione crushed the parchment in her hand, staring at a spot on the floor, her cheeks flushed red with mortification. Dumbledore had been aware of her change of plans? Did that mean he was also aware of the reason for the change? Did Snape know? Was the hateful Potions master aware that Hermione's so-called boyfriend had taken up with another girl, to her ever-lasting humiliation? Was she going to have to endure his taunting for the next week?

Dropping the wadded parchment into the snow-puddle on the floor, Hermione turned and walked away from Snape without speaking a word to him. With narrowed eyes, he watched her go.

Turning to the door, he engaged the Muggle locks and warded it carefully from within. He had already placed wards on each window of the house, which had taken him over an hour in the raw wind. He had found no sign, thus far, of danger in this Muggle neighbourhood. The job of protecting Miss Granger should be a sinecure.

Hermione came back into the hallway, a steaming mug of fragrant tea in her hand. Extending the mug to Snape, she said, "You can hang your cloak on the coat tree behind you."

He took the mug from her, and she withdrew her wand, murmuring *Evanesco* to remove the melted snow from the hallway floor. She left him again, only to return a few moments later, her arms laden with blankets and a bed pillow.

"Go on then!" she said impatiently. "Take your cloak off before you catch your death of cold!"

Snape set the mug of tea on the hallway table, removed his cloak, and then hung it on the wooden structure from which Miss Granger's own school cloak was hanging.

"Come with me," she said and led the way into the back of the house.

The room they entered was fabulously warm compared to the environment outside. It was furnished with a long sofa, facing the hearth; the sofa was flanked by matching armchairs. A rack of Muggle electronic devices were arrayed against one wall. Miss Granger's familiar was imitating a furry ginger cushion at one end of the sofa. The girl tossed her armload of bedding on the unoccupied end of the sofa and turned to face him, her own expression closed.

"You can sleep here. Help yourself to what you need from the kitchen; it's through there." She nodded her head toward a darkened doorway, through which Snape could discern glowing red numbers on a large white stove. "The bathroom is the first doorway on the right in the back hallway. I'm going to bed."

She paused only long enough to scoop up the cat and she left the room; he could hear her climbing the stairs and was treated to the sound of her conveying her feelings by slamming her bedroom door.

"Good night, Miss Granger," Snape murmured with sardonic amusement, seating himself before the fire and beginning to sip the excellent tea.

Hermione woke to the sound of strangled shouts, her heart pounding a tattoo in her chest. Crookshanks was standing on the end of her bed, his ears pricked keenly forward. Arming herself, Hermione crept to her bedroom door and stopped to listen, but heard nothing save for the beating of her own heart. She opened her door and moved out onto the landing, listening with all her might.

The sounds became audible again, and she recognized Snape's voice. It was Snape making those dreadful noises – was he being attacked? But he was not forming intelligible words.

It dawned on her, then. He was dreaming – or, more likely, having a nightmare.

Hermione stood for several moments on the top step, irresolute; very soon, the noises stopped and Snape was quiet again. After a time, she slowly made her way back to her bed.

The next morning, Hermione woke up with a headache. She had no potion for a headache cure available to her, so she would have to settle for whatever pain reliever her mother had in the medicine cupboard in the kitchen. Pulling on an additional oversized sweatshirt over the one she already wore, she shoved her feet into her trainers and made her way down to the kitchen; Severus Snape was in her house, and she would not care to appear again in his presence whilst wearing her Winnie-the-Pooh slippers, no matter how warm they were.

Shuffling into the kitchen, she was somewhat surprised to see Snape sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of tea and the *Daily Prophet*. He wore his customary black teaching robes and a high-collared black coat and black trousers; on his feet were his black boots. Though his hair did not appear to have been washed, it had been combed, which was more than Hermione could say for her own appearance.

Without stopping, she continued past him to the cupboard where her mum kept aspirin and bandages and sore throat lozenges.

"Good morning, Miss Granger," Snape said.

Hermione waited for additional comments, perhaps regarding her appearance or the lateness of the hour, but none were forthcoming. She found a bottle of pain reliever and took it down from the cabinet, popping off the top and shaking out two tablets.

"What is that?"

The pain behind Hermione's left eye throbbed once. "Not that it is any of your business," she said, "but it is a pain reliever. I have a headache."

Snape made a derisive sound. "Don't swallow that rubbish. I have a headache cure potion. Wait here."

Hermione did not argue; in truth, a potion worked much more efficiently than Muggle tablets. She replaced the pills in the cupboard and moved over to sit down at the kitchen table, thankfully pouring herself a mug of tea from the china teapot before her. She was stirring sugar in when she noticed four Galleons stacked in the middle of the table.

Snape entered the kitchen again from the sitting room with a small glass phial in his hand. Hermione squinted at him because the wintry morning sunlight hurt her eyes.

"What is this?" she asked, indicating the gold.

"Drink this straight away," he said, handing her the potion.

Hermione recognized the smell when she popped the cork from the phial; this was the headache cure potion they had learnt to brew in fifth year, and which Madam Pomfrey doled out in huge quantities to a school full of angsty teenagers. She drank the potion and stood to rinse the phial at the sink.

"I will do it. Drink your tea," Snape said, holding his hand out for the container.

Hermione settled back into her seat and gratefully drank her tea. When Snape seated himself again across from her, she repeated her question.

"Why is there gold on the table?"

Snape inspected her for a moment. Apparently satisfied with what he saw, he went back to reading the newspaper. "There is gold on the table to pay for my food and drink while remaining as your *guest*." The last word was accompanied by a sneer.

Hermione may have been brought up in the urban sprawl of London, but her parents had instilled good home training in their only child. The notion that a guest in their home should even *offer* to pay for his food was a shameful one. Professor Dumbledore bade her to make Snape welcome, and here he felt as if he had to pay his way – as if this were no better than a boarding house!

Hermione's face burned, but she kept her voice neutral as she said, "There is no need for that, sir."

Snape did not reply, but studied her surreptitiously over the newspaper. She was pale, with a pucker between her brows which indicated to him that the headache cure had not yet relieved her discomfort. Perhaps she was beginning her menstrual cycle – in which circumstance Dumbledore would owe him *two* bottles of cognac, rather than one! – and if that were the problem, she would need a diuretic as well as the headache cure to relieve her. The light sensitivity, however, seemed to indicate a migraine; in that case, he could only hope to make her more comfortable until the headache passed. Very little, short of narcotics, assisted in such cases, and he did not have those sorts of potions with him.

To test his theory, he slid the plate of toast to her. "You should eat."

She shook her head, her lips pressed close together. "Food sounds awful."

A vehicle passed by the house on the street, its radio turned up so loud that the table vibrated with the booming bass line. She covered her ears in distress and applied pressure to her temples.

Snape hid his alarm at the sudden loud noise; the child did not seem to think the music was out of the ordinary, so he did not comment. He rose quietly and went to survey the area in front of the house through the window curtains. Convinced that there was no danger, he returned to the kitchen doorway and studied his student.

"Miss Granger, have you had migraines before?"

"Once." She looked quite nauseous. "It was just like this."

"What helped you to feel better that time?"

"Soft music and a darkened room. I slept on and off until it passed."

The professor and his student spent an oddly companionable first day of their mutual confinement in the Grangers' home. Hermione lay upon the sofa, with a warm, damp

flannel over her eyes, and listened to classical music from one of the electronic devices on the wall. Occasionally, people would talk, or adverts would come from the machine, but most of the time it was very pleasant classical music. Snape sat in one of the armchairs, reading by the light of his wand tip, periodically renewing the warming or dampening charms upon her eye cover and watching over her while she slept. As the Head of Slytherin House, this was not the first time he had been in charge of a sickly student, though he had certainly never before looked after one in her own home.

The early winter twilight had passed into full darkness before she sat up. Snape was in the kitchen, preparing sandwiches. When he came into the sitting room and found the sofa empty, save for the blanket she had used, he moved to stand outside the bathroom door just long enough to determine that she was using the facilities and then returned to his armchair, where he proceeded to eat a sandwich.

Hermione emerged from the bathroom having emptied her bladder and feeling wrung out, but the pain in her head was gone. She saw Snape sitting in his chair, continuing to read by the light of his wand. He had been remarkably kind to her: settling her comfortably on the sofa, making sure her eye cover was warm enough, answering her periodic questions regarding the time or the location of her cat with matter-of-fact patience.

Snape turned slightly in his chair to look at her as she stood by the bathroom door, looking at him. "How do you feel?"

"I'm better, sir, thank you." She walked back to the sofa and seated herself.

"Could you eat a sandwich? Or would soup be better?"

Hermione looked at the sandwich on his plate and her stomach growled. "A sandwich, I think but I can make my own."

Snape extended the plate, offering her the untouched half of his sandwich. She did not want to take his food, but she was so hungry ... the amused quirk of his eyebrow made her utter a faint laugh and snatch the sandwich.

"I am very hungry," she admitted.

"Then you are feeling much better," he stated calmly, rising and going back into the kitchen.

That night, the sleeping potion Snape had induced her to swallow allowed Hermione to sleep through the night, undisturbed. He, however, thrashed and muttered in his sleep as he always did, this time unheard by any save the watchful Crookshanks.

A/N: Beta reading thanks to Snarkywench and Brit-picking kudos to MagicAlly.

Part I: Chapter 3: It's Beginning to Look A Lot Like ?

Chapter 3 of 9

An annoying event causes Hermione to choose to spend the Christmas break in seventh year away from her best friends, but Dumbledore feels she needs someone to watch over her. How will Hermione react to the appearance of the Potions master on her doorstep -- and how will they interact when cooped up alone together for days on end?

Chapter 3: It's Beginning to Look A Lot Like ...

Sunday morning dawned bright and clear; the temperature held steady, below freezing, but the sky was a perfect, unclouded blue. Hermione sang to herself in the shower as she bathed. She had thought she would be all alone on Christmas, but she was actually going to have company. In that case, they might as well celebrate. She would bring down the decorations from the attic, and procure a tree and the makings of Christmas dinner and perhaps she *would* buy her usual Christmas gifts, after all. It was not Harry's fault that Ron was an idiot nor was it Ginny's and she knew that each of them had presents for her, because they were so transparent when asking questions and so bad at keeping secrets.

After patiently plaiting her thick, long, bushy hair into a French braid down her back, she dressed in her favourite denims, last year's Weasley sweater which was embroidered with tiny books and pulled on her heavy brown boots. She ran down the stairs and into the kitchen, her spirits high.

"Good morning, Professor!" she said, bustling about to pour a packet of flavoured porridge into a bowl, add milk, and put it in the microwave. "Isn't it a glorious day?"

The glower which met her from behind the newspaper might have cowed a lesser mortal. A grunt was her only response.

"I feel like a new person today! Thank you for looking after me yesterday."

The microwave beeped and she removed the bowl of porridge, carrying it to the table.

"What did you just do to that porridge?"

"I nuked it, sir. Why "

Snape moved swiftly, his non-verbal *Wingardium Leviosa* floating the bowl off the table and into the sink before Hermione could complete her thought.

"That was my breakfast!"

"Do you have any idea what the ingestion of irradiated food will do to you?" he thundered.

Nonplussed, Hermione gazed into his darkened countenance. What in the world ailed the man? Unless ... unless he took her literally?

She dissolved into gales of laughter.

There were many things which Severus Snape could endure with equanimity. Being ridiculed was, unfortunately, not one of them. He rose from his place at the table and stood over her, an ugly expression upon his face.

Even one day previously, the Potions master's threatening attitude would have subdued her. After having him look after her with as much solicitude as she might have received from her own Head of House, Hermione was not afraid. She plucked a paper tissue from the box on the counter behind her and dried her cheeks. "I'm sorry, sir," she said, as her laughter subsided. "The term 'nuked' is slang. The microwave oven produces electromagnetic radiation which is exactly the correct wavelength to heat the water molecules in the food which, in turn, heats the food itself. It's perfectly safe, I promise you!"

Snape struggled with himself. It would be so satisfying to snarl at the girl. He loathed appearing uninformed, especially to a student, but there was no way he could now pretend he knew exactly how the microwave contraption worked, after betraying such ignorance.

"Continue, by all means," he sneered. "Eat your electromagnetically radiated food. I will be outside, surveying the perimeter."

Hermione cringed slightly as the front door slammed shut. She might have handled that more diplomatically, she supposed. Why did the man have to be so prickly? She chuckled as she retrieved her bowl from the thankfully empty sink and began to eat her breakfast.

The better question was, why was she surprised? Surely there was a picture of Severus Snape beside the word "prickly" in the World Wizarding Dictionary.

The rest of the morning passed in silence, with Snape reading in the sitting room, ignoring Hermione's attempts at conversation. Finally, she decided to ignore him as well. Choosing a video from the shelf, she popped it into the player and settled down on the sofa to watch one of her favourite seasonal shows.

Before long, the movie had Snape's attention.

"That is the most obnoxious child I have ever seen," he muttered, watching Kevin McAllister's antics as he was left *Home Alone* by his family. Hermione's gleeful laughter as she watched the little boy outwit the burglars drew his eyes more than once, though he did not laugh himself. When the boy's mother showed up on Christmas morning, Hermione sniffled and wiped her eyes on her sleeve, but when it was over, her spirits rebounded almost immediately.

"We need Christmas biscuits!"

She stopped long enough to turn on the machine which she referred to as the stereo, putting in a flat silver disc which began to play seasonal music, then she went into the kitchen and began to make noise.

Snape stood and attended to the fire in the hearth, adding additional logs and arranging them in the grate with the flick of his wand. He had not been in a private home at Christmas in nearly twenty years, and the last time had been at the Malfoys, where the house-elves attended to one's every whim and the atmosphere was cold and formal. Since that time, he had spent the holiday at Hogwarts, which had traditions of its own.

His childhood home carried for him memories that were both good and bad. Some of the good memories were of his mother at Christmas time. She loved the season and would sing while she baked the treats that he was allowed to have only at this time of year.

The child in the kitchen opened the oven not the microwave, but the actual oven and removed a tray of something which filled the house with the aroma of cinnamon and nutmeg. Snape relaxed in the armchair and closed his eyes as he inhaled the scent of the homemade biscuits, underlain by the smell of the burning wood on the hearth. He dismissed the ache, which he presently felt beneath his sternum, as the undoubted product of a hastily consumed luncheon even when the sensation intensified as the child commenced to sing along with the music, in a soft, sweet soprano.

Giving in to an urge that would normally never assail him, Snape wandered into the kitchen, ostensibly to procure a glass of water, and permitted the girl to put him to work stirring batter in a bright yellow bowl with a long wooden spoon.

Hermione startled awake when the hoarse shout from below stairs echoed in her room. Crookshanks was waiting at the door when she shoved her feet into her Winnie-the-Pooh slippers and crept out onto the landing, her way lit by the tip of her wand. She and the cat moved silently down the stairs and into the sitting room. Snape was quiet now, lying upon his back on the sofa, his bare arms stretched up and crossed behind his head; Hermione could clearly see the Dark Mark on his left forearm, which he had so bravely revealed to Cornelius Fudge after the return of the Dark Lord. The pillow she had provided for him was on the floor, as was the blanket. She could see how his thrashing had twisted the strapped vest he wore about his torso, separating it from the black trousers into which it had been tucked, revealing an expanse of his very pale stomach.

Hermione forced her eyes away from the intriguing planes of her sleeping professor's abdominal muscles and replaced the blanket over his sleeping form, being careful to cover his stocking feet, which extended over the end of the cushions. She padded out of the room and up the stairs, only to return shortly thereafter with something which she placed on the seat of the armchair, on top of the pillow she had retrieved from the floor.

When Crookshanks curled up on the arm of the couch, just above Snape's head, Hermione smiled and left him there.

Snape opened his eyes the next morning to find he had been roused by the girl's familiar, whose tail was tickling his face. He pushed himself into a sitting position, glaring at the cat.

"I thought you slept with her," he grumbled.

Crookshanks began to purr and butted his head against the professor's arm.

"Keep your fleas to yourself or you will discover the meaning of the saying that there is more than one way to skin a cat," he promised.

Crookshanks flicked his tail in answer.

Snape rubbed his hands over his stubbled cheeks and groaned. He could shave with his wand, but he much preferred his razor. And what he would give for a shower! But he had brought no personal items of that nature, nor a change of clothing, vowing to himself that cleansing charms would suffice for this sojourn, as he did not actually intend to sleep during his stay of course, he had also not intended to eat, or to speak to the girl, and he had ended up doing all three. He found the house, in spite of its indisputable Muggle nature, to be a place of comfort, and the child behaved to him as if he were a favoured uncle, or an older brother.

It was surprisingly pleasant.

He noticed that his pillow, instead of being on the sofa, was on the armchair and what was that on top of the pillow? He Summoned the pillow to him and it brought with it a black fleece track suit.

Obviously, the girl had brought these to him when had she come in? Why had she been prowling about in the night?

"Well, that explains *you*, anyway," he muttered to the cat, as he stood and gathered his shirt and coat before going into the bathroom to perform his morning cleansing charms.

When he emerged from the bathroom and entered the kitchen, it was to find Hermione there before him, with coffee brewing and breakfast cooking.

"Good morning!" she said cheerfully. "Your owl brought your paper; it's on the table. Have some eggs and toast!"

Snape poured some coffee and accepted the plate she offered to him.

"I want to go shopping," she said, joining him at the table.

"If wishes were Thestrals, then beggars would ride," he said dismissively.

"I'm sorry, I misspoke." Hermione sipped her milk. "I *am* going shopping today. Would you care to come?"

