

The First Faint Glimmer

by Ladymage Samiko

A little light reading and a chance comment lead Hermione to discover that Snape has nowhere to spend Christmas. But is dragging him home for the holidays really a good idea? (A WIKTT Christmas 2003 challenge fic; AU w/HBP & DH)

Open Mouth, Insert Foot

Chapter 1 of 19

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Chapter 1 ~ Open Mouth, Insert Foot

It was, Hermione reflected, taking a bite from her apple, a rare afternoon. Ron and Harry were out at Quidditch practice--which she (thankfully) was not asked to attend. She had completed all of her schoolwork and, at this point in her seventh year, had made her way through all of the resources she could find. At least, all of the resources she could tackle on her own. Everything else required professorial supervision at the very least. And many of her professors had put their feet down at teaching her that sort of magic. So Hermione had been left at loose ends for one afternoon and was spending it--how else?--reading. But this time, she was finally getting around to the pile of books her mother had bought for her over the years, in the hope that she would take at least some time for pleasure reading. And, to her surprise, she found she was quite enjoying them.

Today, she had followed *Anne Shirley* on her many--well, adventures was a little too strong a word, given what Hermione was used to. Experiences, then. The young woman had sped her way through *Anne of the Island*, and ended up about halfway through *Anne of Windy Poplars*. She had just finished the delightful description of the Christmas holidays with the prickly *Katherine Brooke*, whom *Anne* had convinced to join her for the holidays, since the woman was otherwise alone. The books were simple and, Hermione supposed, childish, but they did bring back memories of her own Christmas holidays and made her look forward to the ones coming up in less than a month.

Crookshanks leaped onto the bed and butted his head against her arm. Glancing at her alarm clock next to her bed, she realized it was time for dinner. "Thanks, Crooks," she said casually, giving him a pat. "I'll see you after dinner, all right?" Sufficiently answered by a meow, Hermione made her way out the door and downstairs. On her way down, she wondered what she would think if her own life was as--unexciting--as that of the novels. It wouldn't be a bad thing, she reflected. Though she would miss all of the scrapes Harry and Ron had dragged her into.

Deep in thought, she collided with something. Actually, someone. "Oh, I'm so sorry..." she began, then looked up to see that the person she had run into was Professor Snape. Her voice trailed off.

"Somehow, I doubt your sincerity with that remark, Miss Granger," he commented. "I believe ten points from Gryffindor would be a sufficient apology."

"Then I shan't inconvenience you with any further expressions of regret, *sir*," Hermione replied, answering him with a voice as dry as his own. After seven years, she had found that it was the only way to really deal with him. It didn't make him any less caustic, certainly, but it did seem to give him at least a modicum of respect for her. Streams of insults became bouts of verbal sparring.

"Then I shall thank the gods for small favors, Miss Granger," he said. "I imagine I shall regret this exercise of curiosity, but what subject did you find so intriguing that you

forgot the use of your eyes?"

"Um..." Hermione's voice trailed off as she turned slightly pink. It was rather embarrassing to admit to Snape--of all people!--that she had been reading children's books. "Well, I was thinking about the Muggle literature I was reading this afternoon." There, that sounded sufficiently mature. "I was, um, trying to formulate the central theme of the series." Definitely a scholastic approach.

"I see." Damn, it sounded like he believed her about as much as she believed herself. "And have you come to any conclusions on the matter? Does this 'Muggle literature' have a deep meaning that has somehow eluded wizarding comprehension?"

He *would* have to put it like that, wouldn't he? "Well--" Hermione gave the question some thought and surprised herself by coming up with a sort of an answer. "I think," she continued slowly, "that the message of the books is that the two most important things in this life are hope and love. No matter what else you may or may not have, these are key to truly living."

She watched him blink for a moment after she stopped speaking, then heard him say, "In that case, Miss Granger, it would appear that these books of yours would negate my entire existence. Now, if you would excuse me, I have a potion that requires my attention."

For the first time, Hermione stared down the hall at her retreating professor and thought, *How sad!*

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Over the following week, Snape's comment continued to bother her more than she was willing to admit. And certainly much more than she would admit to either Harry or Ron. Both of them would scoff at any sort of concern she might express. But to say such a thing struck her as one of the worst statements anyone could make about his life. And the fact that it had apparently slipped out--in front of *her*, one of his most annoying students, no less--was certainly cause for notice, if not concern.

After a great deal of thought (which she would never have admitted to), Hermione decided to mention the incident to Professor Dumbledore during their weekly meeting (a requirement of her position as Head Girl). After they had discussed sundry school matters, she began tentatively, "Sir? I wanted to ask you about something. Something Professor Snape said to me last week."

"Ah, yes, Severus," Dumbledore mused, his eyes cheery. "I don't suppose he threatened to turn you into a three-legged toad or something of the sort, hmm?"

"Er, no, sir. Something like that wouldn't have bothered me nearly as much."

"So you have figured out that Severus is more bark than bite. Excellent. And most perspicacious of you, my dear. Now, what *does* seem to be the problem?"

Hermione briefly outlined the incident and repeated what Snape had said, almost word for word. "Sir, what did he mean?" she asked finally.

"I rather think you have a very good idea of what he meant," the ancient wizard replied, leaning back in his chair. "And I also think--which is a most extraordinary thing at my age, may I say--that to say anything else on that particular matter would be more than indiscreet of me. Severus' life is something I am privileged to know of, not to discuss."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

"However"--and Dumbledore leaned forward once again--"I think it would be quite another matter to mention to you that Hogwarts will be closed, to both staff and students, over the Christmas holidays. And I believe that Severus will be spending the time at his family's manor, alone. A very dark, rather unpleasant place, I am given to understand."

Hermione blinked at this; it was the first time that Dumbledore had mentioned the total closing of the school. "But, sir, why--"

"--am I closing the school?" Dumbledore smiled at her. "There are certain--enchancements--that must be renewed every so often. One doesn't want the castle to come tumbling down at our feet, after all, does one? And it is most effective that I perform them without having to concern myself that I may turn some poor, unfortunate inhabitant invisible. For, as I am sure you are aware"--and Hermione squirmed under his gaze--"invisibility has its uses, but is most inconvenient on a permanent basis."

"And, as I must remain to perform the house-work," he continued, twinkling, "I cannot invite Severus to come with me for the holidays--not that he would accept, in any case. The rest of the staff have their own families to consider and Grimmauld Place, while inevitably interesting, would, if Severus stayed, be the scene of some rather nasty hexes after a day or so. I believe the last time a combination of Spineless and Infinite Limb Hexes were the result. Most childish and very difficult to reverse, but everyone did need to relieve the stress. That is a very important thing, you know."

"Yes, sir." Hermione said little, having garnered from this lengthy and not-very-subtle hint what it was Dumbledore wanted her to do. After all, she couldn't yell at the Headmaster, demanding to know if he was now *completely* insane.

"Well, then," he beamed, "I believe that is all of the important matters for the week, don't you? And remember, Miss Granger, sometimes the most important advice comes from the simplest of sources." He continued reminiscently, "Lucy was a remarkable woman, after all."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. I'll let myself out." Hermione beat a hasty retreat, stopping only when she reached a corridor far distant from the Headmaster's office.

"Oh, lord," she moaned, burying her face in her hands. "Please smash face against castle wall to continue."

AN:

This story was begun quite some time ago (see summary ^\_^); but I promised myself I wouldn't post it to any HP archives until it was complete. I'll try to post at least once a week, but I admit that I'll probably get distracted by RL happenings. Still, I hope everyone enjoys! --Lm. S.

The *Anne of Green Gables* series was written by L.M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery. The title is a quote from *Anne of Windy Poplars*.

## Bearding the, er, Bat in His Den

Chapter 2 of 19

A little light reading and a chance comment lead Hermione to discover that Snape has nowhere to spend Christmas. But is dragging him home for the holidays really a good idea? (A WIKTT Christmas 2003 challenge fic; AU w/HBP & DH)

## Chapter 2 ~ Bearding the, er, Bat in His Den

There were three distinct problems to her current situation, Hermione reflected. Well, there were actually quite a few more, but three *immediate* problems. The first was, of course, how in the hell to ask her *dear* professor home for the holidays and have any chance of him accepting. For, once she had given it some thought, Hermione had gloomily come to the conclusion that both Dumbledore and L. M. Montgomery were right: It was inhuman to think of *anyone* (except, perhaps, Voldemort) spending Christmas alone in a place they despised. And, since she was the only one who (thanks to Dumbledore) was able to do anything about it, it was her job to do it. But how to do it? She knew as well as anyone that Snape disliked her. And he was as proud as the devil himself. Come to that, he was disturbingly similar to *Katherine Brooke*. They were both solitary, prickly creatures with sour dispositions and acid tongues. And they were both intensely hated teachers who, never-the-less, managed to produce some of the best results in their students.

Damned creepy literary parallels.

And that didn't help *her* whatsoever. She had none of *Anne's* magnetic personality and that approach had dubious chances at best. Maybe a written invitation? No. Too easy to ignore or refuse point-blank. Through Dumbledore? Ditto. Unless Snape took it as an order, in which case he would come and be as unpleasant as possible. And that wouldn't be fair to her parents. So, unfortunately enough, it would probably have to be the private, personal invitation. Damn. And that led to problem number two: How were her parents going to react to the idea? Hermione doubted that they would be thrilled with the idea that the first man Hermione would bring home would be her professor--and a man old enough to be her father. Mum was getting very keen on her finding the "right man" and had been since she was fifteen. Maybe one of these days she could tell her mother she was a lesbian just to get the woman off her back. And Christmas had always been a very private holiday for the family; Hermione had her doubts as to whether an outsider would be very welcome at the family dinner table. Still, it was an act of good will, and she supposed that was how she would present the idea to her parents.

And then there was problem number three, which came in two parts. They were called Harry Potter and Ron Weasley. Ron would be violently disgusted by the idea, Dumbledore-induced or not. Harry might prove a little more tractable; while he still loathed Snape, he had become a little more... sympathetic after his Occlumency lessons in fifth year, though he had never said why. And he knew better than anyone the miserable possibilities of Christmas. Which was why he was staying at the Weasley's, after all. So maybe she could talk to him first and then both of them could talk Ron around.

Well, here goes nothing.

An owl to her parents was straightforward enough; she wrote as simply as possible to avoid entangling herself in her own words. And strangely enough, they agreed. They weren't ecstatic about it, but they seemed to understand. And then it was time to talk to Snape himself. If she told Ron and Harry first, they might manage to talk her out of it.

It was early evening when she knocked on his office door, her hands shaking. She had tried to think of what she was going to say, but her brain had refused to cooperate.

"Come in!" the dark voice snapped. She did so and found Snape seated at his desk, surrounded by masses of parchment. "Miss Granger," he drawled after a cursory glance. "To what do I owe this unexpected... *pleasure*? If it is to bother me once again with your repetitive requests for further potions study, I beg that you turn around immediately and return to your place. I have no wish to incur further headaches this evening."

"No, sir, it's not about my studies," she replied nervously.

At that, he finally looked up from his work, studying her with a sardonic expression on his face. "Will wonders never cease. I do believe this is an occasion of such note that I will be forced to mark the date on my calendar. Well, then, if you are to make some marvelous revelation, please do so that I may return to my work."

"I--um, I--"

"I had *hoped*," Snape interrupted, returning his gaze to his papers, "that by your seventh year you would at least be articulate, if not intelligent."

"Sir, I wanted to invite you to spend Christmas at my home," Hermione blurted out. "It would just be me and my family, so Ron and Harry wouldn't be there and you wouldn't have to worry about that. And then you have my word that we wouldn't bother you if you didn't want us to. You could do whatever you like; you wouldn't be pestered to join in the celebration. I promise you wouldn't. And my parents already know I'm asking you and they don't mind, really they don't. In fact, they'd like a chance to meet one of my professors..." Her voice trailed off as she realized she was babbling and that there really wasn't anything more to say. She watched Snape cautiously, as though he might jump up and hex her at any moment for her sheer gall in asking him. As it was, he rather looked like he'd been hit in the face with one of Dumbledore's smiley-faced Bludgers. Of course, with Snape it was always difficult to tell, but it looked that if he had been in the habit, his jaw would be on the ground by now.

And then there was a split-second change from astonishment to fury. Tight-lipped, he ground out, "I can assure you, *Miss Granger*, that I do not find this particular *joke* at all amusing. If you--and those two young bastards I assume are somewhere within listening distance of you--do not remove yourself from my presence *at once*, you will find yourselves on the receiving end of punishments that will make anything Umbridge inflicted seem like the third level of Paradise."

Hermione wasn't quite sure how she should react to this unchecked anger. Part of her wanted to be angry that he thought she would play such a nasty, malicious trick on *anyone*. Another part was surprised and saddened that this was the conclusion he would jump to so quickly and easily. After a second's deliberation, she answered him in a manner which would probably make the most sense to both of them.

"Sir," she said evenly, "if I was at all inclined to play practical jokes--which I am not--I would hardly be likely to practice such things on my professors. I am well aware of the fact that I still need recommendations for the upcoming university applications and would hardly risk alienating a professor who could very well make or break my college career. And before you bring up the subject," she continued, warming to her theme, "I certainly do not expect this to affect your letter in any manner whatsoever. Anyone with even a quarter of a brain would know better after having spent seven years with you. Furthermore, *Professor*, I happen to have my parents' letter with me. If I may present it to you as evidence of my sincerity?" She pulled the slightly creased sheet of paper from her pocket and placed it square in the center of his desk.