Snape set his coffee mug on the table with a snap. "You are not leaving this house. It is my job to keep you safe, and I cannot do that if you go gallivanting all over creation!"

Hermione finished chewing her bite of toast and washed it down with a sip of milk before responding, "I have some shopping to do, Professor. You can come with me, if you like, but I'm not going to be held prisoner in my own home."

Though he never admitted defeat, in time it was understood that he would accompany her on her shopping expedition. Hermione levitated the dirty breakfast dishes to the sink and set them to washing, all the while examining Snape from the corner of her eye. He could look so much better if he would just wash his hair properly! How could she induce him to do so? Well, she needed no further delays this morning at least he acknowledged that she was leaving the house to shop!

The next altercation involved transportation.

"I am not entering that *vehicle*." Snape stood in the Grangers' garage, his arms crossed belligerently over his chest.

Hermione looked from her mother's car to the professor and back again. "But how else are we going to get to the shops? And how are we going to bring our shopping home?" She opened the driver's side door and slid in. "Come on, it's getting late!"

"Do you imagine that you can operate this machine?" he demanded.

"Yes, I have my license would you like to see it?"

He snorted. "We can Apparate and you can do your shopping in Diagon Alley, like the witch you are. And if we cannot carry your shopping bags, then you have bought too much!"

He strode to the open car door and leaned over, grasping her arm and compelling her to exit. "Come on it's getting late," he reminded her.

They Disapparated from her back garden, and Hermione found that he was not a bad companion for shopping. The shops of Diagon Alley were just beginning to open when they stepped through the enchanted arch from the Leaky Cauldron, and the holly and the red ribbons adorning the shop windows, along with the snow on the ground, made it all very festive. Hermione found the gifts she wanted for Harry and Ron yes, she would buy a gift even for Ron, for she wanted to be his friend, if not his girlfriend in Quality Quidditch Supplies, and a lovely cashmere scarf, hat and glove set for Ginny in Gladrags. In the men's department she saw an exquisite black turtleneck cashmere jumper; a quick glance around showed her that Snape was seated near the front of the store, immersed in the book which he had produced from his cloak pocket. She paid for her selections and buried the jumper at the bottom of her shopping bag, beneath the colourful hat and scarf set she would send to Ginny.

"You cannot Apparate with a fir tree!"

She stomped her foot, sending the powdery snow from the previous night's fall up in a cloud. "I want a Christmas tree! It's not Christmas without a tree!"

But he was adamant, and they returned to her home with only her shopping bags.

After supper that evening, she pulled out the yellow mixing bowl. Snape wandered in from the sitting room.

"No moving picture tonight?"

"Maybe later; I thought I would bake now."

"Again?"

She gave him a look of fond exasperation. "Well, you keep eating the biscuits I make, don't you? If I don't bake more, then where will we be?"

Snape froze at her expression, his own impassive mask falling into place over his face, returning him to the forbidding Potions master.

"Suit yourself," he said indifferently, before going out of the house to patrol the area.

She noticed that though he paid no apparent attention to the movie du jour, which was *White Christmas*, he seemed to have recovered his mood enough to enjoy the homemade biscuits with the cocoa she served before going up to bed.

"Didn't you care for the movie?" she asked, dipping the spice biscuit into her cocoa as she sat with him before the fire.

"The man actually *wanted* bad weather," Snape said incredulously, and Hermione was still chuckling when she went up the stairs and climbed into her bed.

The muffled shouts from the sitting room scarcely startled her when she sat up in her bed at three in the morning. Her bedroom door, which she had left ajar so that Crookshanks could visit them both during the night, allowed her to hear him more clearly; she was certain that she heard him cry, "Mother!" before his words became incoherent. Picking up her wand, she padded downstairs and into the sitting room, telling herself that she simply wanted to be sure he was all right.

The first sight which met her eyes was that of Crookshanks, who was curled up on Snape's mid-section and purring. The fingers of the professor's right hand were threaded through the thick orange fur. This time he had managed to retain the pillow, though the blanket had once again drifted onto the floor.

As she moved to drape the blanket over his form again, she saw that he was wearing the black track suit she had brought for him from her father's closet; they weren't pyjamas, but they had to be more comfortable than sleeping in his clothes. She saw his coat, trousers, and shirt arranged carefully on the armchair, and for a moment she reached out and touched the black wool coat before going back upstairs to her own bed.

A/N: Beta reading thanks to Snarkywench and Brit-picking kudos to MagicAlly.

Part I: Chapter 4: Winter Wonderland

Chapter 4 of 9

An annoying event causes Hermione to choose to spend the Christmas break in seventh year away from her best friends, but Dumbledore feels she needs someone to watch over her. How will Hermione react to the appearance of the Potions master on her doorstep -- and how will they interact when cooped up alone together for days on end? **This story was written for the SS/HG Winter Exchange on Live Journal, for the prompt: A weekend alone for Hermione in the Granger's residence. Suddenly the Potions master turns up on her door step. For whom the bell rings, it rings for you.**

Chapter 4: Winter Wonderland

When Hermione woke up the next day, it was to find snow falling outside her windows. Feeling terribly Christmasy, she pulled on an old jumper with a picture of Father Christmas and his reindeer, unmindful that it was rather too small for her now tight across her breasts and leaving a bit of midriff bare each time she lifted her arms. She pulled on her favourite low-riding denims and a thick pair of socks, accompanied by her sturdy boots, then ran down to the kitchen.

Snape sat at the table with his customary plate of toast, but he had braved the automatic coffee maker and successfully brewed a pot of coffee.

"Luxury!" Hermione moaned, opening the fridge to pull out the milk and pour a dollop into her coffee cup. She grabbed a handful of biscuits from the plate on the counter and joined him at the table. "Isn't it beautiful out? I just love it when it snows!"

Snape lowered the paper and watched the child begin to eat spice biscuits for breakfast. "I am quite sure there is porridge available for nukuing, Miss Granger."

Hermione giggled before eating another biscuit. "Yes, but there's something so holiday-like about eating biscuits for breakfast!"

Snape's lips thinned in disapproval, but he went back to reading the paper.

"I'm going tobogganing!" Hermione announced, setting her empty coffee mug in the sink. "Would you like to come?"

"You'll do no such thing!"

"The park is just down the block, Professor, and no one will be there I'll be perfectly safe! I haven't been sledging at home in years!"

Snape watched helplessly as the impossible girl went into the connecting garage and returned with two red wooden sledges. "Aren't they beauties? They were my father's! I haven't been home when there was snow on the ground since I went to Hogwarts. Come with me, sir ... it will be fun!"

Snape bowed to the inevitable, wrapping a Slytherin scarf about his throat before donning his cloak.

"That doesn't look like the Slytherin scarves now is it an old one?" Hermione asked as she wound her Gryffindor scarf about her neck.

"From my student days," he replied shortly, and was moved to smirk by her look of amazement. "That does not make it an antique, Miss Granger," he added.

To Snape's amazement, it was rather enjoyable to go tobogganing with Hermione Granger. The park was a small, neighbourhood affair, with a play park at one end and one good hill, perfect for sledging. As the girl had prophesied, there was no one else there, and it took her a little less than an hour to persuade him to take his turn sliding down the hill.

They had been at it for long enough for both of them to be quite red in the cheeks and chapped at the lips from the cold and the wind. The snowfall had ceased and children were beginning to show up in the park, with older siblings and parents in tow.

"One last trip down the hill," Hermione wheedled, when he suggested that they go. "I'll race you."

He scoffed. "That would not be a race at all."

She laughed. "You are an arrogant Slytherin!" she taunted.

His eyes glinted devilishly. "You are a foolhardy Gryffindor," he answered. "What would be the purpose of a race? What would the winner receive?"

She thought for a moment. "The loser has to cook breakfast every morning for the rest of the week and do *all* of the dishes."

He lifted one superior eyebrow. "I like my toast dry and my tea unsweetened."

She laughed again. "I like my toast with strawberry jam and I take two sugars in my tea; thank you for asking!"

Snape lowered himself to his sledge. "How very kind of you to share that information, but I cannot conceive of what use it will be to me."

Hermione threw herself onto her sledge. "All right, big talker on the count of three!"

Snape was clearly off to a cleaner, faster start, but Hermione desperately wanted to win. Pushing too hard, she overbalanced herself and tumbled off the sledge, head over heels, until she slammed into a horrified Severus Snape and knocked him off of his sledge as well.

They came to rest in a tangle of arms and legs, three feet farther down the hill than the spot where the two sledges had collided and stopped. Hermione had the wind knocked out of her and could not catch her breath.

Snape realized that he was virtually on top of the child and began to move away from her, until he noticed the panicked look in her eyes. "Hermione? What's the matter? Are you hurt?"

His hands were frantically pressing her arms through the fabric of her Muggle coat. When she was able to drag in a lungful of air, she answered, "No ... not hurt ... no air ..."

Snape supported his weight on his forearms, looking down into her face, anxiety for her clearly written in his face.

Hermione took another lungful of air and, to Snape's amazement, began to laugh.

"What are you laughing at?" he demanded, scowling.

"You!"

"Me?" He raised himself to his hands and knees, neatly straddling her inert form, and pinned her wrists to the snow. "I won the race, I have you pinned in the snow, and *you're* laughing at *me*?"

Hermione nodded, but at the same time, she felt a strange excitement rising within her. She had been in this position more than once with Ron, when he was kissing her, though Ron had never held her wrists down. The immobility was increasing the wild feeling swelling up from her tummy, into her chest. She thought the feeling would come bubbling out of her lips like laughter, but she felt the urge to laugh dying in her throat as she became more aware of the body of the man on top of her.

Snape watched in fascination as Hermione's thoughts and emotions played over her face; suddenly, he became aware that he was still pinning her to the ground, and that the moment when such an action could have been passed off as playfulness was gone. He had a healthy, vibrant, entrancing woman beneath him not struggling, but submitting to his dominance and the primal center of his hindbrain began a chant: *take her, take her, take her, take her, TAKE HER!*

With a Herculean effort, Snape wrenched himself away from her, standing, and beginning to brush the snow from his cloak. As he stood, the rest of world came crashing back into his consciousness, and he realized that he had ceased to be aware of the presence of the other people in the park.

Wordlessly, he held a gloved hand out to Hermione and helped her to stand; as he did so, he reflected that these days of living alone with her in her parents' home had a dream-like quality to them, completely at variance with their true, real lives as student and teacher, Order member and Death Eater, Gryffindor and Slytherin.

I don't care! he thought defiantly, bending and grasping the sledges in his hands. *I can have this time. The rest will take care of itself.*

And they trudged back to the Grangers' house, their previous camaraderie reasserting itself in the aftermath of the awkward moment on the ground, almost as if the interruption had never occurred.

Snape and Hermione left their snowy boots in the garage and hung their outerwear over straight chairs before the fire to dry. Hermione went into the room where the machines which she referred to as the washer and dryer were kept and emerged with two large, fluffy green towels in her hands.

"You can use the shower in my parents' room, and I'll use the one in my bathroom," she told him, handing him one of the towels. "Don't forget to bring the track suit to change into after your shower!"

Snape stood in the middle of the sitting room in his stocking feet with a towel in his hands, feeling rather foolish.

"That won't be necessary," he began.

"Don't be silly! I know you haven't had a proper shower since you got here! You'll catch your death if you don't get warm and into some dry clothes! Besides, it will give us a chance to wash your shirt and your under things. I'll get you a nice, warm pair of socks to put on, too."

He had followed her to the foot of the staircase, but he stood there, irresolute.

"Come on, then!" she said, smiling over her shoulder at him. "It's my fault that you ended up going arse over teakettle into the snow, anyway."

With his eyes fixed on the arse in question, he followed her up to the promised shower.

An hour later, Hermione descended to the kitchen to find Snape stirring a pot of stew. The container in which her mother had frozen the stew was in the sink; the aroma was mouth-watering.

Snape was wearing the track suit and the thick grey socks she had found for him in her father's drawer; she hoped he was also wearing the clean pants she had put out with the socks. He looked cosy and comfortable and altogether unlike her professor. She liked him this way. Except ...

"Your hair isn't clean!"

Snape turned to see her standing in the doorway and he glared at her fiercely. "Good afternoon, Hermione," he said, as if he were speaking to a recalcitrant six year old. "Did you have a nice shower? Are you warm, now?"

She wore pyjama pants adorned with Christmas trees, with an oversized crimson sweatshirt; her hair had been pulled into a plait, and her feet were stuffed into those preposterous bear-shoes. The sight of her gladdened his heart.

"Why didn't you wash your hair?" she demanded, reaching up to rub a strand between her fingers.

"I did wash it," he snapped. "Get your hands out of my hair."

"Wait ... I'll bet there wasn't any shampoo in the shower, was there? What did you use to wash it?"

"Bar soap. Leave me alone!"

She left the room and he heard her climbing the staircase; moments later he heard her coming back. She entered the kitchen with a bottle in her hand. "I knew I had this in my bathroom! It's from the summer I decided my hair would behave better if I used a more astringent shampoo." He turned to look at her and she grinned. "No, it didn't help! But it's the perfect formula for your hair. Come on, I'm going to wash it."

Panic seized him. "I am not showering with you!"

Hermione chuckled as she pulled a chair over to the sink. "I can do it right here you're tall enough. Just sit down and lean your head back."

Snape's self-hatred told him to refuse, but there was a part of him that wanted to feel her fingers in his hair. With a huge sigh, as if he were making a great sacrifice on her behalf, he sat in the chair and allowed her to drape a towel around his shoulders. She began to run the water and he could feel the heat as the water warmed.

"Lean back a bit," she encouraged, and he did, extending his neck and letting his hair fall into the sink. She used a small nozzle attachment which he had seen, but not tried to use; it flooded his scalp with warm water, and her fingers worked the shampoo into his hair with firm, circular strokes. Snape nearly purred as she massaged his scalp, and as she bent over him he could smell the mint from her toothpaste and the spicy perfume she had put on her throat. He felt he could remain there forever with her so close and the warm water cascading through his hair, but all too soon she was finished with him, and the moment was past.

"Sit up!" she said, and as he did, she moved closer to him, using the towel about his shoulders to wrap his hair and squeeze the water from it. He was acutely aware of her torso, inches away from his face, and he wanted nothing so much as to bury his face in her fragrance and rest his cheek upon her heart.

"It's really clean now," she murmured, drawing a wide-toothed comb through his hair, while holding her wand and casting a drying charm.

Abruptly, he stood, moving away from her. "If I'm clean enough for you now, shall we eat?"

Hermione bit her lip, drying her hands on the towel he had abandoned. She had really forgotten to whom she was speaking, feeling as if she had been talking to ... a friend a dear friend, whom she could trust and with whom she could share her thoughts.

But he wasn't her friend. He was her greasy, unpleasant Potions professor, her natural enemy from the moment she set foot in Hogwarts, hater of Mudbloods and all things Harry Potter.

No. No matter how he seemed at Hogwarts, here he had been different. Just the two of them, alone in her home, were living a very companionable life one she enjoyed far more than being with her two best friends, if truth be told. Whatever was happening now, though, could not last. He would never behave this way with her if Harry or Ron or Draco Malfoy, or any other student from his House were present to see it.

I don't care! she thought, moving to take down bowls from the cupboard. *This is the way it is right now and now is enough. What will be, will be.*

All of the excitement of the morning of tobogganing had exhausted her, and once she had filled her tummy with two bowls of her mum's stew, she was drowsy. Still, she sat down on the sofa and popped in one of her Christmas movies; if she was surprised that she drifted off after the movie had been in the machine for less than twenty minutes, Snape was not. He smirked to himself and covered her with his blanket, wielding his wand to stoke up the fire. All he needed now, to create perfection, was a glass of brandy. Perhaps Mr. Granger partook?

He prowled down the unexplored back hallway and opened the door to the room beyond the bathroom. It appeared to be a man's study and on the sideboard stood two decanters with glasses.

Pouring three fingers of the brandy, he returned to the sitting room, and found himself being pulled into the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, which he watched while the fire crackled merrily and the girl on the couch slept on.

As Hermione stirred on the sofa, the first thing she realised was that her muscles were sore. She smiled to herself as she remembered climbing the hill and sliding down on her sledge repeatedly. Pushing herself into a sitting position, the first thing she saw, on the far side of the hearth, was a large pine tree, covered with snow.

She blinked.

There was no pine tree in her sitting room! She had wanted one, but Snape had refused. What in the world

"Is it straight?"

The voice came from behind the tree, which moved fractionally to the left.

Hermione went to the wall and flipped on the overhead lights, which showed her Severus Snape, standing behind the tree and holding the trunk, his arm thrust through the branches.

"Lean it forward just a bit," Hermione said, entering into the spirit of the thing. She had no idea *why* there was a tree in her sitting room, but had wanted one, so she would not ask questions even though it was very difficult to restrain herself.

Snape leant the tree forward, as requested, and Hermione said, "Perfect!"

A muttered spell secured the tree in place and Snape released his hold on it, stepping back and pulling his sap-stained gloves from his hands. He looked uncommonly relaxed and rather pleased with himself.

"Oh, your gloves!" she exclaimed, going forward to take them from him. "You got that sticky resin all over them!"

Snape's hand closed instinctively over hers and he peered down into her face with a speculative look in his glittering black eyes.

Hermione's breath hitched in her throat and there was a great swooping sensation in her tummy. She was acutely aware of his long fingers, closed about her hand, and as she took another step closer, she could smell the tang of the shampoo she had used on his hair and something that reminded her of her father was it whisky?

"You've been drinking," she said, unable to break the connection of her eyes gazing into his.