He watched her as he took the letter, his eyes narrowed and focused. She met his gaze with one equally intent. His eyes dropped at the very last moment to scan the letter's contents. When he looked up again, his eyebrow lifted. "Mynie?" he queried dryly.

*Damn!* She'd forgotten a few of the things her parents had written. "A family nickname, sir," she answered, trying not to betray her embarrassment.

He made no further comment, instead folding the letter carefully and replacing it on his desk. "Since it seems I must accept the fact that you are not acting maliciously," he said slowly, "I must then ask you this, Miss Granger: Who told you to invite me? And do not try lying to me. Like most Gryffindors, you are an absolutely appalling liar."

"I'm not sure whether I should take that as a complement or an insult," she quipped. There was no response from the stony-faced professor. She sighed. "Very well. To be perfectly honest, no one *told* me to invite you. However, Professor Dumbledore did strongly hint in favor of the idea."

Snape looked disgusted. "Albus. I should have guessed. Who else would be sending me students with Christmas invitations? Sometimes, I do wonder-- Well, no matter." He returned his attention to the girl still standing before his desk. "It would seem I have no choice but to accept, Miss Granger," he drawled. "I am well aware that should I refuse your invitation, the Headmaster will continue to throw other people in here in the same fashion that Christians were once fed to the lions. And as fond as I am of biting people's heads off, I should be singularly imbecilic not to realize that the conditions you mentioned are among the best I am likely to receive. I can think of few less horrifying ways of spending Christmas than by being surrounded with enforced holiday cheer with families who dislike me as much as I dislike them."

Hermione interjected, "Such as spending the holidays with the Weasley's, perhaps, sir? Or the Creevey's?" Was it her imagination, or did she actually see him shudder slightly?

"Precisely, Miss Granger," was his reply. "And so, I regret to inform you that you will, in fact, be meeting me once the train reaches platform nine and three-quarters."

"I will owl my parents immediately," Hermione responded calmly. Because, after all, she had prepared herself for the worst ever since her meeting with Dumbledore. And, perhaps--just perhaps--it wouldn't be so bad after all.

## It's Only the Beginning...

### Chapter 3 of 19

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#### Chapter 3 ~ It's Only the Beginning...

Well, she had managed it. The weeks had passed, schoolwork was completed, and now she was sitting with Harry and Ron while the Hogwarts train carried them back to London. Snape, she knew, was elsewhere on the train; she was aware of what he would have thought of sharing space with her two friends and so had not bothered to make the offer. As it was, she thought she very well might decide to join *him*. Ron and Harry, full of plans for the holidays, were busy chattering to each other and effectively ignoring her. Hermione stared out the window, bored with the ideas that had already been covered several dozen times. If not more.

"So, what are you going to do, Mione?" Ron asked, startling her. "I mean, we know you have to go home and it's too bad, really, but is your family doing anything?"

"Um..." The girl had managed to avoid this conversation so far, but it seemed that her luck had run out. "Well, we're having a guest over for the hols."

Ron may have had the sensitivity of a brick, but Harry caught her hesitation. "All right, Mione," he grinned, "'fess up. Who is it? Lockhart? Umbridge? Krum?"

"Er..." She could feel herself turning red, one of the few reactions she couldn't control. In return, Harry needled her some more. "Well," she confessed, "actually, it's Professor Snape."

There was complete silence in the compartment.

Then an explosion. "Hermione, are you *mad*!?" Both young men stared at her incredulously.

"No, I am not mad." Though, at the moment--even though she had expected this reaction--she felt rather annoyed.

"But, Mione!" Ron agonized. "You're taking *him*--Snape!--*home* with you! Over *Christmas*! Snape, the Bat Bastard!"

Harry watched her carefully. "There's no way you're doing this voluntarily, unless..." He paused a moment, thinking. "I can't see why," he mumbled, "but think, Hermione. Did Snape, at any time, get close enough to slip something into your drink?"

"Or maybe your cauldron during class!" Ron chimed in. "Come on, Mione! Think!"

"Don't be absurd," she snapped. "Of all people, why would Professor Snape potion *me* into taking him home? If there is such a potion, which I sincerely doubt. And no--before you mention it--he did not put me under Imperius, either. Honestly, you two! As it so happens, I found out that he doesn't have anyplace to spend Christmas; you *both* know Hogwarts is closed this year."

"Yeah, we know." Harry looked uncomfortable.

Hermione pressed her advantage. "You know what it's like to have a miserable Christmas, Harry," she continued gently. "I'm just trying to help. *No one* should be forced to spend a bleak, miserable Christmas alone."

Harry watched her quietly for several moments. "All right, Mione," he sighed. "I give. Still," and at this he grinned, "once this holiday is over, I'm nominating you for sainthood."

She smiled back, wryly. "I'll probably deserve it," she replied.

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Once at the station, Hermione waved good-bye to her friends and waited at the barrier--now, due to Arthur Weasley, helpfully labeled "To Muggle London"--for Snape to appear. Her hands clutching Crookshanks's travel box, she watched him disembark carrying a small traveling case and, interestingly enough, a diminutive pet carrier. She was also surprised to note that he looked no more out of temper than usual, even after he spotted her.

"Miss Granger," he said simply.

"Professor Snape," she replied just as evenly. "My parents are to meet us at the main entrance and then drive us home in the car. Is this all right with you?"

"Certainly." Hermione wondered if he would be this terse for the entire holiday.

"Let's go then," she said and picked up her own duffel as she led the way through. Crookshanks, cooped up in his box, grumbled irritably, catching the girl's attention. "By the way," she asked as they threaded through the holiday crowds, "who's your friend?" She gestured at the carrier.

"Agrippina," he answered blandly. Hermione's eyebrows rose in apprehension. Not surprising, but certainly not reassuring that Snape owned an animal named after one of the most clever and ruthless empresses of Rome. "Don't worry," he continued, thin lips twisting into a wry smile. "She'll stay out of the way of that monster of yours. She will not bite, either. Unless it's called for."

"Unlike you?" Hermione quipped. "Who bites whether it's called for or not?"

"Touché," acknowledged Snape with a nod. Hermione grinned. A moment later, she spotted her parents and began waving frantically, regardless of the sardonic-faced professor beside her.

"Mynie!" Snape watched a tall woman--obviously Hermione's mother from the masses of hair that cascaded from her ponytail--run forward to embrace the girl. "Welcome home, darling." He shifted his gaze from the mother and daughter to examine the father, who was following at his own pace. Dr. Granger had a pleasant, if unremarkable, face with carefully combed dark hair and his daughter's eyes. Tall, he matched Snape inch for inch--a fact which Severus appreciated as the man smiled and reached out a hand to him.

"Robert Granger," he introduced himself. "A pleasure to meet you, sir. Our daughter has told us much about you. We look forward to your stay."

Severus wondered briefly what exactly the girl had told her parents about him. Nothing good, presumably. He made sure none of his students--save the Slytherins--had anything good to say of him. "Severus Snape. The pleasure is mine," he replied smoothly. Contrary to popular belief, he had had the civilities drilled into him as a child. And he had determined to at least be civil to the Grangers for keeping him away from that mausoleum he had inherited. "I am very grateful for your hospitality and apologize for the inconvenience."

"Nonsense," Mrs. Granger said briskly. She turned toward them, still keeping an arm around her daughter. "There's certainly no trouble at all in having a friend for the holidays. A blessing, rather. Oh, yes, and I'm Amelia Granger. Mother of the accused, although I imagine that's painfully obvious." She laughed, a light, silvery dance of sound that was odd coming from such a practical-looking woman. Snape allowed himself a small smile in return, though privately astonished at her words. *A friend? A blessing? Me?*

"Mother!" Hermione herself sounded like any other exasperated teenager.

"Well, then." Robert gave his wife and daughter an amused look. "I imagine we should be underway, then. Traffic will be a mess if we wait much longer."

"Sure thing, Dad," Hermione agreed.

"If you'll follow us, Professor," Robert continued, "we'll find our car and start off for home. I imagine both of you are tired and would be glad to get settled in."

"Of course." Severus nodded.

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The car ride was thankfully uneventful. Upon accepting Miss Granger's invitation, Severus had requested a few Muggle Studies references from Madam Pince to look up things he was likely to be presented with, of which automobiles had been one. Of course, with Weasley's flying menace still roaming the Hogwarts grounds, he was unlikely to be completely ignorant of the machines. Still, Agrippina was making her annoyance generally known, her maniacal hissing providing a harmony for That Cat's irritated yowling. Between the two animals, there was more than enough noise, which rather precluded further conversation, though he noticed that Miss Granger kept glancing at him, presumably waiting for his next sarcastic remark.

The journey ended in front of a neatly maintained Victorian, somewhat more... romantic than he had expected, knowing the Granger girl as he did. And there was something else that he certainly had not been expecting. As they emerged from the car, a pale blur--seen just at the corner of his eye--disappeared from a downstairs window. Snape turned just in time to see the front door hurled open and a small form hurled forward with equal force. A tiny child, her hair in braids flying behind her, leapt at Miss Granger.

"Mynie!" she cried, her voice a childish echo of her mother's. "You're home! Welcome home, sissy!"

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A few notes: It is never said *how* people get home for the holidays, so I'm assuming the train. Also, using the Eton school calendar as a reference, school is out from about mid-December to mid-January. We'll have a lot of time to play with. *evil chuckle* Oh, and "touché" is a fencing term, from the French, meaning "I am hit" (roughly anyway). It is properly used to acknowledge a touch, or hit, on one's self, never to say that you have hit your opponent.

Dizzying Intellects

Chapter 4 of 19

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Chapter 4 ~ Dizzying Intellects

"Genie!" Apparently Miss Granger was equally pleased at the sight of her younger sibling, for she immediately lowered her bags--still too sensible to drop her annoyed cat--and knelt down for the child's... enthusiastic embrace. "Oh, I missed you, elfling. And I have so many stories to tell you!"

"Cool!" the child exclaimed, her face lit up like a Midsummer's bonfire. "And I have a lot to tell you, too, Mynie! I've grown a lot since you left and Mum and Dad gave me some new books..." Snape felt something odd in his chest at the sight of the child's grin. He didn't like small children--never had--but that transparent happiness was something he envied. He was certain a similar expression had never appeared on his own childish features. The sound of piping voice, from somewhere around the area of his knees, startled him. "Sir, are you Professor Snape?"

He looked down and unconsciously drew himself up in full intimidating professor mode. "I am," he said.

She stuck out a fragile-looking hand that was almost lost when he clasped it in his own. "My name is Imogene Leonora Granger. Six years old. You can call me Genie if you want. I'm Mynie's little sister. She's told us an awful lot about you. She said I'm not supposed to bother you with a lot of questions, but can I ask you what kind of pet you have in there?" She pointed at the box in his hand.

Snape suppressed the urge to roll his eyes at the child's chatter--which wasn't surprising when one considered her elder relation. Still, if Miss Granger had spoken of him 'an awful lot,' he was surprised that the child's first question hadn't been along the lines of 'Why are you such a bastard?'--couched in age-appropriate language, of course. Calmly, he replied, "This is Agrippina. She is an Aesculapian snake, *Elaphe longissima longissima*."

The child looked doubtfully at the small box. "Is she a baby, then, sir?" she queried. "The box doesn't look big enough for an adult. And may I see her later?"

"That's enough, Genie," Amelia Granger warned her.

"Sorry, sir," the girl grinned up at him, her eyes disconcertingly clear. "Mum always tells me I chatter too much. She says that to Mynie, too."

Snape's lips twitched as he fought to keep the grin he felt forming off of his face. It would appear that even Miss Granger's family had issues with the amount of talking their daughter accomplished. The Great Wizards knew it annoyed *him* on a regular basis and he only saw the girl for a few hours a day. But he needed to answer the child's question. "No, Miss Imogene, Agrippina is an adult Aesculapian. However, she dislikes traveling--especially at this time of the year, when she is hibernating. Both she and I handle such things more easily when I take the liberty of shrinking her. As to whether or not you may see her, I imagine that you may, as long as you do not disturb her." He caught Miss Granger's surprised expression and realized it mirrored his own feelings at his acquiescence to the child's request.

"Thank you, sir!" Imogene smiled again, even more broadly--if that was indeed possible--than before.

Miss Granger interrupted before the child could say anything more. "We should let Professor Snape get settled, Genie," she commented mildly. "If you don't mind, sir, I can show you to your room."

"Thank you, Miss Granger," he replied and followed her into the house.

She pointed out the sitting room, dining room, and kitchen as they passed through the ground floor. All three were an interesting mixture of things both familiar and unfamiliar to him. But he dismissed them from his immediate concern. If he felt an overwhelming urge to examine Muggle items, he would do so at a later time. Up the stairs they went, silently, to the first floor. "Here we are, sir," Miss Granger announced, rather unnecessarily. "The far door is my parent's room. This one here is my sister's room and this is the bathroom, which we share. I think just about everything in there will be familiar to you. This room is yours." She pushed open the middle door on the landing. "It's mine, actually, but space is a little tight around here and we thought you might prefer it to Genie's room. I'll be moving in with her while you're here."

He walked slowly into the room, feeling rather like an unwelcome intruder--though, to be fair, this was none of the Granger girl's fault. He had expected a cool, impersonal guest room tucked away in a corner somewhere and being given the girl's own room made him feel like he was being forced into a highly uncomfortable intimacy. Still, there was no help for it and he was used to making the best of situations which he could not alter--in spite of his extreme desire to Apparate back to the Hogwarts Train and return to the familiarity and safety of his dungeons. "I apologize for the--inconvenience--I am causing you, Miss Granger," he said stiffly.