"Some of your father's brandy," he replied. "It was cold outside."

"Where did you go?"

A small but genuine smile touched his lips. "The park. No one will ever miss it."

She followed his gaze to the tree and pulled away from him, diverted. "You stole that tree from the park?"

"I didn't *steal* it!" he objected. "It's a *tree*, Hermione. You cannot own a tree."

"Of course you can own a tree!" she said. "My parents own every tree planted in our garden!"

"Well, that tree did not come from someone's garden, did it? It came from a wood. Hagrid brings Christmas trees from the Forbidden Forest every year." He snorted, turning from her and beginning to remove his cloak. "As if I would stoop to thievery."

Hermione watched as he moved back into the hallway to hang his cloak, then she laid his gloves upon the coffee table, holding her wand to them and murmuring, *Tergeo* to remove the sticky substance from the soft black leather. Well, as long as the police did not come knocking at her door, demanding the arrest of the person who had stolen a tree from a public park, she would not worry about it. Her stern, grim Potions professor had gone out of his way to cater to her whim and straddled her hips and held her down in the snow, but she absolutely would not dwell on *that* and she was simply going to enjoy decorating her Christmas tree.

After all, tomorrow was Christmas Eve!

Snape thumbed idly through *Potioneer Quarterly* and cast the occasional glance at the girl as she fussed over the tree. After they had finished their meal of pizza, which was delivered to the house, she had gone into her father's study and brought out the brandy, putting it on the end table beside his armchair. He had been coerced into "helping" her put lights on the tree, which she referred to as a "two-man operation," but she had done the rest of it herself, humming along with the music she played on the stereo while she hung ornaments on the branches of the tree.

"There!" she said brightly, stepping away from the tree to survey its splendour. "Isn't it beautiful?"

Snape darted a glance at the tree from the corner of his eyes. "I am no judge of Muggle holiday decorations," he said flatly.

Her face fell a little. "Well, I think it's lovely."

From behind the curtain of his hair, he watched her as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. He felt frustrated to note that non-greasy hair did not hang about his face the same way his usually oily hair did. It made it more difficult for him to watch her covertly.

Finally, she seemed to come to a decision.

"Well good night, sir. Thank you for the tree."

"Good night," he replied and permitted himself to watch her as she left the room, her demeanour a bit dashed by his lack of enthusiasm. He had shown a bit too *much* enthusiasm thus far, that day. Restraint was what was now required.

Hermione sat up late that night, her pillows propped against her headboard, her Transfiguration text open across her knees. She was too overwrought from the excitement of the day, and the long nap of the afternoon, to sleep just yet. The bedroom door was cracked open and she found herself listening for sounds from the sitting room.

She had just begun to doze over her Transfiguration notes when the now-familiar sounds of her professor's night-time distress reached her. Without hesitation, she padded down to the sitting room to check on him.

Crookshanks crouched on the arm of the sofa near Snape's head, his yellow eyes shining in the patch of moonlight which sliced across the room. The blanket and pillow were both on the floor; the top portion of the track suit was rucked up almost to his chest by his thrashing about. For a moment, Hermione stood near his feet, letting her eyes dwell upon his stomach, with the intriguing line of dark hair which trailed from the dip of his navel down under the edge of the tracky bottoms ...

Forcing herself to stop staring at him, she bent to retrieve the blanket, only to have her upper arm clamped in a merciless grasp. Crying out, she instinctively reached for her wand, only to have his wand thrust under her chin.

"Don't spy on me!" he grated, the fingers holding her arm in a bruising grip.

Hermione jerked her arm from him, her other hand coming up to rub the sore spot. "I wasn't *spying!*" she cried. "You were having another nightmare I was only checking on you to make sure you were all right."

He sat up, rubbing his face with his hands. "Do not approach me when I am sleeping. My self-defence reactions are swifter than my cognitive reasoning." He scowled at her. "Go back to bed."

Hermione glared back at him. "I am going to make some cocoa. Shall I make enough for two?"

She took his grunt as assent.

They sat side by side on the sofa, the fire crackling in the hearth and the Christmas tree lights twinkling gently, making a colourful pattern on the ceiling. The homemade cocoa seemed to soothe them both, Snape's nerves no doubt helped along by the dollop of brandy he added to each of his mugs of the hot chocolate.

"You have a nightmare every night," she told him, conveying both deference and concern in her tone.

"I don't have nightmares," he replied tersely. "I am a restless sleeper."

Hermione did not contradict him, but kept her eyes on the fire. "I have nightmares, sometimes." She chanced a glance at his face and found him gazing into the firelight, as well. "I dream about the Department of Mysteries."

Snape's nod was nearly imperceptible, but Hermione felt it was an invitation to continue.

"I remember when the curse hit me; my last thought as I began to fall was that I would never know what marks I made on my O.W.L.s."

Snape snorted. "Why does that not surprise me?"

"I imagine that you did well on your O.W.L.s," she said.

He gave her a sidelong glance. "As well as you did."

She felt a glow of satisfaction. "You know my O.W.L. scores?"

"I am one of your teachers; of course I know." He snorted again. "Besides, your Head of House natters on about you in the staffroom. No one is ignorant of your scores."

The fire burned lower as the time passed by, the two intellects meeting and retreating in one area of discussion, only to circle about and approach again from another direction. Snape continued on in his stubborn belief that his interactions with the girl were somehow separate from his everyday life; recklessly, he relaxed into her kind concern and her flattering attentions.

"...but it was humiliating, having one's boyfriend take up with another girl."

"From what I understand, you left your mark so to speak."

Hermione choked over her cocoa. "You *know* about that?"

"The school matron takes her tea with the rest of the staff, you know. I imagine the entire school is aware of your particular skill." He slanted a sideways glance at her. "Interesting curse, to carve actual words in their flesh. That required some control."

Hermione dipped her head. "I was very angry."

"Don't be ashamed. It was a curse worthy of a Slytherin."

She made a face at him. "I'm not sure how to take that."

"Consider the source," he advised her.

She tilted her head to one side and regarded him thoughtfully. "A compliment, then."

"Of the highest order," he replied with a slight quirk of his lips. After a moment, he added, "I've heard of worse things in such situations."

"At Hogwarts?"

"Lovers' quarrels in Slytherin House are the stuff of legend, I promise you."

"Tell me," she wheedled, turning sideways on the sofa to face him, crossing one leg beneath her.

He considered her for a moment, his head resting against the back of the sofa, his clean hair falling back away from his face. He was relaxed and at ease, a heady feeling for him. The fire lit one side of her face, leaving the other in shadow; it was as if he were seeing only a part of her. Perhaps she, too, was taking this as time out of the context of her reality, leaving her school-self dormant, in the shadowed portion of her psyche, and letting her doppelganger conduct her actions for this holiday.

"You are the oddest girl, Hermione," he said lazily, narrowing his eyes at her.

"*Tell* me about world-class Slytherin rows, Severus," she said coaxingly.

"Cheek," he murmured and was oddly pleased with her soft, easy laughter.

The fire died down to embers before Hermione could tear herself away. It was amazingly comfortable, sitting in the dark with her professor, talking about everything that crossed her mind. He would not speak much of himself, smoothly directing the conversation away from personal matters of his own, but he listened to her personal observations, her confidences, and occasionally let fall a word of counsel.

As she settled beneath the duvet on her bed, she reflected that over the last few days, it had come to seem as if Professor Snape were a different person. He had a wry sense of humour, a sharp mind and a sharp tongue to go with it, she had to admit but he also listened to her as if what she had to say was worth hearing, unlike the boys, who squirmed and fidgeted in those circumstances. If his calm guidance was obviously the same as what her own Head of House would tell her, there was still something in his manner that seemed far more personal than Professor McGonagall had ever appeared.

As her eyes drifted closed, she smiled to herself, holding the thought of her new friend close to her heart.

Severus.

Snape punched the blameless pillow beneath his head and turned to his side, inconveniencing Crookshanks, who had been curled up on his stomach. The cat leapt down with an indignant "mrow" and trotted out of the room.

"Go on," Snape muttered bitterly, tugging the blanket over his shoulder. "*You* can go sleep with *her*."

Hermione.

He closed his eyes, and for a moment a spasm of emotion passed across his face.

"You're a damned fool," he said flatly though it was not clear whether he was speaking to the cat or to himself.

Beta reading thanks to Snarkywench and Brit-picking kudos to MagicAlly.

Part 1, Chapter 5: Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas

Chapter 5 of 9

An annoying event causes Hermione to choose to spend the Christmas break in seventh year away from her best friends, but Dumbledore feels she needs someone to watch over her. How will Hermione react to the appearance of the Potions master on her doorstep -- and how will they interact when cooped up alone together for days on end? This story was written for the SS/HG Winter Exchange on Live Journal, for the prompt: A weekend alone for Hermione in the Granger's residence. Suddenly the Potions master turns up on her door step. For whom the bell rings, it rings for you.

Chapter 5: Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas

The morning of Christmas Eve dawned crisply, the sky an uncluttered blue with the weak winter sun shining on the blanket of snow covering the gardens of the Grangers and their neighbours. After their late night, Snape and Hermione were entirely unaware of the beauty of the day, for they were both still sleeping.

It was, perhaps, entirely unfortunate that Harry Potter and Ron Weasley should have been overcome with the spirit of the season and decided to pay an unannounced call on Hermione, bringing with them her Christmas gifts and an olive branch. "We'll take her back to the Burrow with us," Ron said, secretly hoping to charm his way back into Hermione's heart in more ways than one.

"Let's take one thing at a time, mate, all right?" Harry said, ascertaining that he had all of Hermione's gifts stowed in his rucksack. "First, we have to apologise for leaving her on her own for a week at Christmas."

The two Disapparated, reappearing in the Grangers' back garden. "You do the talking," Ron said nervously, one hand going unconsciously to the healed marks on his bum, beneath his trousers.

"I will," Harry promised and knocked briskly on the Grangers' back door.

Snape shifted his position on the sofa and willed the pounding to go away. What a lousy way to dream wall-knocking so loud that it roused you out of sleep. Who ever heard of a dream doing that?

Unwillingly, but necessarily, Snape opened his eyes and squinted at the clock over the mantel. Nine o'clock? He never slept until nine o'clock!

More pounding.

Pushing himself into a sitting position, he glared in the direction from which the sounds were coming. Someone was knocking on the door out to the back garden which meant that someone was *in* the fenced area.

In the next instant Snape was on his feet and striding to the door, entirely unmindful of his stocking feet, the rumpled track suit in which he slept, and the morning disarray of his hair. He took down the ward on the door and threw it open to confront the intruder.

It may be laid at the door of his years of experience at never showing emotion that his consternation was not evident. Potter and Weasley, however, had no subtlety they were both taken aback.

Potter recovered use of his voice first. "What the hell are *you* doing here?" he demanded aggressively, his wand in his hand.

"Language, Potter," Snape responded mechanically. What in the world were the whelps doing here? Wasn't the whole purpose of him giving up his holiday to baby-sit Hermione due to the fact that her erstwhile boyfriends would have nothing to do with her?

Snape relaxed slightly; the younger wizards were unlikely to be so unwise as to attempt to duel with him. Both of the boys' faces were a delightful study in nauseated horror. Snape could well imagine how he looked exactly as if he just climbed out of bed, in fact and Weasley, for one, would assume he had been shagging the girl. His inner demons delighted at the notion of an opportunity to devil his two least-favourite students but a scarcely acknowledged portion of him was furious that anyone would have the temerity to think badly of Hermione.

Leaning one shoulder against the door frame, as if he had all day to block their entrance to the house, Snape folded his arms across his chest and looked the boys up and down once before saying, "A much more pertinent question would be, what are *you* doing here?"

Weasley found his voice. "We're here to see Hermione. Where is she?"

Snape smiled thinly. "She is not available."

Harry took a step forward. "You let us see her, Snape now!"

"Really, Potter," he drawled, "I hope you don't imagine that you will receive special treatment from *me*. You are, after all, nothing but an ..." *untalented little boy* he projected effortlessly into Potter's unshuttered mind, "...unwelcome guest."

Potter's face went nearly purple with fury and Weasley mustered the courage for which his family was famous. "What have you done with her? I'll go back for my dad, Snape you don't dare try to keep her from us."

Snape's voice lowered to a deadly whisper. "You, Weasley, have no use for her at all you made that perfectly clear to the entire population of Hogwarts. I suggest you get out of here whilst you can still do so under your own power."

"Who's going to make us go?" the redhead shot back angrily.

Snape made no effort to suppress the yawn which overtook him at that moment, placing one hand tauntingly before his mouth as if to protect Potter from his morning breath. "I'm sure it will not be necessary," Snape said, narrowing his eyes at them. "I don't think either of you wish to lose fifty points apiece for your House for insolence to a teacher."

"I'm going directly to Dumbledore!" Potter snarled. "He'll sort you out straight away."

"Who do you think sent me here, you stupid boy?" Snape hissed.

"He thinks he can trust you!" Potter bellowed. "He doesn't know what you've been getting up to, does he? You'll be *out*, Snape!"

Snape's contemptuous laughter was enough to bring Potter's wand right into his face.

"Severus?"

Snape inwardly cursed Potter's loud, carrying voice, while relishing the renewed looks of revulsion on the boys' faces at the sound of his name upon Hermione's lips. Without bothering to answer her, he turned from the door, leaving it open, with the boys standing uncertainly in the snow, and walked back to pick up his freshly laundered clothes and his trousers and coat from a chair.

"You have guests," he murmured to Hermione, with the most infinitesimal quirk of an eyebrow to let her know that her friend still resided within the nasty Potions master.

"Are you going to shower?" she asked, ignoring the gasps of her boon companions. "Don't forget to take your shampoo up with you I left it beside the sink in the kitchen."

On his own with her, Snape would have repudiated the suggested shower as well as the impertinent remarks about the shampoo but his desire to bring chagrin to the minds of Potter and Weasley induced him to detour into the kitchen for the shampoo before heading upstairs.

Hermione looked at the boys. "Well? Are you going to continue to refrigerate my sitting room or are you going to come in?"

Harry and Ron piled into the room, closing the door behind them.

"Hermione, what is Snape doing here?" Harry demanded hotly.

"Hello, Harry," she replied, throwing herself upon the sofa and holding Snape's abandoned pillow defensively to her chest. "Happy Christmas to you, too."

"Snape!" Ron exploded with utmost loathing, staring at Hermione as if he did not know her. "You threw me over for *Snape*!"

Hermione was enraged into insensibility at this utterance. As she stared at Ron, the air about her seemed to blur with the waves of magic which poured from her. Harry, recognizing the signs, stepped between the erstwhile lovers. "Hermione talk to us."

Hermione turned her anger on Harry. "What do you want to hear, Harry? That you broke our plans to stay together at Hogwarts for Christmas? That Mrs. Weasley didn't invite me to the Burrow, for *obvious* reasons? That my parents had already made plans to go away for the hols? So, I came home to spend Christmas by myself." Tears were falling on her cheeks, which only made her angrier. She hated it that she cried when she became very angry. "Professor Dumbledore wanted to be sure I would be safe and he sent Professor Snape to watch over me."

Harry came to sit beside her, his face troubled. "We've come to say sorry, Hermione we want you to come back with us. It's Christmas and we should be together, no matter what." He turned a glare on his best mate. "Isn't that right, Ron?"

Ron's eyes were riveted on the sight of Professor Snape's boots, which were neatly arranged beneath the coffee table.

"Ron?"

Ron wrenched his eyes away from the boots, back to Harry and Hermione. "Tell me he's been sleeping down here," he whispered.

Harry groaned and closed his eyes, as if awaiting Hermione's inevitable explosion. After a moment of silence, he opened his eyes again, to find Hermione staring stonily into the fireplace.

"Your gifts are under the tree," she said. "Please take Ginny's gift, as well."

Harry reached out and laid his hand upon her arm; Hermione turned her face to his. Harry said, "I'll come stay with you, Hermione and you can send Snape about his business. I'll look after you. We can have Christmas together."

Hermione looked into the green eyes of her best friend. "But who would look after you, Harry? Don't you understand? Professor Dumbledore has arranged security for you and Ron at the Burrow. I don't know how you got away from your guard long enough to come here without escort and Professor Dumbledore sent Professor Snape here to make sure I will be safe until my parents come home."

"But to have him swooping down on you at all hours of the day and night it's got to be terrible, Hermione. I couldn't bear it!"

Hermione stood and walked past Ron, whose lips were pressed tightly closed as he looked pointedly away from her. She knelt at the tree and pulled the gaily wrapped gifts for Harry, Ron, and Ginny from beneath the branches. "You don't have to bear it, Harry. I do. And I do not find it to be a burden. Here." She extended the packages to him.

Harry stood and came to kneel beside her at the tree, reaching into the rucksack and pulling out her gifts. "I brought these, in case we couldn't convince you to come back with us." He began to pack away the ones she had given him and Hermione went back to her place upon the sofa.

"You'd rather stay here with *him* than come have Christmas with us?" Ron blurted, taking a step towards her, his fists clenched at his sides.

"Yes," she said simply.

Ron turned and marched back out of the door into the back garden.

"Happy Christmas, Hermione," Harry said, bending to kiss her cheek. Then he exited the room, carefully closing the door behind him, and he and Ron Disappeared.

In the stairwell, Snape smirked and went up to take a shower.

Snape climbed down the stairs and he continued into the sitting room in search of his boots. Placing the carefully folded tracksuit on top of the pillow and blanket in the armchair, he sat on the sofa and pulled on his footwear. He could hear the girl in the kitchen, but she had not yet spoken to him, so he left her to her own devices as he set about adding logs to the fire. The noise of his activities brought her to the doorway.

"I hope you don't mind coffee, this morning," she said, sounding slightly strained.

"I cannot remember an occasion upon which I have objected to coffee," he remarked, approaching her. Her eyes were red-rimmed and her cheeks bore the signs of tears. "Your guests did not remain for breakfast," he observed neutrally.

Hermione turned from him and returned to her Muggle toaster, removing the bread from its slots and placing them on a plate. "They only stopped by to exchange gifts," she said, placing the plate in the center of the table.

"I see," he said. He poured coffee into his cup. "This is the first morning I have slept late what happens to the owl post if no one is awake to receive it?"

Hermione laughed, and Snape felt his mood lighten immensely at the sound.

"I found your copy of the newspaper right beneath the window, in the back garden. I'm afraid that the owl must have been quite put-out that no one was up to pay him. I had to spell the paper clean before I brought it into the house."

Snape seated himself and accepted the *Daily Prophet* with some hesitation. "You're certain you removed all of the sh ... erm, waste product?"

She simply laughed again, and Snape settled down to read his newspaper.

The day passed peacefully enough, with the girl in the kitchen baking, playing her music and singing along. Snape found himself repeatedly lured into the kitchen as if answering a Siren's call. He stirred ingredients for more of the spice biscuits, he rolled out pastry with a precision which earned him her praise, and he dutifully tested the mince pies. In the middle of the afternoon she disappeared upstairs for a purported nap and he was quick to take the opportunity to stretch out on the sofa, undetected, to nap as well.

The smell of the baked goods permeated the air, and the memory of her sweet singing lulled him into sleep, where he dreamt of his mother.

Hermione rose from her nap and quickly showered. Her spirits were good, and she eagerly anticipated her plans for Christmas Eve. A generous application of Sleekeazy smoothed her bushy mass into manageability; she pinned it up and applied her makeup with particular care. Reaching for her diamond drop earrings, she fixed them in her ears, glad that her father had overborne her objections and given them to her on her eighteenth birthday. From her closet, she took out the dress of burgundy velvet and stepped into it, pulling it up over her nylons and magicking the zip up in the back. Last, she slipped on the extremely high-heeled black sling-back shoes which made her legs look so slim and shapely.

When her inner voice demanded to know why she was making such an effort over an evening spent at home in the company of her ugly, old, nasty Potions teacher, she touched up her lipstick and walked out of her room, mentally telling the bitch to *shut up!*

Snape woke from his very restful nap as the sun went down. After a quick visit to the loo, he combed through his hair again to neaten it and stared at his reflection in the mirror. The face which glared out at him was no more or less unattractive than he remembered, though for some reason when he was with the girl he forgot to be self-conscious. There was never any revulsion in her face when she looked at him and there never had been, even when she was an insufferable first year.

"There's no fool like an old fool," he told the mirror, forgetting that it was not enchanted and would not enthusiastically agree with him.

The girl came into the sitting room and he caught sight of her when she walked past his chair in a cloud of spicy perfume. His head came up out of his book and he was treated to the sight of her walking away from him, looking not at all like a schoolgirl. He was instantly on his feet and following her.

"Did you nap well?" she asked over her shoulder, treating him to her smile, which was somehow enhanced by the glossy colour she had applied to her lips.

He lengthened his stride and caught up to her in the middle of the kitchen, where he touched her shoulder, causing her to turn to face him.

"Yes, Severus?" she said.

Snape felt his mouth go dry. She was coiffed, made-up, perfumed, and dressed to the nines. The dress, made of a fabric which he very much wished to stroke, bared her throat and collarbone, showing an intriguing cleavage which disappeared discreetly into shadow; it clung to her torso, emphasising her waist before curving over her hips and her derrière and halting somewhere just above her knees. From there, the story was continued by sheer nylons over her calves and down to her dainty ankles; on her feet, she wore a pair of shoes the like of which had been tantalising men of all ages for time out of mind.

In short, the appearance of Hermione as an alluring nymph seriously discomposed him and upset his notion of her place in the universe. Damn the girl!

"Are you all right?" she asked worriedly.

Snape fell back on his old stand-by. "Are Weasley and Potter returning, then?"

A faint frown touched her brow. "No why would you ask?"

"Surely you're not all tarted-up just to spend an evening with *me*." He saw the flash of hurt in her eyes and felt a savage satisfaction.

Hermione turned away from him. "My family tends to dress up on Christmas Eve," she said, opening the refrigerator door and beginning to remove the trays of cheeses, olives, and other nibbles she had prepared earlier.

Snape walked out of the kitchen and resumed his place in the armchair, where he picked up his book and pretended to read.

Damn the girl!

Hermione told herself that Snape was Snape, and that one could not expect the Potions master to become a nice man simply because one wished for him to do so. Stubbornly, she continued to set up a small buffet of foods from which they could serve themselves throughout the evening, as was her family's Christmas Eve tradition.

She could not prevent the looks she frequently cast into the sitting room, but she hastily looked away each time he looked up and caught her at it. She also could have sworn she caught him sneaking looks at her when she was unaware. Drying her damp palms on a kitchen towel, she said, "Shall I fix a plate and bring it to you, or will you do it yourself?"

Snape stood from the armchair, placing his book precisely on the end table. "I am not hungry," he stated. "I will patrol the perimeter now."

Dumbstruck, Hermione stood alone in the kitchen, listening to Snape as he pulled on his cloak and let himself out of the house. With tears standing in her eyes, she sat down at the kitchen table and stared at her hands.

Snape kicked his way viciously through the snow as he walked around the house in this ridiculously safe Muggle neighbourhood. The vision of Hermione, a most desirable adult witch, darting coquettish glances at him as he sat in the next room was tearing him apart. She looked like a woman tonight; she smelt like a woman; when he had her body beneath his in the snow, she had felt like a woman but she was only a child. She was a schoolgirl, his own student, and the thoughts he was having the desires he was experiencing were out of line.

She told Potter and Weasley that she wanted to spend Christmas with me his subconscious reminded him. *She called me "Severus" within their hearing. She washed my hair. She doesn't look away she isn't disgusted she isn't afraid.*

"That's because she has no clue of who and what I really am," he snarled aloud to the back garden fence.

She shares her secrets she confides in me. She trusts me.

He turned and looked at the windows into the house. He could see her through the darkened sitting room, seated at the table in the lighted kitchen, her head in her hands the picture of despair. "Hermione, don't," he murmured.

The twisting feeling beneath and slightly to the left of his sternum was undoubtedly some form of indigestion. He marched up to the back door, prepared to go into the house and to participate with the girl in her Christmas traditions; she, after all, was not accustomed to being bitter and alone in the world at this time of year. She had only Severus Snape to keep her company this holiday she had actually chosen him over her two best friends and he had repulsed her and walked out on her.

"What a fine way to live up my name with typical Snape behaviour," he thought as he entered the house, and Hermione looked up at him, her face betraying her gladness at the sight of him.

He forced away every thought, save of her.

"What do you imagine you are going to do with that?" Snape asked as Hermione placed a large container of dark rum on the kitchen counter. The detritus of their meal still sat upon the table and Snape lounged back in his chair, surveying her through half-lidded eyes.

"I'm going to mix the Christmas punch, of course," she said, promptly thrusting him into a state of mute desire by moving a step stool across the room and climbing up to the top step to retrieve a large cut-glass punch bowl from a high shelf. As she reached up to place her hands on the bowl, her dark red velvet dress rode up the backs of her thighs nearly to her bum, and his sudden arousal throbbed with approval.

"Could you help me, please?"

Snape stood, surreptitiously adjusting himself before he approached her and took the bowl from her. "Do you need anything else from up there?" he asked as he set the bowl on the counter. When she shook her head in the negative, he grasped her waist with both hands and swung her down from the step stool.

"Severus!" she laughed, her hands on his shoulders. "What are you doing?"

He placed her on the floor and looked down into her warm brown eyes, a dangerous look in his glittering black ones. "Those shoes are very nice, but are clearly not made for climbing up and down step stools," he informed her.

She smiled up at him and he hastily released her, stepping away. "I believe that I will brew the Christmas punch," he told her. "Where is your cauldron?"

"I don't have a cauldron here! This is a Muggle house!"

"Not tonight, it isn't," he retorted with a wicked gleam as he turned away. He bent to the cupboard from which she always produced cooking vessels and emerged with an enormous soup pot. With a careful flourish, he Transfigured the pot to a cauldron.

"Nice wand waving, sir," Hermione murmured, and he shot her a quelling look.

"You might make yourself useful by zesting the lemons if you think you can handle that."

Hermione huffed at him and he smirked as he carried the cauldron into the sitting room. When he returned to the kitchen to fetch the rum, he found that she had provided the sugar, the zest, and the carefully sectioned lemons, as well.

She stepped up to stand very close to him and tilted her head slightly, darting a glance up into his face. "I trust you know where to find the brandy?"

Snape was thankful that his arms were full of punch ingredients because he was not sure he could have restrained himself from snatching her up and kissing her if his hands had been free. He must remember to tell her that she ought not to go about *looking* at men like that!

She turned from him then and walked into the sitting room with a tray of punch glasses. Snape returned to the hearth and knelt there, pouring and mixing in the

Transfigured cauldron, which had been securely settled into the hearth. When he had squeezed the lemons into the brew, he looked at her over his shoulder. "Fetch me the brandy, minx."

She gurgled laughter, plainly pleased at this form of address, and brought the half-empty bottle from the end table. "So," she said, watching as he poured brandy into the large ladle and set it afire with his wand, "does Christmas punch brewed by a wizard become, by definition, magical?"

Snape dispensed the flaming brandy into the cauldron and watched it burn there before replying. "You will have to drink the punch, evaluate its properties, and make a report to me."

Hermione Summoned a footstool from its place before the sofa and sat down at Snape's knee. "Two feet of parchment, or three?"

Snape spoke a word to douse the flames in the punch and stirred it three times anti-clockwise before directing his attention to her face. "An ... oral report, I believe," he murmured silkily, allowing his eyes to dwell unmistakably on her slightly parted lips before slowly raising them to her eyes. He watched her blush and heard the slight hitch in her breathing. He continued to look into her eyes for another beat, then forced himself to stand. "We will let it continue to heat for five minutes and then it will be ready for you to begin your assessment. Excuse me; I must wash the lemon juice from my hands."

When he returned to the sitting room, she was placing a movie in the player. "This is one of my favourite Christmas movies," she confided.

"I was under the impression that *all* of them have been your favourite Christmas movies," he replied with a smirk.

He allowed her to persuade him to sit beside her on the sofa, each of them with steaming cups of punch in their hands, and they watched the story of a man who seemed never to be satisfied with his life. What a fool! He had everything: parents who loved him, friends who valued him, a beautiful wife who thought he hung the moon and the man wished he had never been born.

Snape kept the punch cups full by the simple expediency of charming them so that they perpetually refilled, and he felt the sense of comfort and security spread through his entire being. By the end of the movie, Hermione was shedding tears and he was looking down at her face, bemused. "Why must you watch it if it makes you cry?" he demanded, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket.

"It's such a beautiful story," she explained, blotting the moisture from her cheeks as if she feared to smear her makeup.

He snorted but curbed his tongue, simply taking her cup and placing it on the coffee table. She stood to remove the movie from the machine and swayed slightly on her feet. "No more punch for you," he drawled, reaching to place his hands on her waist, to steady her.

She turned in his grasp, leaning down to place her hands upon his shoulders, her neckline gaping slightly, admitting a clear view all the way down to the top of her brassiere. "I haven't had too much to drink," she told him, breathing lemon scented rum into his face, "I just stood up too quickly."

Snape deliberately closed his eyes and tried not to know exactly how the globes of her soft breasts would fit perfectly into the roughened palms of his hands. After a moment, she had the audacity to rub the tip of her nose to his, laughing softly as she did so, then turned from him and walked over to the electronic devices. She seemed to ponder for a moment, then she slipped a silver disc into the machine, and soft music filled the room.

"Severus?" She turned to face him. "Please dance with me."

"That would be a bad idea," he said, taking another long drink of the punch in his cup. His eyes absorbed the sight of her; she had dressed for him, made herself lovely for him. Tonight she was his, was she not?

"I can dance," she assured him, reaching down to remove the ridiculously high-heeled shoes, balancing first on one foot, then on the other.

"I am aware that you can dance," he told her, as his arms longed to hold her. "I saw you dance with Mr. Krum at the Yule Ball, the year of the Triwizard Tournament."

She stood with her shoes dangling from her fingertips, a smile upon her face. "You saw me dance with Viktor?"

Why should he not dance with her? Had Krum deserved to touch her? Certainly not! Had Weasley *ever* deserved her treated her with that respect? No, never. Just once, she should be touched and held by a man who was fully cognizant of her amazing powers and who felt for her the reverence due to her.

He stood and walked to stand before her, looking enigmatically down into her face. "Of course I saw you dance with him. You opened the Ball, didn't you?"

Without bothering to answer, Hermione stepped into his arms. He received her gracefully, holding her small hand in his own, as his other hand clasped her waist. The music was seasonal, yet somewhat bluesy, the voice of the female singer blending somehow effortlessly with his punch-fortified inner calm, at once soothing and sexy.

She moved close enough to rest her cheek upon the fabric of his coat, and her body flowed with his as if two streams were joined to flow together to the great ocean. He was an adequate dancer, but she was intuitive, responding to his signals almost before he made them. She danced with her eyes closed, completely at ease in his arms, trusting and content. He danced with his eyes open, alternately looking down into her face, which seemed ineffably beautiful to him, and looking at the room, awash in firelight and brightened by the twinkling of the Christmas tree lights.

The amount of punch he had drunk no doubt contributed to his feeling of other-worldliness, but the girl herself was intoxicating to him, as well. He wanted the night to stretch on indefinitely; let Hogwarts, and Dumbledore, and the Order, and the Dark Lord, and the Death Eaters, and the coming war all go by the wayside. He was going to move about this enchanted room with this enchanting woman in his arms, and perhaps when they awoke, as one does from a dream, the constraining realities of their lives might have passed away, leaving only themselves to consider.

In spite of his wishes, time passed, as time will do, and the music came to an end. When they were in a silent room, Hermione let out a small sound of protest and opened her eyes, looking up into his face with an expression of such open sensuality that he was moved to tighten his hold upon her. She felt it as well, he could clearly see it; after nearly an hour of moving chest to chest in one another's arms, she wanted him as he wanted her. Inexorably, he began to lower his head, watching her face carefully for any sign of alarm. She watched his approach with complaisance, lifting her chin and scrunching her eyes and ...

...yawning hugely in his face.

Belatedly, she brought a hand to cover her mouth. "I beg your pardon," she giggled. "I think the Christmas punch has made me sleepy!"

Snape stepped away from her, turning to the fire and using his wand to remove the cauldron from the grate. "Christmas punch can do that to you," he replied neutrally, his back to her. "Why don't you go up to bed?"

He heard her behind him and was acutely aware that she stood mere inches from him; he knew that she was looking at him with that slightly baffled expression she wore when he behaved with the good sense God gave a mongoose and treated her as a student.

"I was having such a lovely time," she murmured, so softly he could scarcely hear her.

"It is very late," he said doggedly, still not turning, but seizing a poker and beginning to push it into the fire.

"I'll say goodnight, then," she said, and still he did not turn to face her. "Happy Christmas, Severus."

"Goodnight, Hermione," he replied, clinging to the poker until the ridges of the handle left creases in the palms of his hands.

He listened until he heard her bedroom door close before collapsing on the sofa and resting his furrowed brow upon his clenched fists.

A/N: Thanks to Snarkywench for beta reading and kudos to MagicAlly for Brit-picking.

Part 1, Chapter 6: The Gift

Chapter 6 of 9

An annoying event causes Hermione to choose to spend the Christmas break in seventh year away from her best friends, but Dumbledore feels she needs someone to watch over her. How will Hermione react to the appearance of the Potions master on her doorstep -- and how will they interact when cooped up alone together for days on end?

Chapter 6: The Gift

Hermione woke early on Christmas morning and felt a bit odd.

"That's what you get for drinking enough Christmas punch to float the Giant Squid," she muttered to herself, sitting up carefully.

Oh, God. What had she done the night before? Besides imitating Devil's Snare all over her Potions teacher for nearly an *hour* while he danced with her? The poor man. And then she all but begged to be allowed to stay with him when he was obviously ready for her to leave him alone. How was she supposed to face him today?

"Maybe something will come to me in the shower," she said as she made her way gingerly to her bathroom and turned on the water.

Snape woke up when he heard the water begin to run in the pipes upstairs. His head immediately informed him that he had overindulged the night before. Well, what was a man to do when all he wanted was to force himself upon a schoolgirl? Drink what was left in the cauldron, obviously. It was the only logical course of action.

"So, you think hungover is an improvement on pathetically infatuated?" he raged at himself. "You're an arsehole *and* a fool." Grabbing his discarded clothing from the armchair where he had flung it before he collapsed into sleep, he stormed into the downstairs bathroom to perform his morning cleansing charms.

Hermione left her hair down and dressed in a velour tracksuit in cranberry red. The shower had washed the cobwebs from her brain, and with youthful resiliency, she shrugged off her embarrassment over her behaviour from the night before. How bad could it have been, after all? He probably just thought she had a bit too much punch to drink he couldn't possibly know how her feelings of deep, solid friendship with him were becoming mixed up with an emotion she could not identify or explain.

"Happy Christmas, Severus!"

Snape was dressed in his full professorial regalia when Hermione greeted him in the kitchen.