"Oh, please don't apologize, sir. I don't mind at all, really," she rushed to reassure him. "I'm used to it. I move whenever we have company and, of course, I'm used to sharing space after so many years in the Gryffindor Tower."

"Of course," he answered shortly.

"In any case," she hurried on, "the door locks, so feel free to use it whenever you like, and we won't barge in without knocking, of course. Um... The top drawer of the dresser and the left-hand side of the closet are empty, so feel free to use them. You're free to read anything on my shelves, if you're at all interested, and to use my stereo. This is the power switch, the volume, and the radio tuner, so you can find different types of music. I would appreciate it, though, sir, if you would leave my computer alone," she pointed at an odd, glassy-faced box on top of a desk in the corner, "but if you're interested in how it or anything else works, just ask. I think that's everything, so I'll let you settle in. Um, dinner should be at seven, but if you want anything sooner or later, just tell me or my mum. Just..." she paused slightly, as though searching for the best words to use. "Professor, as I said before, I don't want you to feel pressured into anything while you're here. If there's anything you do or do not wish to do, then feel free. Even if you just want to stay in here for the next month. I--well, all of us, actually--*do* want you to have a pleasant holiday. Well, anyway, I'll be going."

"Miss Granger," he called as she turned to leave. She stopped, looking at him with an expression somewhere between curiosity and apprehension. "May I inquire as to which of your parents is the avid reader of Shakespeare?"

Sheer astonishment replaced the fear. "Well, my father, actually," she admitted, "How...?"

"Come now, Miss Granger," he replied, his lips twisting in an amused smirk. "With children by the names of 'Hermione' and 'Imogene,' it was a fairly obvious conclusion."

"I--" she stammered slightly, then steadied, "I just didn't think you'd be familiar with Shakespeare. After all, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* aren't exactly two of his most popular works."

"Even Muggles can *occasionally* contribute something useful to the common culture, Miss Granger, though I admit the occurrence is so rare as to be practically nonexistent," Snape remarked silkily. "It would be remiss of me if I neglected any of the contributions of such a remarkable individual."

She opened her mouth to speak, but stopped abruptly. "If that will be all, sir," she managed to say, "I think I will take my leave. I have my own unpacking to do, after all." Without waiting for a reply, she turned on her heel and left. To her credit, she did *not* slam the door.

With a mental shrug, Snape turned his attention to unpacking his things and taking in the room that was to be his for the next month. It was an odd combination of things, really, being neither the straightforward study he would have expected from such a book-bound girl nor the frilly, feminine effusions he would imagine typical. The walls were painted a rich robin's egg blue and warm cream and were covered with a variety of pictures and posters. The Periodic Table of Elements and the Potions' Basic Herbiary did not surprise him, but one of a man apparently named "David Bowie" and another of a dark-haired man in front of a Muggle vehicle holding a black box in the air were certainly unexpected. Another odd one was a Muggle photograph of a man and woman gazing intently at each other, their faces barely centimetres apart. They didn't look to be relations of the girl and he would never have pegged her as a romantic. But he shrugged as he hung a few robes in the closet; it was none of his concern, anyway.

A knock at the door startled him, though he immediately smoothed over his expression. "Enter," he said, in his almost instinctual 'enter-if-you-dare-but-I'll-most-likely-kill-you' tone. A brown-blond head poked in the door, grinned, and was followed by a body.

"Mum made these fresh," Imogene announced, holding up a plate of biscuits. "I thought you might like some. She's really good at these chocolate chip ones."

Severus raised an eyebrow. Was he losing his touch or did this child have some superhuman ability to ignore his (extraordinarily effective) ability to repel people? "Thank you, Miss Imogene," he said stiffly. "You may leave them on the dresser, if you wish." The girl did as she was instructed, but then she plumped herself down on the bed, wrapping her skinny arms around the bedpost as she watched him. Severus gave a mental 'thank you' to whatever gods might be listening that he had already put away his more intimate apparel, as it did not look like the child would be leaving any time soon unless ejected by brute force.

"Can I see Agrippina?" The child was certainly as single-minded and tenacious as her sister.

"Very well," he sighed. "If you would be so kind as to close the door, Miss Imogene? I very much doubt that your parents would be pleased to find Agrippina nesting on top of the bookshelf." At that, the child giggled and practically ran to the door while Severus watched incredulously, then turned to enlarge his pet's carrier. An annoyed hissing emerged. "I am perfectly well aware of your current temper," Severus informed the snake. Parseltongue was somewhat unnecessary with such a personality as Agrippina possessed. "However, may I point out that the sooner you accept the situation, the sooner you may return to sleep? Very well. And I would appreciate if you would be at least somewhat polite to your audience." Under the child's fascinated gaze, Severus released the catch on the box, allowing the snake to slither free. Vain as always, Agrippina preened in front of her surprisingly adoring audience, while said audience dropped to her knees and cooed.

"She's lovely," Imogene breathed. "And so *big*." At that, Agrippina moved to face the child nose to nose. Severus almost snorted with laughter at the nearly cross-eyed child and Agrippina's definite serpentine smirk. But the snake quickly dropped back down to the floor and after some cursory investigation, managed to make her way to the top of the bookshelf, where she curled up and fell asleep. "Thank you for letting me see her, sir." To his disconcertment, the child turned that same adoring gaze on *him*. "She's

absolutely gorgeous. I'd love to see her again, if you don't mind."

"I doubt Agrippina will be terribly interesting asleep," he said, slightly desperate. *I thought they were supposed to leave me alone!*" And much less so, as I imagine you can barely see her from your somewhat diminutive height."

"Oh, *that's* not a problem," she replied sunnily and before he could comment, she was halfway up the shelves, clinging to the edges. "I do this all the time when Mynie's gone," she grinned. "I like to look at her schoolbooks. Oh, and here's something you might like." She tossed down a thick, black, cloth-covered object, then jumped down herself. "Mynie said she'd showed you how to work her radio, but there's never anything good on it anyway. *I don't really like Mynie's music, but she listens to a lot of stuff, so maybe you'll like one of her CDs. You see, you put the disc in here, then press play. This is the volume and this stops it. I dunno,*" she shrugged. "You might like it. Just don't tell Mynie I showed you, 'kay?"

"If your sister is opposed to the idea, why on earth should I take the responsibility upon myself?"

"Well, anyway, they're a lot more interesting than that junk on the radio." She shrugged again. "Guess I should go now. Need anything else?"

Snape began to shake his head, then stopped. This girl was a mine of information--and one that didn't need much to get her started. "Might I inquire as to the subjects of these posters?" he asked, gesturing at the ones he had noticed earlier.

"Sure." Imogene jumped back onto the bed. "David Bowie is a singer Mynie likes. Don't ask me why. I think he's weird. The one with the dark-haired guy and his stereo is from a movie. I think he was trying to tell his girlfriend something, so he blasted the message out on the stereo. Anyhow, Mynie always says it's to remind her to be honest about her feelings and not to be afraid to say what she wants to say. And that one's of an actor named Humphrey Bogart and his wife, Lauren Bacall. It's supposed to be one of the great love stories, 'cause they fell in love on the first movie they did together and she was only twenty and he was really old. They got married, but he died later. I think more stuff happened but that's all I know 'bout it, anyway."

"I see."

"Well, I'd better go. I gotta be at my friend's house in a half hour. See ya! And thanks again for letting me see Agrippina. She was awesome. Bye!" The girl disappeared from the room. Bemused, Snape watched her go. Then his eye traveled to the CD case on the bed. "Perhaps I shall," he mused.

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Notes:

The title is from *The Princess Bride*. "Truly, you have a dizzying intellect."

Aesculapians are a real breed of European snake. Northern types can be around five feet long, which is about Agrippina's size. They like high places, which is why she's chosen to snooze on top of Mione's bookshelf.

Snape uses the old-fashioned modes of address, which distinguish sisters by calling the elder by her last name and the younger by her given name. I can tell you now he will never call her 'Genie.' I tried, but I kept getting visions of Disney's *Jafar*. ^\_^; Which I don't think Snape would appreciate.

Mione's posters reflect the depth of personality we don't see in the books. I'm not sure why she has one of David Bowie. The [second one](#) is of John Cusack in the movie *Say Anything*. As to the one of Bogey and Bacall, you can see that one [here](#). I think it's rather apropos in this fandom.

## In the Cold, Grey Light

Chapter 5 of 19

A little light reading and a chance comment lead Hermione to discover that Snape has nowhere to spend Christmas. But is dragging him home for the holidays really a good idea? (A WIKTT Christmas 2003 challenge fic; AU w/HBP & DH)

### Chapter 5 ~ In the Cold Grey Light

The next week passed quickly but uncomfortably. Professor Snape was faultlessly courteous--no one could fault him in that respect--but was completely withdrawn. He spoke as little as possible and spent much of his time in his room, though what pursuits he engaged in were unknown. Even Imogene was somewhat intimidated by his imposing silence.

"Is this his normal behaviour?" Amelia Granger asked her daughter one evening as they washed up after dinner one evening.

"As far as I know," Hermione answered slowly. "At school, at least, he seems to have two settings: silent and sarky. I've rarely known him even to smile, let alone laugh. And even at High Table, he's never been one to engage in the general conversation."

"I find that... regrettable," Amelia replied after a few minutes' thought, "but not altogether surprising. Not that he doesn't chatter, mind you, but that he never laughs. The look in his eyes reminds me very much of your grandfather--your Dad's father."

"Grandfather Michael?" Hermione looked up at her mother, surprised. "The one that died when I was two?"

Amelia nodded. "It's too bad you never really knew him, but maybe it was for the best. According to your grandmother, he was a cheerful young man once. But the War changed him. He came back with shadows in his eyes, much as Professor Snape has. He could never forget what he had seen--though he never spoke of it--nor could he forgive himself for what he had done." Her hands moved busily, drying dishes and placing them in the rack.

Hermione was silent. "I guess it doesn't surprise me, either. I don't know much about what he did during the war with Voldemort, but everything I've been able to find out has been bad enough. I just wish... I just wish he could let himself enjoy this one holiday. He can be a right bastard, but he's still human."

"I am well aware he can be 'a right bastard,'" Amelia smiled. "I've been reading your letters for the past several years, haven't I? And you're right. But he'll need to find peace within himself first before he can share it with others. Just don't try too hard, will you, dear? You know you can be somewhat overbearing, even with the best of intentions."

"He's pointed that out to me often enough." Hermione grinned wryly. "I'm sure if I try too hard, he'll do the same again. But I'll watch myself, Mum."

"Good girl." Amelia kissed her daughter's cheek. "Now be off with you. I'll finish up here." Hermione nodded and left.

Still, it was Amelia who approached Severus, late that night when a noise downstairs awoke her.

She found him in the living room, staring out of the window at nothing. "It is very late," she remarked softly. He whirled, his wand drawn and ready, but relaxed when he saw only the trim woman standing in the doorway, her dark masses of hair curling around her shoulders.

"Dr. Granger. I could not sleep," he explained. "I am normally something of a night owl anyway."

"I see," was all Amelia said in reply. After a moment's silence, she continued. "I've been wanting to thank you for coming to stay with us."

A snort of disbelief escaped. "I sincerely doubt that," he said bitterly. "Especially if your daughter has been completely candid with you."

"She is extraordinarily candid," Amelia admitted staunchly, "but she is also fair and gives credit where credit is due. You are a good man, Professor, and I say once again: I thank you for staying with us."

"A good man? Hardly."

"I'll say it again if you like. I am aware of..." she hesitated slightly, "what you have been. And I am well aware of the sorts of things you may have done and seen. Muggles have shown no less talent than wizards in hatred and prejudice, in devising horrible, cruel things to do to one another. We may even be more ingenious at such things, not having the use of magic to make things easier. But I say you are a good man because of the shadows of those things that you carry with you, that darken your eyes. An evil man would not have them. And, when all is said and done, Professor, you are still human. And humans often make wrong choices."

She held up a hand to forestall any comment. "I'm not saying it's a simple matter, Professor. I'm simply saying people, life, are never black and white. And the shades of grey change constantly." At his continued silence, she stepped forward to join him at the window, looking out at the deserted street. "As for my expression of gratitude, which you are so stubborn in denying, there are two reasons for it. Whether or not you believe it, we do welcome you to this house in your own right and are happy that you will celebrate with us. Christmas is meant to be shared. My other reason... The Weasleys have kept us abreast of the turmoil in the wizarding world and of our daughter's part in it. It is a terrible thing, as a parent, to know your child is in danger and be unable to protect them, but I also know that to hold her back would be even more dangerous. And, as happy as we are to have her home, we know she is even more vulnerable here than she is at school. She has knowledge and some experience, but to have you here... eases my mind. I know very well that you are both dedicated and dependable and, should anything happen, you would be one of the best for my daughter to have at her side."

"Well," she finished abruptly, "I must return to sleep. I'm off to work early tomorrow. Good night, Professor Snape."

"Good night, Dr. Granger." Snape said nothing more, but he was still at the window over an hour later, silent and unmoving.

It was Hermione, awakening before the rest of her family, who found the man still at the window seat, his sleeping features softened by the grey of pre-dawn.

She studied him curiously, careful not to make any noise that would disturb him. It was a harsh face even when relaxed in sleep, full of angles rather than curves. And somehow defensive. Thick, black eyebrows, sunken eyes, prominent cheekbones, thin lips. And, dominating it all, a nose that would have made the most imperious Roman emperor proud.

"It is a rock! A peak! A cape!" Hermione jumped, startled, at the murmured words. "Did I say it was a cape? It is a peninsula!"