"I'm sorry!" she said penitently. "I'm supposed to be preparing breakfast every morning, but you keep waking up before I do."

Snape quirked one eyebrow at her. "So, you are admitting that I won the race, in fact?"

Hermione sniffed. "Of course not. But you *are* my guest, so it is my duty to prepare your morning tea."

One corner of his mouth twitched. "Happy Christmas, Hermione," he said, directing his attention back to the very thin edition of the wizarding paper.

She stood over him. "Come on, we have presents to open!"

"You have presents to open," he corrected, "and I scarcely see why that requires my attendance."

"Because it's Christmas morning," she insisted, snatching his newspaper from his hands. "On Christmas morning you open presents before you eat breakfast." She danced back from him as he made a grab for the *Daily Prophet*, on the cover of which was a ridiculous photograph of Cornelius Fudge, wearing a Father Christmas hat.

"You are a menace," he growled at her.

"Bring your coffee to the sitting room," she coaxed him. "You never know you might have a present, too."

He stood and advanced into the sitting room with a glare. "I had better *not*," he threatened.

Hermione laid the newspaper on the cushion of his favourite armchair and approached the Christmas tree. "There are things here that I didn't put here," she said, feeling a sudden touch of Christmas-morning excitement such as she had experienced when she was a little girl. "Look! This one is for you, Severus, from the headmaster! How did it get here?" Hermione picked up a large square box and handed it to a reluctant Snape.

"Sentimental old man," Snape muttered under his breath. "He has his ways."

Hermione fell upon her presents with glee. Her parents had given her a laptop computer, even though she had explained to them repeatedly that she could not use it at Hogwarts. It would be fun to use while she was at home, though. They had also given her some warm pyjamas, a new bathrobe, and the soft black leather boots she had yearned after since she was fifteen. As she ripped open her gifts and exclaimed over them, she kept an eye on Snape. He had not moved to open Dumbledore's gift, but was watching her surreptitiously through the curtain of his greasy hair, pretending to be absorbed in the newspaper in his hand.

Finally, she asked, "Aren't you going to open your present from Professor Dumbledore?"

Without looking up from the newspaper, Snape said indifferently, "It's a bottle of cognac and seven pairs of coloured socks."

Hermione laughed, diverted. "How do you know?"

Snape lowered the paper and smirked. "He gives me the same gift every year."

"Why seven pairs of coloured socks, though?"

"It is his wish to ... vary my wardrobe," he said with careful irony.

"Do you wear them?"

Snape sneered at her. "You have had occasion to launder my socks," he pointed out.

"Well what do you do with them?"

"I put them in a drawer."

"I would love to see that," she chortled. "A drawer full of years' worth of colourful footwear!" The notion that the drawer in question would undoubtedly be in his bedroom occurred to her, and she flushed. Confused, she looked down and saw the box that she had wrapped and slipped beneath the tree for him.

"This is for you, from me," she said, scooting across the floor to be closer to his feet. She held it out to him.

Snape stared at her impassively, and for a moment Hermione was very much afraid he was going to refuse the gift. Her heart was beating rather quickly as she waited to see what he would do, and when he put down the newspaper and rose to his feet, she expected the worst.

"Where are you going?" she asked, sounding rather more like a girl than the woman she very much wanted to be.

He stepped around her, over to the tree, where he stooped and produced a large, oblong wooden box which was not gift-wrapped, but which did sport a rather oddly-tied green velvet ribbon. "Only to fetch your gift," he replied in a voice which brought her eyes to his face.

"Oh," she said, watching as he lowered himself to sit with her upon the floor. "That's for me?"

He glanced down at the floor between them. "Put my gift there," he instructed. When she did, he placed the rather heavy wooden box in her hands. "It isn't new," he cautioned.

"Is ... is this from *you*, Severus?"

Snape resisted the compulsion to snipe at her. "Yes."

Hermione stroked the velvet of the ribbon. "Slytherin green, I see," she teased, and she giggled when he smirked. With a look of absorption upon her face, she slid the ribbon from the wooden box and lifted the lid.

Snape sat tensely across from Hermione, her gift to him held tightly in both hands, his damp palms leaving a slick of sweat on the gaily-coloured paper she had used. Would she like it? He had been afforded no opportunity to shop for her; the best he could do was owl a Hogwarts house-elf and instruct him to send the box along by owl post. It had taken three birds to bring it but if she liked it, he would consider it worth the bother.

When she lifted the lid completely, Snape watched as wonder filled her face; he was infected with a giddy elation out of proportion to the situation.

"Severus they're beautiful," she breathed reverently, running her fingertips over the hand-carved chess pieces, fashioned like faerie-tale creatures. She looked up into his face. "Are these yours?"

Solemnly, he moved his head in the negative. "They're yours," he answered.

She hesitated for a moment. "I don't play very well," she confided.

"So I've heard," he answered, letting a sliver of amusement tinge his tone. "I could help you with that."

True excitement lit her features. "You would teach me to play better?"

"I would certainly endeavour to do so," he replied and was astonished when she slipped the box onto the floor and threw her arms about his neck.

"I can't believe you gave me your own chess set," she whispered; she was so close to him that he felt the movement of her lips on his ear. "Thank you."

Closing his eyes and mentally driving away what good sense he had remaining to him, he allowed himself to drop the gift and to return her gentle embrace. As he had noted the night before, she was a cosy armful, not shaped like a boy, as were many of her hipless contemporaries, but like a true woman, with a rounded bottom, deliciously curved hips, and full breasts. Having her throw herself at him when they were both seated on the floor brought him into contact with her body from a whole new angle, and the knowledge of its contours insinuated itself in his ever-strengthening subconscious.

At length, she sat back from him and picked up the discarded gift, placing it in his hands with a look somewhere between anxiety and excitement. Snape received it from her in much the same spirit. He was thirty-seven years old, and the number of Christmas presents he had received in the course of his adult life were few, if one discounted Dumbledore's yearly obligatory gifts and the occasional bribes bestowed upon him by deluded parents desirous of improving their offsprings' Potions marks.

He had simply never been the sort of man who inspired others with the desire to confer gifts upon him. Aside from one occasion when he was very young and pathetically foolish he had never received a gift from a woman who cherished ... romantic feelings for him. He was ugly, he was old, and he was a Death Eater. What more needed to be said?

"Severus?" Hermione asked hesitantly. "Aren't you going to open it?"

He raised his eyes to look at her and for a moment he saw her as he had never done before. Clearly, he could see vulnerability and was that desire? in her pleading eyes. For once, the knowledge of another's defencelessness did not spur him to twist that frailty to his own advantage. It was not a sign of weakness for the girl to permit him to see this about her it was a mark of that inner fortitude which was the hallmark of her House, and he was forced by the personal decency which had ever been his scourge to honour and respect her for it.

Snape looked down at the carefully wrapped package he held. In his estimation, the present could fall into one of two categories: a child's gift to her teacher, or a woman's gift to a man. Did *he* have the courage to remove the wrappings and discover in which league Hermione placed him and, thereby, in which category she placed herself?

"Severus?" Her voice was now timorous.

Glancing at her swiftly from beneath one rakishly raised brow, he tore the paper from the box, removed the lid, and stared in unconcealed shock at the thoughtful, costly and terribly personal garment tenderly swaddled in silver paper. With one hand he stroked the lush cashmere. What did it mean? What made her believe that he was worthy of such extravagance? What did she see when she looked at him?

"Do you hate it?" she whispered. "I have the receipt. You can exchange it for something else, if you like." She was reaching to him, a folded bit of parchment in her hand.

He looked up at her. "It is the nicest gift I have ever received," he told her honestly.

Her smile at his pronouncement might very well have lit the darkest gloom; he could not be sure. What he knew with unshakeable certainty was that his inner confusion was moving him into treacherous territory and that he had not the will to resist the journey.

They had eaten shop-bought iced buns for breakfast, then she had commandeered his aid to put the small turkey to roast in the Muggle oven. He had stubbornly refused to permit her to drive anywhere, and she had stubbornly refused to do her grocery shopping in Diagon Alley. In the end, she had ordered her groceries on the Web-Net-thing, using the computer in her father's study and having the shop deliver the food and other items she had ordered. He was rather astonished at the number of dishes which she considered as indispensable to Christmas lunch, but wisely made no argument. When she was satisfied with her endeavours in the kitchen, she ordered him to go take a shower whilst she tidied up in the sitting room. Reflecting that a shower would be just the thing, Snape climbed the stairs without argument.

Now it was evening, and they faced one another with the chess pieces between them on a table. Hermione had moved the coffee table from its spot and replaced it with one of the end tables, which she had Transfigured into a lovely game table, inlaid with squares of blond oak and ebony, the chess board built into the surface. The chairs she had Summoned were quite comfortable, which was a good thing considering the fact that they had spent the greatest part of the day on her lessons in chess-playing.

He sat back and watched her face as she puzzled over her next move, marvelling again at how comfortably they rubbed along together in this house, as if no one else in the world existed. The cashmere of the jumper she had given him caressed his flesh and kept him warm on the outside as he sipped at the Christmas cognac from Dumbledore, warming himself on the inside, as well. The Christmas meal had been devoured in the afternoon, then re-heated and revisited again in the evening. The food had been good, the cognac was better, and the company was superb. He could not think of a time in his life when he had been more content. For the last week, he had been plunged in a type of alternate universe, where he was not a teacher, or a spy, or an ugly git with no family and few friends; where Hermione was not his student, but an available, desirable woman. In this sphere, there was no Hogwarts, no Lord Voldemort, and he was just an average man with a yen for a younger woman who appeared to like him and accept him precisely as he was and yes, to desire him, as a woman wants the man of her choice.

"Your move, Severus."

Startled from his reverie, he glanced at the board to see what move she had made. The girl was making progress. For the first few hours, they had played only practice games, with him explaining each of his moves as he made them, and critiquing her moves as well. She seldom made the same mistake twice; her understanding was good, and her ability to mentally catalogue what she was told was remarkable. He loved to play chess, and he had seldom spent a more enjoyable day than this one, but he was becoming weary and was ready to give it up for the night. Deciding that she had earned the right of a win, he moved his queen forward into her trap.

"Check," he said.

In three swift moves, and with a crow of pure elation, Hermione put him in checkmate.

"I won!"

"You did," he allowed.

After she had reverently replaced the chess pieces in their wooden box, she rose and went into the kitchen to put the kettle on. Snape moved the game table behind the sofa and Summoned the coffee table back from exile. When she emerged, rather than the china teapot, she bore a tray with two large mugs with tea bags still seeping in their depths.

"You let me win," she stated.

"I was tired," he explained.

"Will I ever beat you?"

"Never," he said firmly. "You might, however, defeat me at chess."

She gaped at him for a moment before beginning to laugh. "And you call *me* cheeky!" she said.

He removed his teabag from the mug and placed it in the shallow bowl where she had discarded hers. An unusual aroma assailed his nostrils, and he sipped cautiously at the brew. Hermione was watching him closely as he closed his eyes and concentrated on the information given to him by his nose and his taste buds.

"Cinnamon," he said, "star anise orange peel, and ... liquorice root?"

He was rewarded with her chuckle. "Very good, Professor only you left out a few ingredients."

He scowled at her and took another sip from his mug, breathing deeply of the steam and letting the liquid roll around on his tongue for a moment before swallowing. "Sarsaparilla," he murmured, "cloves and " he took another deep breath with his sensitive nose, "vanilla."

"Not bad," Hermione said.

He bristled. "What did I miss?"

"Cardamom oil," she murmured.

"What am I drinking?"

She smiled at him. "It's liquorice tea." He did not comment, and she continued. "I only saw you in Hogsmeade one time, in all the times I have been there. I was on an errand for Professor Flitwick at Dervish and Banges, and I saw you through the window of Honeydukes. You were buying liquorice wands."

Snape held her glance, seeing the combination of warmth, amusement, tenderness, and affection in her eyes. Turning his head to gaze into the fire, he murmured, "You must have been mistaken."

From his peripheral vision, behind the unsatisfactory curtain of clean hair, he watched a satisfied, womanly smile cross the girl's face.

"Have it your way," she murmured, reaching to move the curtain of hair back from his face. "But I saw you."

Snape sat entirely still, aware of nothing save for the touch of her fingers upon his face.

Hermione stroked the hair back from Severus' face, her fingertips noting the beginnings of his five o' clock shadow, and refused to analyze her feelings. Remotely, she was conscious of time passing, of the return of her parents looming in three days' time, and she did not want to deal with it. Desperately, she clung to the moment, daringly allowing her thumb to stroke his jaw line.

Severus reached up and captured her hand, compelling her to cease stroking his face. "Enough, Hermione," he said, releasing her hand again.

"Talk to me," she invited him.

He arched a brow. "For what purpose?"

"I like to hear you speak," she replied, smiling into her mug.

He snorted and remained silent.

"Let's read," she said suddenly, pulling her wand and pointing it in the vague direction of the staircase. "Accio The Little Prince," she said and waited patiently for the book to zoom into her grasp.

"What is it?" he inquired, seeing on the cover of the book a cartoon-like drawing.

"It is a book about friendship," Hermione told him, moving closer to him so that their upper arms touched. "We have to sit close, so that we can both see the illustrations," she explained. "I'll read a chapter, and then you until we have read it all. It's a short book."

Snape seemed somewhat sceptical about the book, but he lifted an arm to the sofa back, making more room for her to sit close to him, and made no demur. Thus it was that they read to one another, deep into the night. It was the allegory of the Little Prince, who left his home planet to escape the torment of a beloved but thoughtless rose. The Little Prince had many adventures on Earth, including learning about friendship from the fox; he came to understand that he loved his rose because she was unique in all the world, and in time he wished for nothing but to return to her. When Hermione read the last chapter, her voice thick with emotion, she was not surprised to see tears glistening on Severus' face.

"You liked it," she whispered.

"Yes," he replied.

"I am the fox," she told him, and sat quietly beside him, looking into the fire until she fell asleep on his shoulder.

Snape looked down into her slumbering face, his expression enigmatic, and said, "You are the rose."

He was still keeping watch when the sun came up.

The pounding on the door woke them from a sound sleep, and in his heart Snape knew that the idyll was over. Life was about to come crashing in on them, and though he did not wish for their time to end, years of discipline asserted themselves instantly.

"Severus! Hermione!"

Hermione stirred and looked up into his face, her eyes fearful. "That's Tonks," she said.

He put her from him and hastened to the door, flinging it open to admit Tonks. "You're to go to the Burrow, Severus. Dumbledore's orders," the Auror said, entering the house and slamming the door behind her. "I'm to deliver Hermione to Grimmauld Place."

Snape strode into the hallway to collect his cloak as Hermione wrung her hands. "Tonks, what happened?"

"Death Eaters attacked the Burrow last night," she said. "Go get your trunk packed, Hermione; I'll tell you all I can, but we need to go as quickly as possible."

Hermione fled into the hallway and grabbed Snape by the arm just as he pulled the cloak from the hook.

"I don't want you to go," she said.

Snape sneered at her. "I was never here, Miss Granger."

Snape would remember to the end of his days the look of pure agony on Hermione's face when he jerked his arm from her and walked away, feeling the warmth of her grasping fingers through the fabric of the cashmere jumper long after the warmth of the Granger house was far behind him.

A/N: As always, beta reading thanks to SnarkyWench and Brit-picking kudos to MagicAlly.

Don't hurt me! Part 2 is next. Three more chapters to go!

Part II: Christmas, 2000 Chapter 1: Blue Christmas

Chapter 7 of 9

An annoying event causes Hermione to choose to spend the Christmas break in seventh year away from her best friends, but Dumbledore feels she needs someone to watch over her. How will Hermione react to the appearance of the Potions master on her doorstep -- and how will they interact when cooped up alone together for days on end?

Part II: Christmas, 2000

Chapter 1: Blue Christmas

Hermione Apparated into her parents' back garden and let herself in the door. The sitting room was warm, with a nice fire burning in the hearth. The artificial Christmas tree her parents had bought two years ago was assembled and decorated in its accustomed place to the right side of the room. Hermione looked away from the tree, her mouth firming into a straight, mirthless line, and she marched purposefully into the front hallway. At the foot of the staircase, she called, "Mum? Dad?"

Linda Granger appeared at the top of the stairs. "Hermione! Welcome home!"

Hermione climbed up to her mother and they embraced. "I'm so glad you're here," Linda said, smoothing hair away from her daughter's face.

For a moment, Hermione allowed her cheek to rest upon her mother's shoulder. "It's good to be home," she admitted. "The city is just too strange during the holidays."

John Granger appeared on the landing behind his wife, and Hermione walked into his arms, allowing her father to engulf her in his hug. "My little girl," he said. "It's been too long since you've been for a proper visit."

Hermione breathed in the familiar scent of his aftershave and felt both comforted and secure. "I've missed you, too, Dad," she said, giving him a squeeze about his substantial middle before stepping away from him. "But I can see you've been well," she added, patting him on the tummy. Both he and her mother laughed.

"It's time for tea," her mother said, leading the way down to the kitchen. As they settled about the kitchen table with tea and sandwiches, they caught up on news.

Hermione had a flat in the city, from which she could walk to her job as an administrative assistant at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies. Though she had begun as an apprentice in their Potions Department, she had been half-way through her course of study when she had switched to administration. There were plenty of applicants for potioners to keep the hospital in its supply of basic potions, but she had never seen such an unholy mess as the management staff at the hospital. Management, apparently, required a certain flair for the ruthless organisation of the schedules of other people; after seven years of chivvying Harry and Ron into doing their homework and revising for their exams, Hermione had what it took. Along the way, she had also acquired a certain merciless approach to her dealings with other people; if Harry and Ron had a suspicion of where she had learnt to emulate that particular tactic, they were wise enough to keep their thoughts to themselves. Although they had found it all but impossible to praise the questionably heroic acts of someone they loathed, they were yet too well brought up to speak ill of the dead.