The girl began to laugh, but continued the quote. "Of what use is this oblong receptacle? As an inkstand, sir? Or as a scissor box?" Her lips continued to twitch into a smile. "I don't think it's quite *that* bad, sir."

"Then perhaps you would like to wear it for the next twenty years?" Snape's eyes snapped open, filled with sarcastic mirth.

"I am quite satisfied with my own, thank you," she answered primly. "At least yours suits your face, sir."

"I see. And what, may I ask, is your verdict on my facial features, Miss Granger?"

Hermione pretended to study him intently for several moments, hoping for some sign of discomfort from the stoic professor. She was doomed to disappointment. "A very strong face," she finally decreed. "Very masculine. And stubborn, I should say. I don't think there would ever be anyone who would call you good-looking, but it is a face that calls for respect." It was extraordinary how quickly the early-morning giddiness vanished at that point, leaving the young woman horrified at what she had been saying. "Sir! I didn't mean... I..." She miserably stuttered to a stop.

Severus rose, surreptitiously stretching various stiff muscles. He must be getting old. "If I had not wished an answer, I would not have asked the question," he interjected smoothly, amusement clear in his voice. "And you ought to know, Miss Granger, that I am unable to hand you punishments in your parents' house while on holiday. Still, I must admit that you have certainly given me the most flattering description of my features I have ever received."

Hermione simply stared at him, stupefied.

An amused snort emerged. "Can it be that I have finally rendered the infamous Miss Granger speechless? This day shall certainly be recorded in the annals of wizard history. And now, if you will excuse me, Miss Granger, there are a few matters that I must attend to." With a dignity that belied his frantic internal questioning (something along the lines of "What in the hell am I babbling about?"), he swept up the stairs and into his room.

Notes:

To give credit where it's due, the quote at the end of today's piece is from *Cyrano de Bergerac* by Edmond Rostand. I (and HG & SS) prefer the original French, but I put it in English for easier reading.

## Face the Music



A little light reading and a chance comment lead Hermione to discover that Snape has nowhere to spend Christmas. But is dragging him home for the holidays really a good idea? (A WIKTT Christmas 2003 challenge fic; AU w/HBP & DH)

## Chapter 6 ~ Face the Music

Breakfast turned out to be more or less as usual--or what passed for usual with Snape as a houseguest--though the professor maintained an even stonier silence, being annoyed at both mother and daughter for startling him into thinking and saying things he never meant to. He had never been at his best in the mornings.

Hermione herself was much quieter, mindful of her own *faux pas* and hesitant of baiting the hollow-eyed professor. For though most of their interactions had become more like fencing matches in the past few years, she was still well aware of--and occasionally subject to--his ability to verbally flay anyone he came in contact with. Still, her mother's words had made an impression on her and that same little voice that had encouraged her to invite Snape for the holidays wanted her to do more. (It was annoying that it sounded almost exactly like Dumbledore.) Not that there was much she could do, of course, but perhaps she could tease him out a bit, give him a little holiday amusement, if not cheer.

But perhaps lunch would be a better time to ask.

Snape retreated to his room and basically barricaded himself in. Imogene, after a few worried glances at her older sister, left with their parents, who were going to drop her off at a friend's house for the day. Hermione looked around the empty house, extremely conscious of the out-of-sight guest, and sighed. The kitchen seemed like the best place for now; she had to clear up the remains of breakfast. Determinedly humming Christmas carols, Hermione began to pick up the empty dishes.

Some hours later, she found herself staring mindlessly at the book she had chosen and shut it with a snap. Dawdling at this point served no useful purpose she could see, except to make her even more nervous about the idea than she already was. "Well," she told herself, "the most he can do is bite my head off. And he's been doing that for years. And nothing ventured, nothing gained." It was a stupid platitude, but it fit the circumstances, at least.

She marched out of the room and to Snape's door, knocking sturdily. When there was no reply, she looked at the impassive panel of wood dubiously. He could at least reply with an annoyed "go away" if he didn't want company. Was he asleep? Was he dead? "He'll probably kill me for this..." she muttered and cautiously pushed the door open. Poking her head through the door, she smiled in relief and some amusement. Neither drunk, dead, or naked (*that* idea alone made her shudder). Merely listening to her radio with headphones on. She wondered what he could have found to listen to, especially with such an intent expression on his face. She couldn't tell whether or not he was enjoying it, but he was certainly interested. "Professor Snape?" she queried loudly, opening the door further.

He started slightly, then looked full at her and grimaced. Pulling off the headphones, he inquired, "Yes, Miss Granger?"

"I--" She was *not* going to be flustered. "I didn't know you were so interested in Muggle music, professor," she finished evenly.

"I am not," he answered, his voice just as bland as hers. "But as your sister took it upon herself to grant me access to your personal collection, I decided I might as well take her up on her offer."

For the first time, Hermione noticed the open CD case with no small alarm. In truth, 'oh, shit' might be a better description of her reaction. It was not relieved when she identified the missing CD. "I see you found the 'Pressure Valve' CD," she said faintly.

"Indeed." As yet, he said nothing about what he had found on it.

She supposed she shouldn't be so disconcerted about it; it was simply a side of her that she had never intended him (or anyone else, for that matter) to be aware of. 'Pressure Valve' was a CD a friend of hers from primary school had made for her a year or two back, which was entirely of '80s and early '90s metal. It made for a good frustration reliever (hence the title) and could give her something to think about on occasion. "What song were you listening to?" she asked, killing time until her brain could once more begin to function.

"I have no idea." Damn him for being such a blank wall. "I believe it was the sixth song on this disc."

Hermione knew the songs as well as she knew the lists of potions ingredients. "'Unforgiven'," she said instantly, "by Metallica."

He shrugged in a display of complete indifference. "It has proven to be an interesting collection thus far, Miss Granger, if not exactly complimentary to my opinion of your taste in music. I had no idea you could be this self-destructive."

"Unlike yourself?" she shot back, before brain could connect to vocal chords. "I may be a young, silly girl to you, *Professor*, but I have just as many emotions as you do. I can get just as angry, just as bitter, just as desperate. Just as frustrated with life. Hell, I may not have as much material as you do for nightmares, but I have *them*, too. But God forbid anyone actually has sympathetic qualities, don't you think, Professor?"

He was surprised at her vehemence and, truth be told, so was she. "Quite a remarkable reaction to a simple comment," he commented blandly.

She sighed, partly in embarrassment and partly in annoyance. "Sorry," she said shortly. "But do you know how damned difficult it is to deal with someone who still sees me as nothing more than a thoughtless, pain-in-the-neck ten-year-old? And before you can say anything to that, Professor, I *have* changed in the past several years and yes, I *do* realize that I really know very little about life and everything else. My point is that you are treating me like I am the same person I was nearly eight years ago. I'm not and I don't appreciate it."

He merely watched her in silence, a single eyebrow raised. A variety of violent alternatives raced through her brain, all of which were impossible, if only for the reason that she would hardly be allowed to graduate if she inflicted severe bodily harm on one of her professors.

"Anyway," she continued, "I came to ask you if you would like to go shopping with me. Muggle shops, not magical ones; I need to find things for my family."

He glared at her in consternation. "And why, in the name of the Seven Great Wizards, should I wish to do something so monumentally insane?" he demanded. "I can't imagine why you should ask me to in the first place. Don't you have some Muggle friends who are as brainless as your wizarding ones who would actually *like* to engage in this annual rash of commercialism with you?"

His venom stung--all the more so as she was trying to open herself up. But she would be damned if she let him see how much he could hurt her; he'd done it too often in the past and she wasn't about to let him enjoy his petty jabs. "I thought it might amuse you," she answered coolly. "In the observation and criticizing of the custom, if not the practice. At the very least, I thought you might like an opportunity to get out of this room. /I like it, but I never thought it would hold any particular interest for you."

Snape was forced to admit that she had a point. It wasn't that he couldn't leave the house himself, of course--he could very well apparate to wherever he chose, if he wished--but he had nowhere to go. For even in Diagon Alley, he would be pestered with queries about his holidays and he could not endure the reactions he would receive. Pity, derision... outright mirth if he told the truth. Any of them would be intolerable. And while he could be comfortably occupied in his own dungeons, the possibilities here were limited. Still, Muggle shopping did not promise much in the way of amusements, either.

"I thought we might drop by the British Museum if we finished early," Hermione added in a carefully casual tone. "And I shouldn't take long myself. I know exactly what I want and where to get it." It was the best she could do. She didn't know if historical artifacts would interest Snape, but it was all she could think of. At the very least, he could hide in the Reading Room for a while instead of in her room.

It wasn't a marvellous opportunity by any means, but it would provide a manner of entertainment, as well as the chance to take a look at some of the alchemical texts the Museum housed. Besides, if he knew the Granger girl whatsoever, she would continue to pester him with similar offers until he broke down and acceded. And life had taught him that there was much to be said with getting unpleasanties over with. He could be as acerbic as possible during this outing and thereby assure that another one would not be planned at any time in the next hundred years.

"Very well, Miss Granger," he acquiesced with an annoyed sigh. "If I must."

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Notes:

Many apologies for the delay; RL attacked me with a vengeance and I'm just getting back up to speed. I'll spare you the gory details.

I use the archaic spelling of "tease". I've taken the liberty of inflicting a little bit of my taste of music on Hermione, since we're about the same age in linear time. Besides, it seems Snape-appropriate, if not exactly his taste.

Prowling London

Chapter 7 of 19

A little light reading and a chance comment lead Hermione to discover that Snape has nowhere to spend Christmas. But is dragging him home for the holidays really a good idea? (A WIKTT Christmas 2003 challenge fic; AU w/HBP & DH)

Chapter Seven ~ Prowling London

All in all, Hermione thought, he had taken it rather well. The Underground had irritated him no end, but he had merely tightened his lips into that familiar grimace and fingered the wand that was hidden in his sleeve. Though Hermione had to admit that she hadn't really been worried that he would hex a few dozen Muggles. If he hadn't done anything permanent to a student by now, it was more or less certain that he had the self-control of a saint. (Of course, the resulting image of "Saint Snape" was absolutely hilarious.)

He had started when she grasped his hand (his left; she knew he would want his wand hand free) as they threaded their way through the mercilessly crowded station. "Forgive the liberty," she had said to him, "but it's far too easy to lose each other in this mess." He had said nothing, which she took for consent. Or resignation, anyway. And she was telling him the truth; Piccadilly had scads of people this time of year, even on a weekday and even Snape in his unrelieved black would be hard to spot. But she knew her way around here nearly as well as she knew Hogwarts (with or without the Marauders' Map) and a short time later they were comfortably ensconced away from the masses in Hatchard's. And the expression on Snape's face was the closest she'd ever seen it to interest.

"I'll be on the second floor," she told him. "I need to pick up a few things for my parents and then I want to look up one or two subjects for myself."

"Why am I not surprised," he said, the corner of his mouth curling upward, "that the first place you would go to is a bookstore?"

To her own surprise--and, apparently, to his--she chuckled. "Because you know me far too well, Professor," she replied. "Shall we say about twenty minutes, then? Just come up and find me."

"Ten minutes would be more agreeable," he replied. "I have no desire to spend more time here than is absolutely necessary."

"Fifteen," she countered. "And not a minute less."

"Agreed." Hermione smiled inwardly. She didn't need any more than ten, really; she knew the store like the back of her hand. One doesn't become a woman without realising the basic methods of manipulating men, after all.

Some fifteen-odd minutes later, Hermione glanced around in surprise. She had expected Snape to be exquisitely punctual--if not early--and the fact that he wasn't standing on the landing glaring at her was... well, surprising. She indulged in a brief vision of him on the first floor, engrossed in one of the bondage novels, and muffled a snort of laughter. Though utterly atypical, it struck her as absurdly Slytherin-esque. With a grin fighting to appear on her face, she wandered down the stairs. Well, he was on the first floor, but in the fantasy/science-fiction section instead of bondage. Hidden in the small space between the large bookshelves against the wall and a small set that isolated it from the main walkway, he was immersed in the contents of a small paperback. She watched him turn a page, oblivious to the people passing by. Hermione felt uncomfortable, as though she had intruded on some intensely private moment. Disconcerted, she backed away quietly, retreating back up to the second floor. Once there, she stopped, leaning back against the railing and trying to analyse her own reaction. But she knew she was fighting a losing battle on that score and proceeded to settle down in a corner with a book of her own until Snape appeared of his own volition.

Though she kept poking at the problem as one would a sore tooth.

It was another ten minutes before he finally came to find her perched on a small chair, reading a book that she had picked out for herself. He said nothing; neither did she as she stood to accompany him out of the store. But a small corner of a sales bag poking out from beneath his cloak made her smile.

It was a bit of a walk to their next destination and Snape seemed no more inclined to talk than he had been earlier. Neither did he offer to carry her parcel, but both omissions were to be expected. So was the inimical glare and the curled lip which he directed at the frantic holiday shoppers, all of whom were much more--obsessed with their task than she was.

"Is there some *reason* behind this inane scurrying, Miss Granger?" he asked at one point. "And in our joining this mass of people acting like ants in a disturbed nest?"

Hermione repressed a snort with difficulty; it was an apt simile. "Well, *personally*, it is simply because I have no opportunity to do Muggle shopping while I am at school--as you well know--and I was unable to do it during summer holidays. And--to answer the question you actually asked--I do this because it makes my family happy. Christmas *is* a tradition, you know, and somehow it becomes a very personal tradition. It brings us all together at a time that reminds us of how important it is to stay connected.