As Hermione carried the tea dishes to the sink for washing up, her father said, "Are you sure you won't reconsider, love? It's been a really long time since you spent a holiday with your cousins."

Linda gave her husband a quelling look, but did not rush into speech herself; perhaps this would be the year that their Hermione would once again become the uncomplicated child she had been before that horrible wizarding war. Linda kept her own compassionate brown eyes on her daughter's back, reading her body language and waiting for her words. With all her heart, she hoped her daughter would agree to accompany them on their family visit for the holiday.

"Thanks, Dad, but I prefer to be alone at Christmas," Hermione responded, busying her hands in the soapy water, with only the tension in her shoulders betraying her discomfort with the topic of discussion. "And you'll be home on Boxing Day."

"It breaks my heart to leave you here on your own at Christmas, love," her father blurted, his voice weighted with care. "It's been three years now since that Dark Lord bloke was brought down how long are you going to mourn?"

"I'm not mourning," Hermione said, her voice devoid of emotion. "I am simply not able to make merry, and I don't care to be around those who can. Please why do we have to repeat this conversation every Christmas?"

Linda rose then and placed her hands on her daughter's shoulders. "We'll probably keep on asking, love but once we've asked and you've answered, we'll leave it alone, all right?"

"Thank you, Mum," Hermione murmured, without once stopping the monotonous motions of washing the tea dishes.

Having waved her parents off on their drive to visit the extended family, Hermione made the rounds of the downstairs windows and doors. As the sun set, she placed wards more out of habit than real fear that such precautions would be necessary. Once Voldemort had died, most of his followers had been rounded up within two months. The Aurors had made some arrests after that, but it had been over a year now since the last Death Eater capture and trial. There were only nine known bearers of the Dark Mark for whom no accounting had ever been made. Among those was Severus Snape, who had gone missing in action and was presumed dead.

Satisfied that the house was secure, Hermione built up the fire in the hearth and settled on the sofa with a small tub of chocolate ice cream in her hands and a stack of movies on the coffee table before her. Her ritual for the last two years had consisted of watching the movies amongst which were *Home Alone*, *White Christmas*, *Scrooge*, and *It's a Wonderful Life* and permitting herself to become immersed in the recollections which she suppressed at all other times: the memories of her last happy Christmas.

The attack on the Burrow on Christmas night had been the opening salvo of the war. The Death Eaters had brought war to wizarding Britain, and the Order of the Phoenix had responded with all its might. Hermione had been ensconced at number twelve, Grimmauld Place with Harry, Ron, and Ginny, but they had not been excluded from the war councils. The war, such as it was, had raged for just over three weeks, consisting of four major battles and a number of skirmishes.

The ending had come, ironically enough, at Hogwarts. Voldemort had been tricked into believing that Harry had hidden in the castle, and the Order of the Phoenix had been able to successfully surround the Death Eaters. Hermione and Ron had formed Harry's personal guard, casting over and again the spells they had learnt from Harry himself in Dumbledore's Army. When Voldemort had fallen, Harry had fallen with him, and Ron and Hermione had dropped to their knees at his side.

Dumbledore had descended upon them then, in a flash of blue-white light, and had borne Harry away in his own arms directly to St. Mungo's. Ron had gone in search of his family, and Hermione had begun to go from body to body on the battlefield looking for Severus Snape, whom she had not seen since Boxing Day morning when he had walked out of her house.

Remus Lupin had found her amongst the carnage, crying uncontrollably, turning over black-cloaked body after body. "Hermione!" he had cried, seizing her by the shoulders and forcing her to stop. "What are you doing?"

"Where is Severus?" she had sobbed, grasping Lupin's ripped and ragged robes in her fists. "Where is he? Why can't I find him?"

Lupin had frowned, Hermione's words and manner having made no sense to him. "Severus was cloaked as a Death Eater, Hermione he and the other Order spies within Voldemort's ranks were the ones who made this ambush possible. I saw him earlier, disabling Death Eaters from behind but I don't know where he is now. You ought to be in the Infirmary, not out here. I'm sure that Severus is fine."

Firmly, Lupin had compelled Hermione off the field where Ministry officials had begun identifying the dead and making preparations for removing bodies. He had deposited her in the care of Madam Pomfrey, who had set up an impromptu field hospital on the third floor. Two of the Charms classrooms and the entire Trophy Room had been filled with litters of patients, volunteer medi-witches, and lime green-robed Healers. Hermione had allowed Madam Pomfrey to place her on a bed, but once the matron was out of sight, Hermione had cast a Disillusionment Spell upon herself and had crept back out to the field.

A week had passed before she had grasped the fact that she had searched every possible place within and without the castle for Severus; she had then borrowed the Marauder's Map from Harry's trunk and had stared at it obsessively for hours on end until Ginny had finally taken it away from her.

"What are you looking for, Hermione?" she had asked with great concern.

"Severus. I'm looking for Severus," Hermione answered doggedly, turning on Ginny with fierce eyes. "And don't you *dare* repeat those lies to me!"

Ginny Weasley was every inch Molly's daughter. Squaring up to Hermione, she had said, "Professor Snape is missing in action, Hermione. We don't know where he is, but you know very well that he is probably dead." Hermione had twisted away from her friend, putting her hands over her ears as she had done when she was a child. Inexorably, Ginny had grasped her wrists and forced her hands down. "But do you know who isn't dead, Hermione? Harry isn't dead. He's lying in the hospital and he needs his friends. Ron is practically living at St. Mungo's. Why aren't you there with them?"

Hermione had gone to sit with Harry in the hospital. She loved him; he was her friend but she no longer called him "best" friend not in her own mind, at least. Her best friend had walked out of her life and gone missing, and although his behaviour towards her in the last instant had seemed cruel, she did not believe that it gave the lie to his kindness prior to that moment. They had not spoken of their feelings it had been the wrong time for that but she knew that he had felt the same way she did.

After all, had he not called her his rose when he had thought she was sleeping?

Roused from her reminiscences, Hermione glanced over at her copy of *The Little Prince*, which lived most of the year in a special box in her bedroom cupboard along with a bottle of aged cognac, a box of liquorice teabags, and a tube of lemon-scented shampoo for oily hair. Rattling at the bottom of the box were four golden Galleons. The chess pieces, however, she had not been able to leave behind. Those had been his very own, and he had given them to her; she kept them on the table beside her bed at her flat, a shrine to what might have been.

Once Harry had been well enough to leave hospital, Dumbledore had decided it was time for the school to open again. They had all been back at school before the first thaw. The seventh years, many of whom had by then been war veterans, pushed on with the last of their schooling, and though they did not sit their N.E.W.T.s until August, the overall showing and the number of N.E.W.T.s obtained had been rather impressive.

Their N.E.W.T.s behind them, Hermione had gone to work at St. Mungo's, whilst Harry and Ron had both tried out for and made the team for the Chudley Cannons. After completing her seventh year at Hogwarts, Ginny had taken a position at Gringott's Bank as an apprentice curse-breaker. During the Quidditch season, Harry and Ron were away quite often; when they had a break, they lived together on Grimmauld Place. Ginny continued to live at the Burrow with her parents. Hermione and Ginny tried to meet once or twice a month to keep in touch, and Harry and Ron went out of their way to seek Hermione out when they were in town, but she found herself living a life far more isolated than she had done before.

Once a month, without fail, Hermione owed Professor Dumbledore, asking for an update on the status of the Death Eaters who were missing in action. Once a month, without fail, the headmaster replied to her that no further information was available.

And still, she dreamt of tumbling through the snow with strong, firm hands holding her and keeping her safe. And yet, she dreamt of dancing the night away, cradled with incalculable tenderness within the arms of a man with a sharp tongue and a wicked wit. In sleep, she revisited again and again the days bracketed by his will and warmed by his voice.

On the first anniversary of the fall of Voldemort, there had been a tremendous celebration, both at Hogwarts, the scene of the battle, and at the Ministry, the scene of the aftermath. Hermione, labelled "war hero" by the press and the public, had dutifully made her appearance at these functions, supported by Harry and Ron. On the night of the Ministry Gala, she had been stupefied by the sight of a hook-nosed profile, framed by long black hair, and she had thrust her way through crowds of people to reach her goal. Viktor Krum had been pleased to see Hermione but puzzled by her fierce, if brief, bout of crying when she had seen him again.

He had been even more pleased when she had gone home with him that night.

After three months, he had long ceased to be pleased and had simply been very confused. Hermione had known of Viktor's affection for her for years since she had been fifteen years old but she had never permitted him to hope that she returned his sentiments. From January to April of that year, she had seen him several times a week, had gone to his bed each time he had asked, but she had never appeared happy. It had seemed to him as if she had been going through the motions of a love affair, while never having been touched by the emotions of a love affair. In April, he had brought his prolonged visit to London to an end, bidding Hermione farewell and making no plans to see her again.

The fiasco with Viktor had taught her a much-needed lesson: one man could not substitute for another, no matter how similar their appearances. Each time Viktor had expressed tenderness, Hermione had found herself recoiling from him. The sex she had been able to stand, particularly in a darkened room, and Viktor learned early on that she would become angry with him if he spoke to her during lovemaking. In the end, when Viktor had left her, Hermione had known that her efforts had failed, and she had resolved not to make that mistake again.

Soon afterwards, she had made the move into hospital administration, and she had thrown herself into the task of reorganising St. Mungo's from the bottom to the top. Department heads had long ago learned to duck into other rooms when they saw her coming, for few of them lived up to her rigorous standards of efficiency and proficiency. She had become unpopular amongst the rank and file employees, and more than one casual observer had likened the terse Miss Granger to that sarcastic bastard, Snape, the Potions master.

When word of the epithet had come to Hermione, she had been inordinately pleased.

It had only been in the last month that her peace had been disturbed again. In early November, an article had appeared in the *Daily Prophet* hinting at top secret negotiations being carried on from within the Wizengamot itself, regarding the possible pardoning of war criminals. There had been a storm of public outrage over the notion, followed by the overwhelming denials from the Ministry that discussions of that type had been taking place. Hermione had thought nothing of it until the same rumour surfaced again, this time with more details.

Instead of "war criminals," it had spoken of "double agents."

That very afternoon, Hermione had been in the headmaster's office, demanding the truth. Professor Dumbledore had assured her that there was nothing to tell, had apologised that she had come all that way for nothing, and had personally walked her to the gates of Hogwarts.

Ten days later, the newspaper had reported the "ongoing negotiations" as fact, although details of the identities of the Death Eaters had not been disclosed. Hints that the acts of these spies had so turned the tide of the war with Voldemort that the brigands deserved not only pardons, but recognition, had been laced through the article. Hermione had left her office that day in such a temper that those in her path had given way, and she had marched all the way to the Ministry rehearsing what she would say to gain access to the Death Eaters in question.

She had made it no farther than the Auror Office, where Kingsley Shacklebolt had told her that there were no Death Eaters in custody, although he had promised she would be the first person he would Floo if any turned up.

Professor Dumbledore had not been in when she had visited at his office and had apparently been too busy to answer his owls.

Two more trips to the Ministry over the last week had afforded her no further information. Increasingly detailed newspaper reports, when flung in Shacklebolt's face, had been met with blank puzzlement.

"Hermione, there are no Death Eaters in Auror custody."

It had been Shacklebolt's careful stress of the last two words that had given Hermione an idea. That very morning she had used her key to enter Grimmauld Place and had borrowed Harry's Invisibility Cloak from its place in his old school trunk. She had made it all the way down to Courtroom Ten at the Ministry of Magic, where she had found a very nervous Minerva McGonagall pacing the hall before the door. Hermione had remained very still beneath the cloak, and soon the doors had been opened, and Professor McGonagall had been summoned to give evidence. Hermione had slipped through the doors just before they had been closed and had followed closely behind her former Professor as she had crossed the old stone floor to the witness chair.

McGonagall had just been asked a question regarding her role in the Order of the Phoenix when Hermione had become aware of Dumbledore, who had sat in the seat of the Chief Warlock. Unless she had been very much mistaken, he had been looking directly into her face. Too late, she had recalled what Harry had told her once before that he was sure Dumbledore had seen him beneath the Invisibility Cloak one night in Hagrid's cabin.

"Excuse me, Professor McGonagall," Dumbledore had said with gentle courtesy. "I am afraid that we have a visitor who has lost her way."

The eyes of the witches and wizards of the Wizengamot had turned eagerly to look about the room, and Hermione had wished very much for a rock under which to hide.

"Miss Granger?" Dumbledore had said. "How may we help you?"

Defiantly, Hermione had pulled the cloak from her, lifting her chin as she had looked Dumbledore squarely in the eyes. "I have simply come to have a word with the persons who are seeking sanctuary," she had stated.

"I am afraid this is a closed hearing," an elderly witch had told her kindly.

"One moment, Griselda," Dumbledore had said. "We will ask the subjects: is there anyone amongst you who wishes to have a word with Miss Hermione Granger?"

Hermione had craned her neck to see to whom Dumbledore had been directing his inquiry, but all she had seen was a box with four empty chairs, beside which a man had sat at a table, scribbling furiously on parchment. The scribbler had appeared to speak to the empty chairs, then he had responded in a clear voice, "No one wishes to speak with Miss Hermione Granger, sir."

Dumbledore had smiled at Hermione and had spread his hands to show that he had done all he could. "I am afraid that we must ask you to leave the hearing, Miss Granger and, your word, perhaps, that you will not return in a clandestine way?"

Hermione had straightened her spine before saying, "Very well, Headmaster." She had turned and walked out of the courtroom, closing the door carefully behind her.

Without bothering to return to her office, she had Apparated home, set out enough food and water for Crookshanks to hold him for a week, and gathered her gear for her Christmas stay with her parents. It was the Friday before Christmas, and she was going home. If she was going to be despondent, it might as well be somewhere truly conducive to her own particular brand of misery.

By the end of the first Christmas movie, she had eaten the best part of the small tub of ice cream, paying scant attention to the video and letting her mind wander over events both recent and distant, all of which contributed to her current mood and state of mind.

Extreme unhappiness had not been particularly kind to Hermione. Eating comfort food had brought on a bit of weight gain, although compared to her weight at the end of the war, she was probably within five or six pounds of where she had been three years before. Stress wrought havoc with her complexion, giving her more spots at the age of twenty-one, when many women were outgrowing such things, than she had suffered as a teenager. She seldom bothered much with her hair or cosmetics anymore; after she and Viktor parted company she had even thought a time or two of ways to make herself *less* attractive to the young wizards who continued to ask her out. Tonight, for her evening of ice cream consumption, movie watching, and memory indulging, she was dressed in her old Christmas pyjama pants and oversized sweatshirt combination; on her feet were her Winnie-the-Pooh slippers, and her hair was twisted up and held at the back of her head with a clip. She neither expected nor wanted company which was no doubt the reason why someone rang the doorbell.

"Bugger!" she exclaimed angrily, wondering if ignoring the ring would cause the visitor to depart. It could only be some bloody neighbour or other, and she had nothing to say to anyone and was certainly not dressed for receiving guests.

The visitor now knocked firmly on the door. What if it was some kind of emergency? Or what if Harry and Ron had decided to drop by after their Quidditch game? With ill grace she stood up and went into the front hall, putting her eye to the peephole.

Nothing but blackness.

She turned her back determined not to open the door for an unknown visitor and thinking she could hide in the sitting room until the intruder just went away when the visitor spoke.

"Miss Granger?"

For a moment she stopped breathing, sure that she was suffering from auditory hallucinations. A further pounding on the door made her swallow and draw her wand, assuming a defensive stance.

"Hermione! Open the door. I know you're in there."

Afraid and angry, she rushed at the wooden door. "Show yourself!" she demanded, thinking that she would hex the boys if they were playing this cruel trick upon her.

She placed her eye back to the peephole and the tip of a wand ignited, becoming steadily brighter until it lit from below, in chiaroscuro, the gaunt planes and sharp angles of the unlovely countenance of Severus Snape.

A/N: Beta reading thanks to Snarkywench and Brit-picking kudos to Magically.

Part 2, Chapter 2: All I Want for Christmas is ...

Chapter 8 of 9

An annoying event causes Hermione to choose to spend the Christmas break in seventh year away from her best friends, but Dumbledore feels she needs someone to watch over her. How will Hermione react to the appearance of the Potions master on her doorstep -- and how will they interact when cooped up alone together for days on end?

Part 2, Chapter 2: All I Want for Christmas Is ...

Hermione could not prevent the whimper she uttered when she saw his face, and she fell back from the door, her wand hand pointed at the floor and her other hand over her mouth. Her brain felt as if it were steeped in treacle, incapable of processing the information with which it had just been presented. How could it be? It was not possible for Severus Snape to be standing on her doorstep he was dead; everyone had told her so, over and over again.

"Dammit, Hermione! Let me in!"

From the other side of the door, the voice spoke again, though not loudly enough for her to clearly hear him. She thought she heard him swear fluently, and then the Muggle locks began to twist and the wards she had placed fell as if they had been cast by a firstie. The door swung open and Severus Snape swept into the hallway, slamming the door behind him.

"Stupid girl! Why didn't you open up?"

There he stood, displacing air in the front hall of her parents' house, yet he could not possibly be there. He advanced upon her and she levelled her wand at his chest. He stopped in his tracks.