"As for the rest of these people, *some* of them must have the same idea, but for many, I imagine it is a self-perpetuating cycle of guilt and showmanship. Everyone *knows* their relatives and acquaintances are going to get them something and they're going to be in big trouble if they don't do the same. Does that answer satisfy you,

Professor?"

"A rather absurd mix of cynicism and romantic idealism, Miss Granger."

She shrugged. "I know what is true for myself, Professor. You may believe or not, as you please."

"Oh, *thank you*, Miss Granger," he sneered, "for allowing me the luxury of my own opinion."

She gave him a blindingly brilliant smile and cheerfully answered, "You're welcome." After a moment's pause, she added, "And Happy Christmas to you, too, Professor." Snape scowled and relapsed into silence.

Which didn't last for long, as they soon arrived at their destination: Hamleys, London's most famous toy store.

"Medea's dragons, what in bloody blazes are we doing here?" he seethed in a modified shout, staring at the frazzled parents and hordes of children in barely concealed horror.

"As you may possibly have noticed," Hermione said blithely, "I do have a six-year-old sister. Six-year-olds *like* toys. Ergo, I am here to buy something for Genie for Christmas."

"I am well aware of your sarcasm, Miss Granger," he remarked, "and I would advise you to cease your use of it immediately."

She took the hint. Besides, after the past several years, she could read him pretty well and he was acting like a horse that was about to bolt. "You know," she continued conversationally, "I've never heard anyone swear by Medea before. It's very unusual."

"Your point, Miss Granger?" he asked, nettled.

"Nothing, really. I'm simply curious as to why you used it. And before you mention it, I did not ask because I knew you would not give me a straight answer. You never have."

"Point conceded," he acknowledged. "And in reply to your non-question: Medea is a direct ancestress of mine. That particular turn of phrase is fairly common in my family."

"How extraordinary!" Snape saw the girl's eyes light up in that far-too-familiar manner and groaned inwardly. "Are you related on your mother's or your father's side? What is your family's version of events? Do you have any literature from the period? I mean, did she leave any sort of diary or personal effects?"

"Miss Granger..." His exasperation was clear. His hand covered his eyes briefly. "I am not some bloody storyteller, nor do I intend to have you prying into affairs that are none of your business. Besides which, this is neither the time nor the place to be recounting long family histories."

"Sorry." At least the girl had the grace to appear somewhat contrite. "I let my curiosity run away with me again. You're right, I shouldn't pry into your personal affairs."

"It isn't," he added, somewhat to his surprise, "that I do not understand your curiosity, Miss Granger. What I take exception to is your expression and timing, not to mention your utter lack of tact."

"I understand." She smiled up at him. When had she become so tall? She was forced to stand very close to him in this crush and for the first time he noticed that the top of her head was on level with his nose. "I apologise for my tactlessness; however, I warn you that it is said to be a family trait, so I don't think there's much I can do about it."

"Try," he growled back, teeth bared in something that was decidedly not a grin. He could not do anything damaging to the girl (unless he bided his time until term began again), but he would not be trifled with. Still, his usual intimidation techniques seemed to be losing their potency. He knew this holiday had been a bad idea.

"Speaking of which," she continued, apparently ready for an unpleasant redirection of this 'conversation.' "We may as well go in and get it over with." He grimaced, then tightened his jaw and nodded. An unpleasant thought had occurred to him: he himself had nothing for the loquacious Genie. He had purchased duty-gifts for the Grangers and their elder daughter (yet another example of the manners pounded into him as a small child), but not for the child, of whom he had not known. As he had no plan to come again into the horror house London had become, he might as well grab some toy or other while he had the opportunity.

"All right, then." Hermione took a deep breath. "I can't promise when I'll be finished; I know what I'm doing, but the lines here will be utterly mad. Shall we say in half-an-hour, in the back left corner of the ground floor? It may be *slightly* less hectic than the rest, since it doesn't have the really popular toys."

"I will be there, then," he replied grimly. "Just finish and get there so we can leave this particular circle of Hell."

"Agreed. I don't like this much more than you do, Professor. Well, over the top!" With a rather devil-may-care grin, she pulled Snape with her into the maelstrom.

They lost each other almost immediately, pushed apart by two arguing mothers equipped with large prams. Snape fared somewhat better, as he was able to out-glare anyone in his path, and made rapid progress to their meeting point. To find himself--more than slightly bewildered--surrounded by plush animals. Blinking, he picked up a teddy bear, its small form dwarfed by his long-fingered hands. Another image superimposed itself on the toy--a bonfire, in the centre of a large gravel drive.

It was no more than a moment, but it brought back a time in his life Severus preferred to leave in a chained, locked trunk in the most distant corner of his memory. His childhood--if, he scoffed inwardly, you could actually designate it by the term. According to his father, who had ordered an enormous party to mark--celebrate was certainly not the word to use--his son's acceptance letter, he had ceased to be a child. And the crowning event of the evening--every second of which he had hated--was a bonfire, in which everything of his that was 'childish' was burned. Including the one item he had left from his mother: his teddy bear, Vespasian. Tight-lipped and pale-faced--he would not, could not cry in front of his father, nor the strangers he had invited--Severus had watched the fur scorch and vanish, the shiny black eyes melt into a shapeless puddle.

Scowling--whether at the teddy bear or himself, he wasn't certain--he slammed the blankly smiling toy back on the shelf. Idiotic, ridiculous, and absurd! A silly Muggle children's toy. A stupid child's infantile attachment. Annoyed, he stalked out of the store, Apparating as soon as he could. The Granger girl--stupid wench!--could run her own silly errands by herself.

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Notes (Jan 2004):

Yes, Hatchard's and everything I mentioned about it exists. I spent a good couple hours there while my own Mum and Dad potted around Fortnum & Mason's. And no, I did not spend the entire time looking at the bondage section. I went and bought the only two HP books I own. As yet, I'm not telling you what Severus bought, either. Hamleys is also real, but I pulled all details from their website. Medea is from Greek mythology, but, like Severus, I won't go into details here. Vespasian is the name of yet another Roman emperor.

(Apr. 2008) Well, I hope everyone is enjoying, though I'm not sure I like this section much anymore. Still, it's a little late to change it now...

# Pressure

## Chapter 8 of 19

A little light reading and a chance comment lead Hermione to discover that Snape has nowhere to spend Christmas. But is dragging him home for the holidays really a good idea? (A WIKTT Christmas 2003 challenge fic; AU w/HBP & DH)

### Chapter 8 ~ Pressure

Snape paced the thankfully empty house for some time before settling down in the front room, watching the snow as it began to fall. It was there Hermione found him, hours later. "I searched the entire building for you, you know," she remarked neutrally.

"I hope you will accept my apology." Snape's voice equally bland.

"Should I?" she queried, tilting her head, studying his face. "I may, but would you answer me one question first?"

"I may." Her lips pursed slightly at the echo, but she continued on calmly.

"I want to know," she continued slowly. "Did you disappear out of malice, some sort of childish prank to annoy your ever-so-irritating student? or was there another reason?"

"There was another reason, Miss Granger." She knew that was as much of an answer as she was likely to get and sighed.

"Very well." Resigned, she turned and picked up her parcels, heading up the stairs. "I shall accept your apology, then. I'm sorry we didn't have a chance to go to the BM, though. My parents will be home in an hour. Dinner will be ready as soon as I can make it."

"Very well, Miss Granger." Snape returned to staring at the fire he had built, and its reflection off of the ornaments on the Christmas tree.

Hermione, on the other hand, climbed quickly up the stairs to her room, grabbed a certain CD and a cloth-covered object from her bottom drawer, and proceeded to her sister's room. She closed the door firmly, then set the CD down on a table. The girl then picked up the brightly-coloured, stuffed toy--which was little more than a pillow with a face drawn on it--and introduced it--repeatedly, and with no little force--to the bed post. Crookshanks, dozing on the bed itself, opened a sleepy eye and cocked an ear to listen to the constant, if low-voiced, stream of invective she let loose. Finally, the pillow was hurled across the room, hitting the door with an impressive thud. "Bastard," she finished wearily, then took a deep, calming breath. It felt good to let it all out like that, especially with the "pounding pillow" she had named 'Snape' in her third year. With a smile on her face, she attached her CD player to her waist, inserted the disc and pressed play. Earphones on, she made her way downstairs, moving in time to the music of Guns 'n' Roses.

On the way to the kitchen, she noticed the blinking light of the answering machine in the hallway. Annoyed, she paused her music and pressed the play button on the machine. *Hello, dear, her mother's voice echoed. I know you're probably still in Town, but I wanted to let you know that you're father and I will be staying on here tonight. Our work is going to keep both of us here late, and with the way the weather is looking, it will be safer to stay. So don't worry, dear. Genie will be staying at Olivia's, as well. I'll call again later to check up on you, Mynie. Don't forget the candles are in the kitchen drawer.*

"I know, Mother," Hermione muttered, savagely smashing the delete button. So it would be an evening alone with a man who had just managed to annoy the hell out of her. She was prepared to start swearing again, but found that there were no words strong enough. With no further ado, she stalked into the kitchen and plugged the speakers there into her player. Hermione then turned the volume up and pressed 'play.' Fortunately for Snape, she had vegetables to turn her butcher knives on.

Snape himself remained in the darkened room, listening thoughtfully to the "music" emanating from the kitchen.

By the time dinner was ready, Hermione had calmed considerably, to the point where she truly wondered what had driven Snape to disappear on her as he had. It would have taken more than screaming children to faze him (as evidenced by years of teaching) and she was forced to admit that, while somewhat frosty, he had been polite to a fault since the beginning of hols.

"Food's on the table." She was quiet, unsure whether her professor was asleep or awake.

"Very well." She watched the dark shadow unfurl itself from the couch, noticing in some odd corner of her mind that it would have frightened her no more than a few weeks ago. But tonight she noticed the slight swaying as he stood, the pale reflection of the light off of his face. He seemed, she thought, exhausted. Disconcerted, she turned and preceded him into the dining room.

"I suppose you heard the machine," she commented as they seated themselves at the table. "It'll just be the two of us until tomorrow, when the weather's cleared."

"So I understood, Miss Granger."

An empty silence ensued.

"Sir?" she asked hesitantly, halfway through the meal.

"Yes." Non-committal, as always.

"What really happened today? Why did you disappear? Was something wrong?"

"I don't see that it is any of your business, Miss Granger."

"Perhaps not," she agreed, focusing on the bit of steak she was currently cutting. "But I was still worried. I'd like to know if there's something wrong. If I could help..." Her head shot up at his initial reply: a disdainful snort.

"Worried?" His lips curled. "My dear girl, you should know better than to think I would believe that. And no, I won't cater to your busybody nosiness."

For the first time in her life, Hermione's temper overrode her sensibility. Her dinner plate sailed across the room, covering the floor with food and shards of ceramic. "Screw you, Professor!" He looked at her in vague startlement. She glared back, her eyes practically glowing. "Is it that difficult, is it that bloody difficult to accept honest human concern? And don't give me any crap about 'pity'; I have never wasted a single fucking moment of pity on you. But of course, God forbid I actually take the time to make sure you're all right!"

"Honest human concern?" Snape nearly chuckled in cynical amusement. "Really, Miss Granger. As far as I can tell, there is no such beast. Nothing exists without at least a modicum of self-interest."

Disconcerted, Hermione stared at him, his words like a bucket of icy water. "I can't believe you just said that, Professor."

"That is your problem, girl, not mine."

"But... Haven't you..." She was at a loss to express herself. "Sir, what about the Headmaster? Surely..."

He gave her the sort of pitying smile one reserves for the particularly dim-witted. "Albus least of all, as you would realise if you thought about it," he replied. "The Headmaster is committed to maintaining the status quo, Miss Granger. I was--and am--simply a means to that end."

"Your parents, then," she challenged, refusing to give up.

"Hardly," he drawled. He did not elaborate further.

She swallowed. "Well, then," the girl managed to say evenly. "Even if you don't believe me, you have now had your first experience of altruism. I hope you enjoyed it." Hermione pressed her lips together to prevent anything further from escaping and knelt down on the floor to begin clearing the mess she had made. Her mother was going to be annoyed at the broken plate later; she believed there was no excuse for destructiveness.

"You're doing it the hard way," Snape remarked blandly.

"I'm well aware of that, *Professor*," answered Hermione. "I am *also* aware, as are you, of the laws on underage magic. I may be eighteen physically, but not legally. And I'm still a student, as you well know."

"Of course." He had apparently finished his meal by then, for Hermione heard him stand and walk out of the room.

"Screw him," she muttered. But she couldn't shake the feeling that something was terribly wrong.

The feeling followed her as she finished cleaning the kitchen and through the rest of the evening. True to form, the now full-fledged snow storm knocked out the power and just about everything else. Resigned, she dragged candles and blankets upstairs for both herself and Snape. He answered her knock civilly, but said nothing more as she outlined the situation. Of course, *he* could cast light and warming charms to his heart's content; *he* was not limited by stupid laws. Her annoyance (and exhaustion, truth be told) kept her from noticing the slightly drawn appearance of his face as well as her customary analysis of their earlier exchange. Instead, she merely ignored everything, shoving it onto her 'to-do' list for the next day. It was much nicer to curl up in front of the fireplace downstairs. (Though she had to drag all of her blankets back down the stairs once she changed her mind.) And falling asleep was such a simple thing to do...

Snape himself had a harder time of it. Hermione had given him some food for thought, but that was easily dismissed. However, some of his memories--triggered by the earlier reminiscence--escaped his control easily and were damned difficult to stuff back into their boxes. Unlike boggarts, it was impossible to make sour memories into anything even remotely amusing. Still, decades of practice meant that he managed to shut them away in the end, drifting into the restless unconsciousness he called 'sleep.'