"Who are you?" she demanded shrilly.

"Oh, for the love of Merlin," he snarled, crossing his arms across his chest and rolling his eyes. "You know bloody well who I am."

"Prove it." She jabbed her wand for emphasis and silvery sparks flew. He eyed the wand and took one step back.

"How shall I prove it, you impossible girl?"

"Tell me something only *he* would know."

His eyes narrowed. "You earned eleven O.W.L.s and scored Outstanding in all but one subject."

She sniffed. "That is a matter of public record."

"You can bake biscuits but you can't hold your drink."

Now she rolled her eyes. "That wouldn't be hard to find out."

He took a step towards her. "You are in possession of the hand-carved faerie-tale chess set my grandfather left to me," he stated, shrugging out of his cloak and hanging it on the coat stand, "and you gave me this jumper for Christmas three years ago."

Hermione drew in a ragged breath, her eyes riveted to his black cashmere jumper, and her wand clattered to the floor as she swayed on her feet.

"Oh no you don't!" Snape said, scooping her up, pivoting and carrying her into the kitchen, where he thrust her into a chair and ruthlessly pushed her head between her knees.

Hermione opened her eyes to look at the kitchen floor tile and saw his black boots, worn and a touch shabby, but impossibly dear, within her line of vision. Slowly, she raised her head and he squatted down on his haunches before her so that they were eye to eye.

"Where have you been?" It was not at all what she had been longing to say to him, yet it was information which she needed to know.

"At Durmstrang, oddly enough."

Hermione blinked once. "But why?"

Snape stood. "I will be happy to share the tales of my adventures and to hear yours, but I think we need tea. Are the tea things still in the same place?"

Hermione nodded, and Snape strode to the cupboards, taking down the china teapot and a tin of Earl Grey tea. Eschewing the electric stove top, he filled the kettle with water and touched it with his wand, quickly eliciting steam. When he had filled the teapot with the tea leaves and boiling water, he took mugs from a shelf and loaded the tray with precise efficiency. He moved with an economy of motion and a great deal of assurance for a man who had spent one week at the Granger home, three years ago, yet he remembered down to the teaspoons where everything was kept.

"Shall we go into the sitting room?" he asked, pausing in the middle of the kitchen with the tray in his hands.

Hermione stood and led the way into the next room, feeling as if she were experiencing a dream from which she would soon awaken. As she sat down on the sofa before the fireplace, she chuckled.

"What is amusing?" Snape inquired with the lift of a brow.

"Only I would have a dream about sitting down to tea with someone," she said.

Snape seated himself at her side. "Does this seem dream-like?"

Hermione watched as he poured tea into a mug and stirred in two sugars, then handed the mug to her. "You remember how I take my tea," she whispered.

"I remember everything, Hermione," he said firmly, looking into her eyes. "Why does this seem like a dream?"

"Because you're dead," she said conversationally, averting her eyes. "One only drinks tea with dead people in one's dreams."

He snorted, and the feeling of déjà vu startled a laugh from Hermione. The laugh drew an answering gleam from him, the merest warming of his glance as it rested upon her face, and she reached a hand to him.

"You really are here," she stated, full of wonder.

Awkwardly, he engulfed her hand with his own. "Yes," he answered.

"Tell me everything," she commanded.

Snape took a long drink of his tea, his sombre gaze fixed upon her face. Finally, he began to speak. "Dumbledore knew that those of us who were working from within the Dark Lord's ranks to bring him down would be at risk for arrest and imprisonment after the war. Ill-feeling towards the Death Eaters was so strong that Aurors were inclined to curse first and ask questions later. The conspirators had firm instructions from Dumbledore: the moment the Dark Lord fell, we were to rendezvous at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, near Hagrid's house."

Snape paused to drink some of his tea and Hermione drank in his appearance. He was wearing the black cashmere jumper she had given him on their Christmas together, with plain black trousers and his worn black boots. His exterior had changed very little, though his face appeared somewhat fuller and significantly less sallow, as if he had spent more time out-of-doors and less time in a dungeon. She was close enough now to note the scent of his shaving lotion; he appeared freshly-shaved and his shoulder-length hair, which was combed back straight from his forehead, was clean. She realised, in a dim corner of her mind, that he had gone out of his way to show up on her doorstep newly groomed and that fact spoke volumes to her.

Snape resumed his story. "Minerva McGonagall met us at the edge of the Forest and informed us that we were going to be taken to a place of sanctuary to be kept safe until Dumbledore could arrange for us to return. She held out a Portkey and we ended up at Durmstrang." A twisted smile touched his thin lips. "Trust Dumbledore to kill two birds with one stone. Minerva explained to us that the board of governors there had agreed to offer the collaborating Death Eaters refuge whilst our fate was arranged with the Ministry of Magic in Britain; meanwhile, we were to make ourselves useful."

"Did you *teach* there?" Hermione said, diverted.

"It's what I *do*, Hermione. Yes, I taught Advanced Potions. Their Potions teacher is not a master."

"But what about the other Death Eaters? What did they do?"

"There were four of us; the other three were the Malfoys, Lucius and Draco, and Draco's friend, Blaise Zabini. The boys became students; Lucius made himself useful as duelling instructor."

Hermione snorted and Snape raised an eyebrow at her. "I assure you, he is quite competent." When she only shrugged, he continued with his tale. "We were under the impression that the negotiations would take a matter of months, and then we would be back home, resuming our old lives."

"We were, perhaps, a bit naïve in our expectations."

"Dumbledore campaigned tirelessly for our return with a full pardon, but the Ministry was reluctant to discuss it. For the first two years after the war, he was never able to bring the matter before the Wizengamot. Cornelius Fudge blocked discussions of amnesty at every turn, and it was not until Fudge was voted out of office that any progress was made."

"But Dumbledore lied to me!" Hermione cried indignantly. "I contacted him every month!"

Snape's hand, warm and dry, tightened about hers, drawing her eyes to his. "So he told me." The thin lips quirked up on one side. "Except, of course, for the months when you were residing with Mr. Krum," he added.

Hermione's face flooded with colour and then paled, just as quickly. She withdrew her hand from his and leaned forward to place her mug on the table, turning one shoulder slightly to him. "Dumbledore told you about that?"

"No," he said. "But Krum is a Durmstrang alumnus, as well as an international Quidditch celebrity. His doings were luridly reported by the Bulgarian press and avidly discussed by the students and teachers at Durmstrang."

"I didn't live with him," Hermione announced to her knees.

"If you had done, it would have been no one's business but your own," Snape stated.

Hermione felt uncomfortable with the topic of conversation; she couldn't tell Severus that she went with Viktor because he was a black-haired hook-nosed grump, could she? Groping for a change of subject, she said, "How long have you been in England?"

"Almost a month and virtually under house arrest. Dumbledore was adamant that we remain out of sight until the case had been decided before the Wizengamot. He was fully prepared to spirit us away into hiding again if he could not prevail upon the others to grant us a full pardon."

Hermione turned to face him. She wanted to tell him not to think of Viktor, that she hadn't cared about Viktor, but she couldn't bring herself to say those words. What if he did not want to hear that?

But what if he did?

"I came to the Ministry I tried to find out if you were there," she said, looking into his face.

He smirked and drank some tea. "Shacklebolt told me."

"He lied to me, too!"

"Dumbledore's orders," Snape murmured.

"I can't believe they didn't tell *me*!" she stormed. "As if I would say or do anything to jeopardize you."

"Perhaps it did not occur to either of them that you would have a particular interest in *my* welfare."

Her chin came up a fraction. "I was in the courtroom today."

Now he did smile, a miraculous lightening of his features that was gone in an instant. "Yes, I saw you."

"No one wished to speak with Hermione Granger," she said flatly.

A strange expression of gratification touched his eyes. "Did that rankle?"

She turned her face away and shrugged, the picture of scorned womanhood. One long, tapered finger touched her chin and turned her face back to him.

"It was not the time for a reunion or a personal conversation, Hermione," he said, the sound of her name on his lips, spoken in a confiding tone, sending a shiver skittering along her spinal column.

Hermione closed her eyes and tilted her head, pressing her cheek into his palm. "And now?"

Again, his voice insinuated itself into her consciousness, coating her senses like chocolate caramel. "Why do you think I'm here, silly girl?"

Hermione opened her eyes and looked at him. He was regarding her with slightly narrowed eyes, his nostrils flared, a faint sneer pulling at his thin lips. She was confused, for he looked both disdainful and intense which part of that was for her? "Why *are* you here, Severus?"

His hand released her cheek, his eyes were cast down at his mug, and he took another sip of tea. "The Wizengamot cleared me, and the Ministry threw me out. I thought I might be able to get a cup of tea if I came to see you."

Hermione smiled. "Well, last time you had a letter from Dumbledore to get your foot in the door."

He seemed to look about the sitting room for the first time. "Is that ... is that supposed to be a *tree*?" he asked, indicating the Grangers' artificial Christmas tree.

Hermione nodded, and Snape sniffed. "The one I procured for you was much nicer," he announced.

"But you haven't been here to denude the local parks," she pointed out, her heart lifting. Did he remember think fondly? of their previous Christmas together?

"I'm starving," she announced, standing. "Come to the kitchen; I'll make sandwiches."

Snape followed her with their tea tray and made himself useful.

Over their informal meal, Hermione related the tale of her career at St. Mungo's, making light of the solitary nature of her existence. Snape watched her carefully, noting the gaps in her history. What had happened to Hermione Granger, the lynch-pin of the Harry Potter Trio? Where were her so-called best friends in her times of trouble and loneliness? He lowered his head, so that his hair fell forward to cover his face.

"Why am I not hearing more of Potter and Weasley?" he inquired.

"They are busy with their own lives and I haven't encouraged them to spend a great deal of time with me. Our lives are quite different, now. We have very little in common."

She rose and carried their dishes to the sink; he watched her, noting that she did not look physically as well as he would have liked. The glowing complexion and shining hair he remembered were dulled and slightly unkempt, but to him, she was loveliness personified, all the same.

"Let's take our coffee in by the fire," Hermione suggested, and he followed her, thankful that her parents were away for the weekend. Finding common ground with her again was going to be tricky; it would have been all but impossible under the watchful eyes of her family.

He attended to the fire before joining her on the sofa, noting her approval of his presumption. It appeared that she wanted him to feel at home but she was such a kind creature; he ought not to read too much into that. Before picking up his coffee, his eyes took inventory of the room, searching out an innocuous topic of conversation. For the first time, he spied a box on the floor beneath the coffee table. Tilting his head, he wondered what it might be. Hermione noticed the direction of his gaze and she leaned down to move the box, but Snape was quicker.

"Give me that!" Hermione cried, abandoning her coffee mug on the table.

Snape raised an eyebrow at her, a truly wicked smile teasing the corners of his mouth. "Oh, I don't think I can do that," he said, turning swiftly to dodge her lunging grasp, so that she collided with his cashmere-clad back. *Holy mother of Merlin, the girl isn't wearing a brassiere*, his senses were quick to report as her soft flesh came into contact with his bony shoulder blades.

"Severus, don't tease!"

He stood and smirked at her. "What on earth has brought about such a protest?" he wondered aloud, reaching into the box and removing the first item his hand encountered. He withdrew a box of teabags. "Liquorice tea," he murmured.

He noticed that Hermione had subsided, a blush staining her cheeks a fiery red as she stared at the floor. Satisfied that she would not try to wrest his prize from him, he sat beside her again, placing the teabags on the coffee table. "What else?" He dipped his hand into the box again, emerging with a bottle of the fine old cognac Dumbledore gave him every Christmas; in turn, he pulled out the bottle of shampoo she had once forced him to use and the copy of *The Little Prince*, which they had read together on that Christmas night so long ago. From the bottom of the box, he picked up four Galleons, one by one. He spread the items out on the table, studying them with a frown upon his face. The obvious reason for the odd collection was at the forefront of his mind, but it was entirely too important for him to make assumptions.

"Do you mean to explain yourself?" he inquired quietly.

Hermione stared stonily at the floor. "No."

"Why do you have these things gathered together, Hermione?"

She lifted her eyes to his face. "I can't stop you from mocking me, Severus, but I don't have to willingly assist you to do so."

Tenderly, he reached his fingertips to brush a tendril of hair from her forehead. "Do these things have a ... sentimental value for you?"

Her chin came up a fraction. "Yes."

He nodded and took his fingers from her face, though he longed to touch her. "I see," he murmured, picking up his coffee and beginning to drink.

Hermione watched him indignantly as he sipped his coffee and gazed into the fire. "Is that all you have to say?" she demanded.

He flicked a cool glance at her, successfully hiding the elation he felt. "If you're not going to drink your coffee, you might read to me," he said.

"Read?" she sputtered, gathering steam for a tirade.

He picked up the book from the coffee table and thrust it into her hands. "Yes and then I will read to you."

Hermione's hands closed over the copy of *The Little Prince*. She had read it alone on each of the last two Christmases as part of her ritual, and she had meant to do so again this weekend. She looked at him, established on the sofa with his long legs thrust out before him and crossed at the ankles, and he met her gaze without turning away. He was so hard to read, and she was undoubtedly out of practice, but he was clearly settled in and prepared to stay a while.

When he lifted his arm so that she could sit closely enough for both of them to see the illustrations, she slid in next to him as if she belonged there, and opening the book, she began to read.

The fire was burning low when Severus read the last words of the story to Hermione. The golden glow of the firelight showed the tracks of the tears which had trickled down her cheeks as he read of the *Little Prince* returning to his rose. Severus closed the book and put it aside, his eyes fastened on Hermione's face. As if she felt his regard, Hermione turned her head and looked up at him.

"That's so sad and so beautiful at the same time," she said.

"Of course," Severus said carefully, "we don't know what happened when he returned to his planet and saw the rose again."

"It was a joyful reunion," she stated certainly. "She had missed him awfully, and he had come to know that of all the roses in the garden, he loved her for she was unique in all the world."

Looking down into her eyes, the windows of a soul so certain of the course of love, he said, "Let's test your theory," and bent his head to press a kiss to her lips.

Her head fell back, resting on his arm where it laid along the back of the sofa, and she returned the pressure of his lips. He lifted his head again, his eyes anxiously searching her face for her response to being kissed by her former teacher. Her eyes opened slowly and he saw the smouldering in her gaze.

"Don't stop," she said huskily, reaching to stroke his face. "I've been waiting a long time for that kiss."

Not needing a second invitation, Severus kissed her again, his arm moving down from the sofa back to pull her closer to him. Kissing was not his forte; he had done little of it in his life and none at all within recent memory. He wanted to thrill her, to taste her, but was unsure of how to proceed. For now, her soft, full lips moved over his own and her free hand came up to run through the strands of his hair.

After a moment, Hermione broke the kiss and moved away from him; for an instant, his courage quailed dammit, he should be able to kiss her better than this! Without speaking to him, Hermione moved onto her knees at his side, then swung a knee across his lap, settling herself astride his thighs.

"Like this," she said, moving her face within an inch of his and pressing on his lower lip with a fingertip. Instinctively, his mouth opened and she said, "Oh, yes," before she tilted her head and kissed him, slipping her tongue past his lips and into his mouth, bringing with it a taste of her coffee and the spice biscuit she had eaten.

His reaction to the intimacy of her tongue within his mouth was immediate and powerful, one hand tangling in the hair at the back of her head and the other arm closing

around her waist in a vise-like grip. His tongue parried with her own, seeking and winning dominance as he darted now into the warmth of her mouth; her purred appreciation, accompanied as it was by her hips grinding in one slow circle against him, went straight to his head and for a space, higher brain function left him. The hand at her waist dropped to her bottom and he gripped one cheek firmly as he thrust once against her in retaliation, his growl eliciting an answering moan from her. Repeatedly he thrust his tongue into her mouth, stroking her tongue, possessing her lips, devouring and bruising.

She twined both hands in his hair, suckling his tongue as if she could not have enough of him within her. His hands went of their own accord to the bottom of her sweatshirt, and in a twinkling, his palms were on the warm, bare flesh of her back, caressing. Once again, she moaned her approval directly into his mouth, and he swallowed her breath as she squirmed over the rock hardness of his erection. Inexorably, the palms of his hands slipped up her sides, over her ribcage, until his questing fingertips encountered her tightly furled nipples.

When his palms closed over her breasts, cupping the globes as perfectly as he had frequently imagined he would, she broke their kiss again, throwing her head back and whimpering, "Severus..."

He murmured an indistinct incantation and her sweatshirt was gone, baring her to his eyes. "...so beautiful," he managed, and then she was doing the unthinkable, arching her back and lacing her fingers in his hair to pull his mouth to her breast. He licked her nipple, tasting her flesh, then covered it with his mouth, sucking and licking simultaneously, whilst one hand teased the other breast, rolling her pebbled nipple between his thumb and forefinger. Inflamed, she bucked her hips against him and he was moved to a sound between a growl and a laugh, followed by the murmured incantation again.

Hermione seemed to realise that she had lost her pyjama bottoms when her wand tumbled to the floor on top of the discarded clothing; she protested feebly, incapable of giving a convincing show of reluctance when she was twisting about on his cock as if looking for a way into his trousers. He abandoned her breasts and let a hand drop to her sensible white cotton knickers, gently cupping her mons through the fabric.

She shuddered and pressed against his hand, burying her face in the crook of his neck. Putting his lips to her ear, he said, "If you want to stop now, Hermione, you will have to put me out of the house, because I am past the point of reason."

Her answer was to reach between them and grasp his erection through his trousers, deliberately rubbing her breasts against the luxury of the cashmere jumper. Lifting her head to look at him with her passion-clouded eyes, she said, "If you want to stop now, Severus, you will have to put me in a Full-Body Bind, because I won't be accountable for my actions, otherwise."