Only to be awakened only a few hours later by a noise that brought surging out of bed, wand at the ready. No more than slightly disoriented, he swiftly checked the listening charms he had cast--after Amelia Granger had pointed out certain things, it seemed only prudent--and identified the location of what he heard. As he bolted out the door, it became clearer. Hermione was screaming.

With only slightly less control, his descent down the stairs would have been called 'falling.' He reached the parlor door and slammed it open, a hex on his lips.

To find the girl alone. He was more than a little nonplussed. And, as he tucked his wand away, annoyed. Snape approached the bundle of blankets and hair with every intention of giving the girl a piece of his mind. Though Granger had stopped screaming, she was still whimpering in her sleep. He was startled to find tears streaming down her cheeks and her voice rose slightly as he approached. "No," she pleaded. "Please God, no. Don't. Don't make me..."

A fleeting look of pain crossed Severus' face as he looked down at the girl. Instead of the sharp shake he had been intending, he jostled her gently. He recognised that familiar litany from his own dreams... "Miss Granger. Miss Granger. Wake up."

Hermione jolted out of sleep, her arm rearing back in readiness. Snape closed his hand over her fist before it could fly. "You were having a nightmare, Miss Granger," he informed her. "Nothing more." She stared up at him, body still shaking, lungs struggling to regain control of her breathing. She shook her head, hair flying around her.

"It's more... when they're... memories..." She turned away from him to face the couch and burst into violent, wrenching sobs.

Snape watched her in consternation. Ordinarily, he would tell the silly girl to stop making that irritating noise. But this wasn't some chit weeping over an equally air-brained boy. This was something he could empathise with far too well. On one hand, he knew he shouldn't coddle the girl; only the strongest would be likely to survive this war. On the other... She had already proven herself in the past few years. And well he remembered the feeling--one he ruthlessly sublimated, but never rid himself of--of desperately wanting someone--anyone--to simply be there as he faced his monsters alone and in the dark.

Hesitantly, almost involuntarily, his hand reached out to clasp the girl's shoulder. When she didn't jerk away, he knelt down next to the sofa and waited, gifting her with the strength of his presence.

## A Star in the Storm

### Chapter 9 of 19

A little light reading and a chance comment lead Hermione to discover that Snape has nowhere to spend Christmas. But is dragging him home for the holidays really a good idea? (A WIKTT Christmas 2003 challenge fic; AU w/HBP & DH)

#### Chapter 9 - A Star in the Storm

Slowly, the girl's sobs subsided and she began taking deep, shaky breaths to calm herself. "I'm sorry I disturbed you, Professor," she said quietly, still turned away from him. "This always happens when I'm tired. It always comes back."

He withdrew his hand from her shoulder, but remained where he was. "It is not an easy thing," he replied, his voice equally low, "to know that one's mind can turn against one. And that the monsters therein are merely waiting for the defences to be lowered."

She rolled over and stared at him, her own dark eyes nearly black in the dim light. "You have them, too," she said, her voice wondering. "You don't think I'm weak because of this, or irritating."

His gaze left her, wandering to the fire. "I have spent," he began slowly, "over twenty years in His service. And in my memory is every dying scream, every agonised face. There was a point when they did not bother me, Miss Granger, but now each and every one lies in wait, appearing when I can no longer fight them."

"And the Greater Good no longer matters when they do, does it?"

"No. Only the pain, the fear, and the guilt of that moment."

Hermione gathered up her blankets, shifting to a seated position on the couch. "You must be freezing there on the floor. Please, sit on the couch. If you don't want to share the blankets, you ought to at least borrow one."

"A non-sequitur, Miss Granger?" An eyebrow quirked.

She smiled a little sheepishly. "I know. It is a valid point, though."

"You do," he acknowledged with a regal nod. "And I will borrow one of those blankets, Miss Granger. My gratitude." He unfolded his legs and settled himself with a thick comforter.

"That's something I never expected to hear," she sighed and leaned her head back against the couch. "Of course, this whole holiday has been unexpected. Not bad, you understand," she hastened to qualify, "just unexpected. I just wish I could get rid of these damned dreams. And their memories."

"You could simply have someone obliviate you," Severus pointed out neutrally.

"Like you have?" she shot back. "No. There is still too much for me— for us— to face. The lessons I have learned in the past few years have their purpose. I can't afford be the thoughtless little bookworm I was. Not if I want to survive. Not if I want others to survive."

She brought herself back to the present and was startled to see Snape regarding her with something akin to respect in his eyes. "That is an extraordinary statement from one so young, Miss Granger. I honour it."

A breath— almost, but not quite, a snort— escaped her. "I wish I could do the same when I wake up screaming in the night, hearing all of those god-awful sounds in my ears."

"Here, here," he sighed.

"Professor?" she queried suddenly after a long moment of silence.

"Hmm?"

"You can tell me to bugger off, if you like, but... Do you have a dream that keeps coming back? I mean, one particular memory that haunts you?" She tried to sound diffident, but he could hear the urgency underlying her words.

"God, yes," he answered, his hand coming up briefly to cover his eyes, then dropping heavily into his lap. "It was a kindergarten, a Muggle kindergarten. I don't even... Children so young they didn't even know themselves yet. There was a little girl there, no more than three or four years old. I dislike children, Miss Granger, as well you know, but I think that I will always see her eyes staring at me, wide and curious, just before Goyle hexed her into oblivion. He seemed to think it was some great joke. The only *regrettable thing*," he spat the words out like poison, "was that the bitch wouldn't grow up into something that might be 'fun' at meetings. Gods, I wanted to kill that bastard then and there. But the girl was already dead. She had purple eyes, you know. A rare colour."

He snorted in self-derision. "Listen to me babble on, like some bloody fountain. And to you of all people."

"Don't belittle it," Hermione snapped, her voice whip-sharp. "Don't dishonour that child's memory by belittling your own."

"Or what, Miss Granger?" The mocking tone was back, though Hermione wasn't sure if it was directed at her or at himself. "What changes? She is dead. I doubt it matters to her one jot what I say *or* think. Matters very little to anybody."

"Damnation," she swore in a low voice, earning a look of surprise from her professor. "I swear, Professor," she continued. "I swear, I don't know whether I think I ought to give you a hug or a swift kick in the arse. For an intelligent man, you can be pretty damn thick-headed."

"I? Thick-headed?" It was rare that anyone had him off-balance such that he resorted to echoing what he heard.

"Yes, you." She paused, uncertain how to proceed. "Oh, I don't know what I want to say. But do you know what I dream about, Professor?"

"I am aquiver with anticipation," he replied dryly.

She glared at him. "Mine are about killing that bastard, Pettigrew."

"I would have thought you would be glad he is dead." Snape had heard of the incident, though he had not been present. Pettigrew had somehow managed to grab the girl in Hogsmeade, using her as a hostage. Though her wand hand had been immobilised, she had apparently shown no little ingenuity in freeing herself and, in the process, had been forced to kill the 'bastard,' as she called him.

"I am. Believe me, I am," Hermione said fervently. She then seemed to pull back into herself, curling up and wrapping her arms around her knees. "God. You'd think that after everything he did, everything he tried to do, I'd feel some sort of triumph. Or... I don't know. Relief? Gratitude? Something." She tensed, almost as if trying to pull everything into her torso to make something smaller. "But all I can feel is the horror of that moment, the feel of my wand as it shoved through flesh. I don't even want to touch it anymore."

Almost dreamily, she added, "Did you know that a man's eye will make a popping sound when you poke it? He screamed, too. The kind when they say, 'he screamed like a woman.' I can hear it in my head." Suddenly, she shook herself, bringing her mind back from wherever it had gone, then shuddered. "Not something I want to hear for the next several decades."

"You did what was necessary, Miss Granger," Snape said bluntly. "Under those circumstances, I imagine you will be able to cope."

Hermione shrugged. "I hope so. Good Lord, I hope so." She turned her head, resting on her knees as she looked at Snape. "Thank you, Professor," she murmured. He snorted. "I mean it," she insisted and unfolded herself so she could lay a hand on his own. He jerked slightly, unused to this kind of human contact and wondering what she would do if she knew that the Dark Mark was embedded just above the wrist her fingers brushed. "You've listened," she continued, "and you've shared with me tonight. You've passed no judgement, made no pronouncements. You respected me. I appreciate that, sir. You have no idea how much."

Touched in spite of himself, Snape retreated behind his ordinary persona. "Just don't expect it to last, Miss Granger," he stated baldly. "You have pestered me for seven years without earning my respect; one more night doesn't change that."

For once, she didn't seem to take his words at face value. Chuckling, she further surprised him by giving his hand a squeeze. "I promise to do better next time, Professor,"

she pledged, amusement threading through her words. I'll get it from you eventually."

Snape rose from the couch, breaking the contact. "You may certainly *try*, Miss Granger," he said, his voice low. "And now, if that is all, I shall bid you good night."

"Of course," Hermione replied. "Good night, sir."

"Sleep well." The quiet, but sincere, wish followed him out into the hall and up the stairs.

## Snowbound Morning

### Chapter 10 of 19

A little light reading and a chance comment lead Hermione to discover that Snape has nowhere to spend Christmas. But is dragging him home for the holidays really a good idea? (A WIKTT Christmas 2003 challenge fic; AU w/HBP & DH)

#### 10 - Snowbound Morning

The next morning the sun rose easily in the sky, creating a bell-like, crystalline day. Snow lay in feet around the Granger house and there was a hushed silence.

The crystal shattered with the shrill blare of the telephone.

Still unaccustomed to the noise of Muggle existence, the ringing had Snape standing, adrenaline flooding through his system, before he was fully awake. With a groan of realisation, he collapsed back into the bed before hauling himself upright with a sigh. He was well and truly awake now and the voice from downstairs didn't help any. A quick brush of the hand tidied his hair back and he shrugged into his robes before emerging onto the landing. Leaning over the railing, he studied the apparently dejected girl on the floor below as she replaced the receiver.

"That was my dad," she said without looking up. "They're still trapped in a hotel near their office. Snowstorm's messed up everything: transportation, power... They're hoping they'll be able to get back by tonight, but they're not counting on it. There's a lot of other places that need help more."

"They are safe, Miss Granger," he pointed out, his tone saying that even the most thick-witted child should have grasped the idea. "Does it really matter that they cannot immediately return?"

"It's Christmas bloody Eve!" Her frustration was clear. "It may not be important to *you*, but I have a family and I wanted to spend it with them!"

Stung... and furious with himself for being so... he spat back, "Yes, *you* have a family, Miss Granger. So stop acting like a spoiled five-year-old when they don't obey your every whim!" He turned on his heel and returned to the vague haven of his bedroom. Such a damned nuisance to have to deal, not only with this spoiled chit, but with her peculiar emerging talent for invoking his most sensitive memories. He paced heavily across the floor, awakening the somnolent Agrippina, who, annoyed, hissed at him. He stopped before the bookshelf. "Apologies, Agrippina," he sighed, "It's all right, really." To his surprise, she roused herself fully, descending the shelves with the delicacy of a dancer before draping herself across his shoulders. A half-smile quirked his lips. "Thank you, O Imperious One." He ran a hand over the surprisingly soft scales and in return, she nudged his ear with her nose.

A soft knock caught his attention just as Hermione tentatively opened the door. "I did not say you could enter, Miss Granger," he said forbiddingly.

"I know," she replied, her voice as quiet as her knock had been. "I didn't think you would. But what I said was uncalled for and I need to apologise for it. Before..."

"Before', Miss Granger?" A single eyebrow glided upwards. Both man and snake regarded her steadily.

"Yes, before." Exasperated... though with herself or him, she wasn't sure... Hermione matched them stare for stare. "I won't attempt to quantify what happened last night; I imagine we wouldn't agree about it, anyway. But I'll be damned if I simply let it slide, let what I said poison it. I was upset and I wasn't thinking; what I said just now was unconscionable."

"Why should you care, Miss Granger?" Snape lifted Agrippina off of his shoulders as he spoke, transferring her substantial weight back to the bookshelf. "Once this abominable holiday is over, we shall return to our customary relationship... if you can dignify it with that term. Nothing that has passed here has any significance whatsoever."

"Bollocks."

"I beg your pardon?" Snape blinked at the girl in consternation.

"You heard me," she replied. "Of course, I can always repeat it. Or perhaps I should clarify?" Hermione couldn't manage the single expressive eyebrow, but the derisive look she gave him was almost as effective. "I think what you just said is complete and utter bollocks. Like it or not, *Professor*, you have actually managed to impress upon me the fact that you are human. Furthermore, a human I admire, respect, and may possibly even *like*, if you'd leave off the bloody posturing you're so fond of. Think as you like, *sir*, but you can't change my opinion or my feelings and certainly not the way I act on them."

Snape's expression was the closest it would ever get to completely poleaxed. "Then I think you're completely, utterly daft, girl." Somehow, his words seemed to have lost their sting, even to his ears.

"What, daft for actually thinking of you as a person?" She crossed over to the bed and sat cross-legged on it, her brown eyes engaging his with complete frankness. "Why is that so hard to believe? I happen to think you're interesting and would like to get to know you better. I think you have some intrinsic value just as yourself. Is that such a far-fetched concept?"

"Honestly, I do find it a 'far-fetched concept'." Snape answered, managing to settle himself in a chair. Resting his elbows on the armrests, he steepled his fingers and watched her reaction.

"Why?" A single word.

"Why should I tell you?" he shot back.

She shrugged. "Perhaps because I have a sympathetic ear?" she suggested. "It isn't healthy to keep things bottled up inside, you know. And you have already demonstrated that you trust my discretion to some degree. Unless you were lying through your teeth last night."

"I do not need sympathy, Miss Granger."

"But it *does* sound like you need someone to talk to. You made your opinion of the Headmaster perfectly clear last night, I have never seen you talk *anyone* in anything other than a professional context, *and* you decided to tell me something last night that I very much doubt you've told anyone. I am well aware that I am one of the last people you would ever think of talking to under normal circumstances. Therefore, I must conclude that some other factor must have induced you to do so."

To her astonishment, Snape began to laugh... a deep, rather rusty sound. "Typical, Miss Granger. Entirely typical. Even in what you would call 'emotional matters', you present your premise, supporting evidence, and conclusion. A true academic."

She grinned in relief. "Well?"

"No."

"No?" To his amusement, she visibly began to bristle.

"Miss Granger... " he paused, considering the best way to formulate his thoughts. "While your hypothesis may be correct... and I am not saying so one way or the other... your question is extraordinarily personal. *If...* and that is an highly unlikely 'if', I might add... an appropriate time occurs, I may tell you. And that is the best you can do, Miss Granger, so I suggest you let the subject lie."

"Alright." Her easy acquiescence surprised him, but in truth, it was a far greater concession than she had been expecting. "How about this, then: you can tell me what you bought at the bookstore yesterday. What sort of low, Muggle trash did you pick up, *Professor?*"

She grinned almost evilly at him, but he had already regained his composure. "My congratulations, Miss Granger," Snape replied, his customary thin smile curling the corners of his lips. "Your tactics, though still applied with the grace of a Gryffindor sledgehammer, are taking on shades of Slytherin guile. Your timing needs work, though, as does that little characteristic known as subtlety."

"I'll take that as a compliment, sir, considering the source," she told him, her voice as dry as his could be, "and reiterate the question."

"Very well." He casually summoned the green and gold bag from the corner of the room, then shooed its contents in the girl's direction. Hermione looked at the covers, realising this was her turn to be completely bowled over. *A Wrinkle in Time. A Wind in the Door. Many Waters. A Swiftly Tilting Planet.*

"I have to say, sir," she managed to choke out, "this is not what I had expected." Though, truth be told, she would have been hard-pressed to say what exactly she *had* expected. Still, children's fantasy was somewhere on the far edges of her list.

He shrugged, looking vaguely uncomfortable. "I picked up the last one at random," he explained. "I didn't expect to find anything worthwhile, but I admit her method of synthesis is unusual. One doesn't usually find the human, scientific, and divine in harmony."

"I would have to agree," she murmured, bemused, before coming abruptly back to herself. "Um, would you like to continue this conversation over breakfast? I'm not terribly good at much, but I *can* manage eggs and toast."

"Well, if that is the *best* you can do, Miss Granger..." She looked at him sharply, but realised, somewhat dazedly, that he was merely teasing her *Curiouser and curiouser...* she thought. *If I see a white rabbit or a red queen, I am out of here.*

"It is, unless you would like to deal with a smoking kitchen," Hermione replied. "Shall we?" She climbed off the bed, realising suddenly that she was still in her pyjamas. With a feeling somewhere between fatalism and pragmatism, she shrugged the realisation off. After all, one doesn't exactly wear red nighties in sub-zero temperatures, does one?

## Nosy Neighbours and Lavish Luncheons

### Chapter 11 of 19

A little light reading and a chance comment lead Hermione to discover that Snape has nowhere to spend Christmas. But is dragging him home for the holidays really a good idea? (A WIKTT Christmas 2003 challenge fic; AU w/HBP & DH)

#### 11 - Nosy Neighbours and Lavish Luncheons

To Hermione's surprise, the conversation continued through breakfast... though L'Engle soon had to be abandoned, since Snape had yet to finish *Wrinkle*, let alone the others... and well into mid-morning. She spared a stray thought for her friends once during that time, wishing she could see their reaction to the hours of animated... and friendly... discussion. That wasn't to say that Snape's barbed tongue had lost any of its edge, but it certainly wasn't as venomous and not, thankfully, directed at her personally.

And the trend might well have continued if the doorbell had not rung. As it was, Hermione had to break off in the middle of a wonderfully complex metaphysical debate to see who had braved the drifts to end up at the Granger front door. Snape followed her, not out of curiosity, but from a lack of anything more interesting. He watched as she looked through the little glass in the door and then, apparently, began swearing silently to herself. She then took a deep breath, controlled the expression on her face, and swung the door open. "Good morning, Mrs. Nott," she said pleasantly. "What brings you out on such a nasty morning?" Snape looked beyond her at the woman she addressed: a middle-sized, somewhat-more-than-middle-aged specimen, with limp brown hair and eyes that ought to have been mild save that they searched the scene hungrily.

"I came to see how my *dear* neighbours were doing, *of course*, child." The woman's voice practically oozed. "After *such a ghastly* storm, and *all* of the power and everything *out*, I wanted to make *sure* you and your family were *all right*."

"That is *very* kind of you, Mrs. Nott." It was easy to see that Hermione was fighting to keep her temper; not surprising, since this Nott woman struck him as the most useless



sort of woman in the world. "And I'm glad to know you are doing *so* very well yourself," Hermione continued, "that you can come and check on us. We are doing perfectly fine. My father and mother are fine, as is Imogene. And, as you can see, so am I. But you can be sure I'll call you if we need any help whatsoever. You are so *very* useful, I know."

"No trouble at all, dear," Mrs. Nott assured her, "but may I speak to your parents? I *amsure* they must be having some trouble I could help with."

"No. Nothing. I assure you." After the past few weeks (and especially the last few days), Snape had learned to read Hermione somewhat better, and took note of her staccato syllables. One more little push and the girl would lose it entirely. This could be amusing.

"Now, Hermie, dear," Mrs. Nott's tone changed to demanding, "I must *insist* on speaking to your parents. Good heavens!" She started back a bit, having seen Snape standing behind the girl. "Who in heaven's name is *that*?"

If Hermione could have hexed the woman into the next century, Snape had no doubt that she would have. As it was, she was all but hissing and spitting like a cat. *That*, Hermione ground out deadpan, mimicking the woman's intonation, "is my hot Latin lover, Mrs. Nott." With that, she slammed the door in the woman's face, closing away any sputterings the dismissed might have made.

"God! that woman gets my back up!" Hermione growled. She then glanced at Snape. "What?" she snapped.

He immediately burst into laughter so violent it brought tears to his eyes. Hermione looked stunned for a moment, then joined in, collapsing to the floor as her legs gave out. When they finally calmed down enough to be able to speak, Snape queried evenly, "'Hot Latin lover, Miss Granger?'" which was enough to set them both off again.

"Sorry about that," Hermione finally wheezed. "It was the first thing that came to mind to get a rise out of the old bat."

"Shall I appear next time with my hair in a tail and a silk shirt open to the waist?" he inquired, lips quirking, which earned him another hoot of laughter.

"Oh, my. Oh, hell," was apparently all the girl could say in reply. Her hair fell across her face, masking her expression.

"An appropriate, if not exactly enlightening, reply, Miss Granger. But do tell me, what on earth possessed you to say such a thing?"

"Oh, I shouldn't've, I know. I'm sorry. Really." Hermione leaned back against the wall, flipping her hair away from her face. "But God! that bitch is nosy."

"Such language, Miss Granger," Snape reprimanded. She made a face at him.

"She just wanted to know if something rotten had happened to any of us. She'd be quite happy if someone found all of us murdered in our beds. Especially me. She thinks I'm entirely too full of myself, seeing as how my parents have sent me away to public school. And," she added petulantly, "I *hate* being called 'Hermie'."

"I shall make a note of that for future reference," he commented blandly, almost smiling as she began to bristle again. Baiting the girl was far too much fun. More than he'd had in ages.

"Don't you *dare*," she hissed, before recovering herself slightly. "Do you have any *idea* how disgustingly Freudian that name makes me feel? Utterly sick-making."

Being a more than passable Greek scholar (given family traditions), Snape traced the connection in seconds. "Ah. Being, in your mind, related to the word *therm*. I can see how that would be somewhat... undesirable."

"As usual," she replied dryly, "you have a positive genius for understatement. Yes, I do find it 'undesirable' to be called after a block of stone with a head and genitals, regardless of any sacred importance the damned thing may have."

"Well, may as well get up off the damned floor. It's bloody freezing down here." Hermione began hauling herself to her feet before, being still slightly wobbly, she tripped over her own two feet. Within seconds, she found herself in the last place she had ever expected to be: sprawled across her professor with his hands at her waist. "Er, hello." The best she could manage as she stared at him from only a few inches away. He honestly did have a *very* large nose. Perhaps Cyrano wasn't too far off.

"Good morning to you, too, Miss Granger." His eyes had narrowed, but his expression was otherwise unreadable.

"Oh, um, right. Sorry." she said hurriedly, getting off of him as fast as was humanly possible. "I, um, I really ought to go wrap. Presents I bought yesterday, you understand." The girl hurried up the stairs, leaving Snape to lever himself off the ground. Bemused, he watched her disappear. Two more observations to add to the list: Hermione Granger had very intense cinnamon-brown eyes and, unless he had lost all sense of touch, she had definitely developed an excellent set of hips in the past few years. Oh, and if she had followed fashion as slavishly as the rest of her schoolmates, she would be a couple of pounds lighter. Three observations, then.

And the thought that he, too, had best get to work on the approaching holiday.

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A few hours passed before he could think of something to give the child, and a few more after that to magic it up; his Transfiguration skills were a little rusty. By the time Imogene's gift was wrapped and ready for the next day, it was noon. More than a little hungry, he wandered downstairs.

The girl was standing in front of the refrigerator, her cat beside her, when he entered, staring discontentedly at whatever she had found (or not) there. Not having noticed his entrance, she closed the door and opened the freezer. Apparently, whatever was there (or not) was unsatisfactory as well. She closed that door as well and a contemplative expression appeared on her face. Which lasted until she saw him, after which she turned a brilliant shade of red. "Um, well, we don't seem to have much to eat," she said. "A few odds and ends, but nothing to make a meal out of. And we can't..." she broke off, looking at him speculatively.

"I intend to eat sometime today, Miss Granger, not stand here for your inspection," he drawled. "If you have a statement to make or a question to pose, I suggest you do so."

"If I give you some Muggle money," she said slowly, "would you apparate to the local market and buy a few things? I don't know if they're open, of course, but..."

"But it is the only chance I have of getting a decent meal," he finished. "Very well. If I must."

"Well, you *could* apparate to Diagon Alley just as easily and leave me here to starve," she pointed out. Crookshanks rowled and stared at the wizard very hard.

Slightly disconcerted (though he would never admit it) by the cat's glare, he blinked, then remarked cryptically, "Sometimes the best idea is neither the first nor the second," and vanished.

Hermione stared at the spot he had been in for a moment, then turned to Crookshanks. "Is it just me," she asked him, "or is he getting stranger?"

"Meow," replied Crookshanks.

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A quarter of an hour later, Snape reappeared, his arms full of paper-wrapped bundles. "I didn't think to ask what you wanted," he said as he plunked the things down on the table, "so I just ordered. Hope you are not allergic to anything." The tone of his voice belied his words, saying rather that he didn't give a damn whether she could eat the food or not. Still, Hermione knew it was a significant enough sign that he had brought her food at all. After giving him a curious glance, she began to inspect the packages.

"Oh, Lord." The words slipped out as she viewed the bounty spread before her, direct from the kitchens of Hogsmeade's restaurant 'for the older crowd'. "Real, honest-to-God, Griffin's Head food... You, sir, are a life saver!" She sprang at him. Snape instinctively went into a defensive posture, but that did little to stop the arms that snaked around him and gave him a quick, fierce squeeze. Flabbergasted, he could only blink as she continued prattling on, hands busily setting things out. "You have *no* idea how much I've been craving this stuff! I mean, I *know* it's nothing special, but it's loads better than the pubs here. Oh, and authentic Earl Grey. Not that pre-packaged junk they manage here. They say food is a way to a *man's* heart, sir, but this is absolutely lovely." She smiled brilliantly at him as she finished, then proceeded to heap her own plate with potatoes. In doing so, Hermione missed the absolutely stunned expression on Snape's face as he slowly took his own seat.

*I think*, he said to himself dazedly, *I think this is the first time I have ever made anyone honestly, plainly happy.*

*It is a very odd feeling, indeed.*

Comfortably sprawled across the countertop, Crookshanks purred in reply.

## R & R

### Chapter 12 of 19

A little light reading and a chance comment lead Hermione to discover that Snape has nowhere to spend Christmas. But is dragging him home for the holidays really a good idea? (A WIKTT Christmas 2003 challenge fic; AU w/HBP & DH)

#### 12 - R & R

"Oh, God, that was heavenly," Hermione groaned.

"You are far more easily satisfied than I would have believed," Snape commented, watching her with his chin propped on his hand.

"You have no idea what this does for a woman," she retorted.

"Apparently."

The remains of their luncheon feast littered the table, crowned by the chocolate cake about which Hermione was still rhapsodising. It was amazing that men never realised how absolutely incredible chocolate could be. Ah, well. Their loss. The girl closed her eyes, relishing the flavour on her tongue. When her eyes fluttered open again, she was disconcerted to find Snape still watching her. Flushing slightly, she tried to gauge his reaction; her best guess was that he was trying for supercilious and was merely succeeding in being amused. Of course, she could be reading far too much into it. And probably was.