Slipping two fingers beneath the elastic at the leg of her knickers, he dipped into her slick folds and pressed gently on her clitoris. She cried out and moved convulsively against the fingers. "Stop, Severus stop, I'm so close..."

"Why should I stop?" he responded, rushed with the power of holding her pleasure so surely in the palm of his hand.

She tightened her hold on his shaft and squeezed once, startling a groan from him. "Because I want to come the first time with you inside of me," she purred, leaning over to bite the lobe of his ear.

He shifted her nearly-naked body back onto the sofa, and he stood with some difficulty, his cock aching. Pulling his wand, he banished the coffee table and Transfigured the hearth rug into a large mattress. Turning back to her, he grasped the bottom of his jumper, pulling it over his head, and began to unbuckle his belt, all the while looking at Hermione with undisguised need written clearly across his face.

He was surprised when she stood and nudged his hands away, releasing the buckle and beginning to unbutton his fly. His cock seemed to leap beneath her touch and he grasped her wrists. "Stop," he commanded. "I want to come the first time inside you, as well," he explained, finishing with the unbuttoning and stepping out of his trousers and his pants in one motion.

He had no time to feel self-conscious, for Hermione stepped out of her knickers and picked up her wand, murmuring the incantation for the contraceptive spell. She then sat on the mattress, scooting to the middle and lying back. "Come to bed, Severus," she said, and he was upon her, kissing her fiercely, one hand between her thighs, one long finger seeking and finding her entrance and slipping inside.

Wantonly, she opened her legs for him, spreading her thighs widely and moving on the finger buried within her. "More," she said, thrusting against him again, her voice uneven with need.

Severus watched her, mesmerised by the beauty of the woman who looked upon him with such shameless desire, begging him for release. He slipped a second finger within her, circling her clitoris with his thumb, and lowered his head to tongue the peak of her breast. Dear God, she was so tight. He rubbed his cock against her hip and she reached for him, the palm of her hand closing over him and moving in a circular motion, spreading his natural lubricant over the sensitive head of his penis.

"Severus, please," she said, and he shifted willingly between her legs, poised himself to enter her. He drank in the vision of the needful goddess reaching for him with her mouth and her arms, beckoning him to join her in paradise. He held himself still over her body as she clamoured for him, luxuriating for an additional instant in her unbridled extremity, then she reached down with her own hand and guided him home.

Hermione could only gasp his name as Severus entered her ready body. He was looking down into her eyes, his own black orbs glittering with intensity as he slowly stroked in and out of her depths, seeming to gauge his movements by her facial reactions. By the third thrust she felt as if every nerve ending in her body was afire. The firelight seemed to limn his body with flame, a red corona shimmering about him as he stroked her very soul with his own, every fibre of her being in contact with his. She moved with him as if theirs was a dance she had learnt in another lifetime, as if they had lived this over and again, existence ad infinitum, until it had become an art form of rapture.

Wrapping her legs about him, Hermione arched her neck and closed her eyes, her mouth panting, her hands gripping his back with such urgency that she had ceased to feel her fingertips.

"Open your eyes," he growled at her, and Hermione did as he asked, allowing him to see her utter abandon. "Look at me when I make you mine," he commanded, thrusting deeper, touching a place within her which had never before been breached. She cried out and lifted her head from the mattress, her eyes wide. "You like that, don't you?" he said, and thrust again, probing her body with his cock as he challenged her mind with his intellect.

"Yes!" she gasped, her nails digging into his back. "Don't stop!"

"You couldn't make me stop, Hermione," he promised her, his voice now pure black silken magic, an extension of the force with which he filled her body. "I'll never stop. You *belong* to me." The look on his face was of a concentration so acute that she could not have looked away from him if she had wanted to, so completely did he command her attention. "Say you're mine."

"I'm yours," she gasped as he rocked her, each stroke eliciting twin gasps from them both.

"Now, come for me," he told her, his compelling eyes seeming to draw her very core into his possession. "Show me you're mine, and say my name."

It was like falling over a waterfall, the fire in her blood combusting as he claimed her body and entreated her mind; the conflagration spread from the apex, where his body joined to hers, along every pathway of her body, a rippling detonation that went on and on and on.

Just when she might have slipped out of consciousness, he summoned her back to him by the simple expedient of shouting her name, coming with a blazing concussion of sound and emotion that impacted him as she tumbled through the waterfall again, clinging on for dear life.

In the aftermath, they slept.

Part 2, Chapter 3: Merry Christmas, Darling

Chapter 9 of 9

An annoying event causes Hermione to choose to spend the Christmas break in seventh year away from her best friends, but Dumbledore feels she needs someone to watch over her. How will Hermione react to the appearance of the Potions master on her doorstep -- and how will they interact when cooped up alone together for days on end?

Part 2, Chapter 3: Merry Christmas, Darling

She woke in the darkness, confused to find she was not in her bed. Turning her head, she found the ebony eyes of Severus Snape watching her with uncertainty.

"Hello," she whispered, smiling at him.

"Hello," he responded.

She reached with one hand to run her fingertips over the furrow between his brows, and leaning over, she pressed a kiss there.

He reacted as if her gesture of affection had released him in some fundamental way. He rose over her, capturing her wrists and pinning them to the mattress, then he kissed her with fierce possessiveness, until she was breathless with need.

"Are you going to send me packing?" he demanded, glaring into her face.

The bruising kiss had stirred her to passion once more; she wanted nothing so much as to have him pounding within her again. Yet her ability to read him seemed to be returning to her, now, and she heard a different question than the one he posed. "Please don't leave me, Severus," she whispered, seeking to move her hands. He released her immediately, rolling slightly away from her, and she pushed herself up on her elbows. She was not truly afraid that he meant to walk out on her, but intuitively, she answered the question he had not spoken aloud. "I could not bear for you to go."

She pushed him lightly and he lay down again on his back, watching her closely. She leaned in and kissed him aggressively, taking one of his hands and pulling it to her breast. "Why would you ask me such a thing?" she demanded, trailing nips and kisses down his throat.

He moved quickly, tumbling her onto her back and shifting between her thighs, looming over her purposefully, his erection hard against her thigh. "You belong to me," he asserted, allowing the head of his cock to press through her flesh, stopping short of entering her, and rotating his hips as he teased her nerve center. "Say it."

Hermione surprised them both by grasping him and raising her hips as far as she could, engulfing just the tip of his erection. "*You* belong to *me*," she told him as he obeyed his instincts and drove into her body. She wrapped her legs about him, gasping, "*Say it!*"

He said it not with words, but with actions, and she was soon bereft of the power of coherent speech.

Hermione next woke with the dawn, first aware of the soreness below, then opening her eyes to find that she slept in the arms of Severus Snape. He had obviously stirred in the night, for the fire had been built up again, and they were covered with a blanket which he had clearly Transfigured from his jumper, if one were to judge by the luxuriant softness against the skin.

Slipping from his arms, she rolled off the mattress and padded into the downstairs lavatory to relieve herself. The mirror over the sink showed her a tangled mess of hair and the face of a different woman. Her lips were swollen from their insistent kissing and her eyes were ... well, they were shining with happiness. It was a cliché, but in her case, it was simply true. She felt as if she had been lit up from within, and the very knowledge that Severus Snape slept naked, coated in the mixed secretions of their lovemaking directly on the other side of the door, filled her with such jubilation that she had to cover her mouth with her hands to prevent herself from laughing out loud.

Contenting herself with a wide, self-satisfied grin, she opened the door to leave the lavatory only to find Severus lounging against the doorframe, naked as the day he was born.

"Have you been listening in to me having a pee?" she demanded in mock indignation.

"No, I only got here in time for the flush and the smothered sniggering," he answered, eying her nudity with complete satisfaction. "Look at this," he said, and turned her so that she faced the mirror, this time with him stepping into the bathroom behind her, and lifting the heavy mass of her hair to expose the left side of her throat. "Where did that come from?"

She surveyed the purplish-black love bite at the base of her throat. "I was apparently attacked by a rabid animal," she said, leaning back against the expanse of his bare torso, glorying in the way his arms came possessively about her.

"I will have to watch you more closely," he said, allowing his hands to move up and cup her breasts before he began to gently pinch and roll her nipples.

Hermione watched his hands upon her flesh in the bathroom mirror and found the sight almost unbearably arousing. She relaxed against him, feeling his sex stirring against her lower back, and closing her eyes, she luxuriated in the magic wrought by his clever fingers.

"Look at yourself, Hermione," Severus commanded, his early morning basso profundo proceeding from his mouth, pleasing her ears as her skin would react to the caress of plush black velvet.

She opened her eyes to see a woman changed by passion, a sultry witch in the throes of arousal brought to her by the wizard who watched her with half-lidded onyx eyes. She watched as one of the long-fingered hands slid up to her throat, then her head was turned and he bent to tongue her mouth, kissing her and nipping at her lips until she was barely able to stand.

"Go to the mattress," he told her, releasing her chin and allowing her to look again at their reflection in the mirror. "Lie upon your back, with your legs opened for me yes, you will, because you are very beautiful when you do. I will come to you and taste your sweetness."

She did as he asked, and when he came from the lavatory to find her upon her back, as requested, he purred, "Good girl." He knelt upon the mattress and took her ankles,

pushing her legs up until her feet rested flat and her bent knees made way for him to recline between her thighs. He caressed her stomach and kissed the tender skin of her inner thighs, speaking to her in such frank, erotic words that his promise of what was to happen very nearly brought her to climax before the first touch of his tongue to her clitoris.

As he nuzzled her curls, reaching with his fingers to spread her inner lips, she said, "Severus you don't have to I didn't think..."

In answer, his Slytherin tongue swept out of his mouth, laving her from her perineum to her clitoris, ending the first salvo with a gentle suction of the small protrusion.

"Oh, Nimüe, Circe, and all of the Graces!" she moaned, her hands descending to twine in his long black hair.

She could hear the smile in his voice as he nuzzled her clitoris. "I take it that Weasley and Krum were not proficient at the art of cunnilingus?" he inquired smugly.

"God, no," she whimpered, wriggling her hips to entice him to continue. "I'm sure they never heard of it. Don't stop," she implored.

"Well, neither am I proficient," he confessed, settling his lips around her clit and sucking gently, sliding two fingers inside of her as he did so. Raising his head, he looked up the length of her body to see her face as she craned her head to watch him, and he continued to pump his fingers in and out of her. "However, I intend to practice until I am very good."

Hermione had no objection to raise regarding this projected program of activity, so Severus set about to practice as he listened for her verbal responses to gauge his progress. Three hours later after a break for tea and toast, they were indulging in their fifth such experiment of the morning when the pounding began on the back door.

Severus heard the infernal pounding, but he did not wish to relinquish his place with his face buried in Hermione's delightful scent, her essence a treat for taste as well. She started and made as if to roll away from him, but he growled and tightened his hold on her hips.

"Severus, stop!" Hermione said, bringing up one foot to shove against his shoulder. "Let me get up!"

He released her and she scrambled up, a delightful vision of bouncing breasts and bottom. He rolled to his side, defiantly naked and erect, and leaned his cheek upon his hand. She hurriedly pulled on her long sweatshirt and grabbed her pyjama pants.

"Don't just lie there!" she scolded in a carrying whisper. "Cover yourself!"

He raised a sardonic brow and sneered at her. "What are you planning to do, little one? Invite the visitors in for tea?" He made a sweeping motion with his hand, indicating the discarded clothing and mattress; he did not point out that the very air smelled of sex.

"Hermione! Hermione, it's us!"

Hermione swore and Severus actually laughed. "I wasn't aware that you knew that word, ma petite. You'll have to say it again for me sometime."

"It's Harry and Ron!" she said, imploring.

His face sobered, his expression hardening. "Would you like for me to gather my things and Disapparate before you're caught en flagrante delicto with the greasy old man?"

"Don't be a git, Severus!" she scolded. "I just want them to bugger off!" She was trying to sort out the tangled pyjama bottoms so she could pull them on.

He gained his feet with feline grace, moving over to pull her into his arms, running one finger fragrant with her scent over her lips. "Shall I get rid of them for you?"

"Would you?" she said thankfully. "I'll just wait upstairs."

He watched her flee the room, enjoying the way the cheeks of her bottom peeked out from beneath the sweatshirt, then he grabbed his trousers, disregarding the y-fronts, and after buttoning the fly nearly to the top, he lounged over and opened the door.

It was very nearly worth three years in Bulgaria to watch the parade of emotions that marched across the faces of the two professional athletes on the patio. Severus leaned one shoulder insolently against the doorframe and tucked his hands in the pockets of his trousers, accentuating the fact that the trousers were not fastened all of the way up, as they parted to show the line of dark hair running from his navel downward. His feet were bare, his jumper had been Transfigured into a blanket, so he had no shirt, his hair was rumpled from a night of unfettered passion, and his face was still slightly damp and utterly fragrant with the sexual essence of Hermione.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Potter said, his voice trembling with suppressed fury.

"Let's skip the niceties, shall we, Potter?" Severus said cuttingly. "Why don't you two deliver your message and go away?"

"I had really hoped you were dead," Potter said.

"Yes, well, if wishes were Thestrals then beggars would ride," Severus said condescendingly.

"Where is Hermione?" Weasley demanded belligerently.

"Hermione is in her bedroom," Severus replied, lovingly lingering over the last word. "She is not...dressed to receive visitors."

"We came to see Hermione," Potter said insistently. "If you've hurt her, I will kill you myself."

Hugely enjoying himself, Severus stepped back from the doorway and gestured for the young men to enter. "Please, be my guests," he said.

Potter and Weasley entered the house and stood uncertainly on the rug. Severus flung the door closed and walked over to the sofa, bending down to retrieve his y-fronts and tuck them negligently into his pocket. The dunderheads were taking in the evidence supplied by the room; he could actually see the moment when they realized what they were seeing...and smelling.

"Did you want some tea?" Severus asked.

"Hermione!" Weasley bellowed, walking out of the sitting room. "Hermione, are you up there?"

Potter looked uncertain. "Ron? Maybe we should ..."

Severus heard the unmistakable sound of Hermione's bedroom door slamming, followed by her tread upon the stairs. "Hi, Ron," she said, and she led Weasley by the arm back into the sitting room. "Hi, Harry," she added. "I wasn't expecting you."

Weasley pulled his arm away from her. "That's bloody well obvious," he snarled.

Hermione had thrown on a bathrobe and had twisted her hair back up into the clip, but she unmistakably looked like a girl who had spent the night shagging, as opposed to sleeping. Her lips looked as if they were bee-stung, she had forgotten the love-bite which was glaringly obvious against her pale skin, and her flesh still smelt of his come. She was well and truly marked; she was his, and he had never seen a sight more beautiful.

Unmindful of their audience, Severus walked past Potter, and ignoring Weasley, he looked down into Hermione's face. "I like your hair better when you wear it down," he told her, his tone low-pitched and intimate.

Hermione flushed and her fingers went to her hair. "I look a mess," she murmured, then flushed more deeply when he chuckled.

"Hermione," Potter said, pushing past Severus to stand with Weasley, "what is going on?"

"Precisely what you are imagining, Harry, I'm sure," Hermione answered him. "This is what happens when you show up unannounced. Why are you here, anyway?"

"You've got a bloody big love bite on your neck!" Weasley blurted, visibly sickened.

Hermione and Potter both ignored Weasley as Potter replied, "We came to take you back with us to the Burrow. Ginny and Neville announced their engagement last night; Ron's mum is having a big party tonight, and the Order members are all coming."

Severus reached out a long arm and pulled Hermione securely to his side. "We will be there if we have no other pressing business to which we must attend," he said to Potter. Glancing at Weasley, he added, "Please thank your mother for thinking of us."

Potter looked entreatingly at Hermione, whilst Weasley looked more nauseated by the moment. "Hermione, are you sure? We can wait while you get ready."

Hermione looked up at Severus with her heart in her eyes. "Oh, Harry, *do* go away. I'll see you later."

Severus, entranced by the adoration directed at him, swung her up into his arms. "Much later," he added, and they were completely immersed in one another again before the door slammed closed behind the departing intruders.

Though they did not make it to Ginny and Neville's engagement party at the Burrow, the Christmas punch which Severus mixed on Christmas Eve was exceptionally fine, and they were careful to toast the happiness of the engaged couple. If they did not see another living soul until the Grangers returned on Boxing Day, they were at least comfortable enough with one another by then to proclaim their intentions to Hermione's parents with a united front.

On later Christmases, with the assistance of a Christmas-baby girl called Rose, and later, with the added help of a sharp-tongued, gimlet-eyed boy by the name of Fox, the Grangers came to fully understand the aptness of their daughter's adamant decision to become the wife of Severus Snape, Potions master and Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

The Grangers, although bemused at the time by their daughter's choice of partner, could not deny their own joy at the resurrection of their happy Hermione and in some way, they realised that the dark, taciturn man with the endless black eyes was responsible for her return.

What they did not know, and what Hermione would not tell anyone for many years to come, was that it all began and ended on two different weekends before Christmas, when Hermione discovered what fate lies in store for she who is brave enough to answer the toll of the bell.

A/N: One final tribute to Snarkywench, whose ability to get to the heart and soul of Severus Snape enriched this story beyond my ability to explain, and to MagicAlly, who has been my Potter-friend and Brit-picker for well over a year now.

I also have to thank each of you who read along and left notes for me on this whirlwind posting - we did the whole nine chapter story in one week. Yay for us! Y'all ROCK.