Nervously, Hermione brushed back strands of hair that had escaped her ponytail. "So, um, what would you like to do now?"

"I believe I shall retire to my room and apply myself to my new acquisitions. And you, Miss Granger?"

"Hmm..." She hadn't really thought that far ahead. "I imagine I'll do the same down here. Um, you *do* realise that if my parents aren't back by dinner, we'll have to do this again?"

He nodded, then rose wordlessly and swept out of the room. Hermione blinked at the abrupt departure, then shrugged. "I should be used to it, I guess," she commented to Crookshanks. The cat meowed in reply, then jumped down from the counter. She followed the cat into the front room, where the two of them curled up in the blankets she had left there.

It was the chiming of the mantel clock that aroused her from her literary reverie. Blinking at it, she realised that the daylight was nearly gone and it had grown correspondingly colder, especially since she had absent-mindedly allowed the fire to die down. And, obviously, the central heating was still out. Hermione shivered slightly as she pulled more blankets up and around her; leaving her nest was not a pleasant option at the moment. Still, she would have to unless she wanted to end up in total darkness and icy cold. Before she could work up the will to do it, though, she heard footsteps coming down the stairs.

"Miss Granger, what on earth are you doing?" Snape's voice sounded from the doorway, where she could see his imposing silhouette. "It is bloody well freezing down here, you stupid girl. Don't you have the sense to warm the room?"

She bristled slightly at the insult, but decided to ignore it. "I certainly do, Professor. I simply lost track of the time and the temperature. I was just about to rectify the situation."

A derisive snort sounded richly through the cold air followed by a few muttered words. Several logs flew into the fireplace and burst into flames. "It will take some time for the room to heat *properly*, Miss Granger. And, as I have a vested interest in ensuring that you do not develop frostbite, I would ask that we *both* repair to my chamber; I have had warming charms placed there since I arrived."

"All right," Hermione agreed (with more than a little trepidation). "Just a moment." Wrapping a single blanket firmly around herself, she grabbed a book and scurried over. Snape took a single, snidely eloquent look at her, then led the way upstairs. Continuing to shiver (and seething somewhat at the deliberately slow pace Snape set), Hermione followed.

The bedroom more than made up for the chilly trip upstairs. Hermione revelled in the delicious warmth and the soothing witchlights bobbing overhead, but remained near the door, knowing that Snape would be annoyed if she presumed, even in her own room.

"Well, sit down, girl," he growled, removing his coat to reveal a meticulously tailored black waistcoat and subtly patterned white shirt. Hermione blinked, taking in the clean, sleek lines of the clothing and of the body underneath. "I would much prefer if you did *not* gape at me like a fish sculpture."

"What if I prefer to do so?" she shot back mischievously, recovering from her split-second revelation. "I should hope I am able to do as I please in my own home."

"If that is what you 'please'... and I cannot, for any reason, comprehend why it would be... then you may do so outside of my charms. I have no wish to expend energy on obstinate, irritating girls." At that, he turned and picked up the book he had been reading, then assumed the place he had occupied earlier: laying comfortably on the bed.

"Women," she corrected him.

"I beg your pardon?" Snape gazed down his nose at her, an expression that seemed to have lost its effectiveness.

"Women," Hermione repeated. "Due to my use of the Time Turner, I am over eighteen, which is considered in this society as adult, though rarely given such consideration. Therefore, you should address me as a woman, not a child or a girl. Or may I also refer to you as a 'boy'?"

"I shall call you a woman when you show me that you deserve the appellation, which is something that has yet to occur," Snape retorted. "Now sit down, girl, before I toss you back into cold."

"Such a pleasant man you are," Hermione drawled, never-the-less sitting cross-legged on a corner of the bed, which was more than large enough to accommodate the two of them. Her parents had bought it years ago in the expectation of numbers of giggling girls chatting until the wee hours. Needless to say, they had been disappointed on that score.

Snape harrumphed and pointedly returned his attention to his book. Nothing loath, Hermione did the same.

Time passed, quickly and silently in the upstairs room, the only regular sound being the turn of pages. Eventually, one set of pages slowed and finally stopped. Bemused, Hermione looked over the edges of her own novel and realised that Professor Snape had fallen asleep. She grinned slightly, remembering how she had found him on the window seat downstairs. He must be tired, though, she realised, to have fallen asleep so early on such a quiet day. And more trusting than she would have given him credit for, with her sitting here beside him. *And why not?* her mind told her indignantly. Still, in spite of it, she felt a strong surge of protectiveness, which she realised with icy shock. Disconcerted, she returned to her book, where people and emotions were much more reliable. Immersed in its pages, Hermione didn't realise that she, too, was tired, nor did she notice the overwhelming urge to close her eyes until all she saw was blackness.

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It was full dark and the moon was high when the front door of the Granger house was quietly unlocked. "It's freezing in here!" Robert noted.

"She and Professor Snape must be upstairs, then, to conserve heat," Amelia replied calmly. "I imagine the utilities were knocked out."

"Lights aren't working, Mum," chimed Genie, flicking the switch back and forth.

"Fire's on in the parlour," said Robert as he poked his head in. "Kitchen's still cold, though."

"Genie, why don't you run upstairs and fetch your sister," Amelia suggested, hefting the bags she carried. "I'll see what I can do about getting everyone fed."

"Right, Mum," Genie agreed cheerfully, then pounded upstairs.

Hermione was very comfortably asleep, thank you very much, and warm and cosy. At least, she *was* until a thread of song came weaving its way into her dreams.

"Professor and Mynie, sittin' in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G..."

Hermione's eyes shot open at that, then closed immediately when she realised exactly *where* she was. She and Snape had both gravitated to the centre of the bed. He was still laying on his back, but she was now snuggled up against his side, arm across his chest and head on his shoulder. From the flexing of his arm and fingers, she knew that he, too, was awake.

Genie finished her tune and opened her mouth again, this time to yell. "Mum! Dad!"

For lack of anything better, Hermione buried her face back in Snape's shoulder. "Oh, fuck," she muttered.

A rumble emerged from Snape's chest. "Given the circumstances, Miss Granger, I am not sure if that phrase is particularly apropos or in the most appalling taste."

Sighing, Hermione levered herself up. "And you are amazingly calm," she said, but was cut off from any further comment by the arrival of her parents.

"Hermione Jane Granger!"

AN - It occurred to me, however belatedly, that y'all might want to know the original requirements of the challenge.

WIKTT 2003 Christmas Challenge (by Megami-sama):

"Must take place during Hermione's seventh year around Christmas. Hermione discovers that Snape doesn't really have anyone around to celebrate Christmas with. Include: Hermione invites Snape home (SOMEHOW getting him to agree to come) OR She stays at Hogwarts and celebrate the holiday with him.

MUST INCLUDE:

Someone getting a 'snake' gift (ex. intertwining snake pens, snake boxers, snake locket, actual snake, etc.)

Someone(s) finding Hermione and Snape in bed together

Harry and Ron believing Snape gave Hermione a potion (Harry and Ron don't have to be the someone(s) who finds Herm and Snape in bed)"

## Neither the One, Nor the Other

Chapter 13 of 19

A little light reading and a chance comment lead Hermione to discover that Snape has nowhere to spend Christmas. But is dragging him home for the holidays really a good idea? (A WIKTT Christmas 2003 challenge fic; AU w/HBP & DH)

13 - Neither the One, Nor the Other

Feeling somewhat at a disadvantage, Snape also pulled himself up into a sitting position, studying the Grangers carefully. Robert looked like he had been hit in the face

with a full-grown Kneazle, but Amelia was harder to read. "Downstairs," she said briefly, looking pointedly at her daughter, then turning on her heel and disappearing. Robert, still stunned, shambled after her. A moment later, Miss Granger removed herself from the bed and straightened out her clothing and her hair.

"Why me?" she sighed.

"Why not?" he countered dryly. He watched as she fought her rising temper, giving him a glare.

"Well, if it makes any difference, *sir*," the girl said before shutting the door behind her, "you make a very comfortable pillow."

"That girl seems intent on disconcerting me," he remarked to the now-silent room. This, too, was an extraordinary feeling. Over the years of his miserable existence, he experienced fear, hate, humiliation, sorrow, loneliness... But after a few years with his father, never once had he let his composure slip. All of these things were to be expected. Hermione Granger had a way about her of showing him the unexpected. But then, he reflected ruefully, this time his own body had had an equal share in the situation. He was accustomed to sleeping alone; as the old phrase would have it, his bed had been cold for the past twenty years or more. And he never moved in his sleep. That he had... and not awakened at the touch of Miss Granger... alarmed him.

With a sigh, Snape stood, rubbing the area on his shoulder where he could still feel the pressure of the girl's head. Honestly, he told himself wryly, her mass of hair ought to have been enough to wake him up. He sprawled across the chair that sat in front of the girl's vanity (which, incidentally, had more knick-knacks on it than female fripperies) and glanced at his reflection. Grateful for the silence of Muggle mirrors, he took in the rumpled clothing, the slightly mussed hair, and the rest of his unprepossessing features. What had she said of it? 'A face that calls for respect.' He snorted. Bollocks. 'Respect' was the last thing he had ever garnered from anyone. What had possessed her? For that matter, what had possessed *him*?

A simple knock brought him back to the present and the fact that the door had been left open. "Yes, Miss Granger?" he asked, his voice neutral.

"I just wanted to let you know that dinner will be ready in a half-hour," she said quietly.

"I'll remain here."

She looked at him, puzzled, and asked, "Sir? Is there anything wrong?"

"No."

The look this time was sceptical. He watched her step into the room and close the door behind her. "Are your parents not going to break down the door?" he sneered.

"No," she answered evenly. "They know me well enough to believe me. Especially when I tell the truth."

Her eyes were steady; he was the first to turn away. "Do you have any idea how blessed you are to have such parents?" He stared sightlessly into the mirror, not really expecting an answer.

"Yes." Hermione crossed the room to stand behind him. "I've seen the others' parents, Professor. And while I'm always a bit disappointed that mine will never completely share my world, I do know what a blessing they've been to me." She turned from him to the mirror. "Somehow," she said quietly, "I get the feeling you didn't have the same."

"How perspicacious of you." Snape tried for sarcasm, but his voice had lost its heat. Her expression changed; he couldn't read it and so was surprised when her arms wrapped around his shoulders. Surprised, and then furious.

"Leave me be!" he snarled ferociously, and flung out his arm, turning as he did so. The force behind it was enough to hurl the startled girl across the room so that she ended up at the base of the shelves. "I don't need your pity, Miss Granger."

"I don't pity you," she replied, her voice low, but clear.

"What is it, then? *Sympathy*?" Poison dripped from his words.

She shook her head, then carefully stood. Her eyes were clear, innocent, intent. "You make my heart hurt," Hermione told him.

Her admission, given in that simple, blunt manner, hit him with all the force of a hippogriff to the solar plexus. He stared at her in shock, barely managing to choke out, "I..."

Hermione grinned suddenly, breaking the rising tension between them. "It rather surprised me, too," she confessed, returning to sit on the vanity table beside him. "I never even considered *liking* you, let alone..." She broke off suddenly, looking thoughtful.

"You ought to finish your sentences, Miss Granger," he prompted, oddly intent on what she had to say.

She shot him an amused glance for his choice of words. "I'm not sure," she answered slowly. "It's... difficult to be specific right now. All I can really say is that over the past week or so you've become important to me; I just don't know *how* yet."

A small breath escaped him, a mere shadow of his customary snort. "And am I meant to *reply* to that equivocal statement?" he queried.

"You are quite capable of sending me on my way," she said tartly, yet refusing to look directly at him.

"I do not know," he replied pensively, "that I will." Her eyes flew to his, dark amber circled by white. A hand reached out to him, halted, then clasped his left hand. He jerked slightly... a reflex from years of concealing the Dark Mark... but her hand merely tightened. He blinked at it, conscious of the feeling of warmth, of the texture of skin.

"I would be honoured," Hermione whispered, "to... at least... call you 'friend.'" She watched for a reaction, but long moments passed with neither sound nor movement. Her resolve began to waver in spite of herself. *He's worth it*, she told herself fiercely, repeating it in her mind. *Don't let him shut you out!*

"I do not believe," Severus said, finally, "I know what a 'friend' is. Or how to be one."

Hermione's smile was encouraging as she slipped off the vanity to kneel in front of him, catching his eye. "Then we figure out what we are together," she told him firmly. "One thing, though: you won't be able to get rid of me now."

A crooked smile crossed his face. "I imagine only time will tell me whether I should be pleased, afraid, or annoyed."

"Probably all three," she said jestingly. "Harry and Ron certainly seem to cover the spectrum. But then, they've also put up with me for years."

"So have I," Snape interjected darkly.

"So I wasn't born perfect." She shrugged, then relaxed so that she could lean against his leg. Once again, she felt that twitch, which seemed to be a reflex action on his part. "I'm a very tactile person," she informed him. "You'll have to get used to it." That he was that unused to contact struck another chord in her heart. The pieces of the puzzle were coming together and it was a picture of a very lonely man. Solitude she could understand. Total isolation was another matter altogether...

"Nobody," he said slowly, awkwardly, "has been this close to me in over thirty years."

"I can't make up for thirty years," her voice sounded slightly muffled, "but I can bloody well try. If you'll let me."

"I have no doubt that I should not, but, Medea help me, I think I will."

"Thank you." *You may not need me, Hermione thought, but you need someone. And I'll be damned if I let you chase me away now.*

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They remained like that for some time, listening to the silence. Severus seemed to slowly become more accustomed to her, eventually relaxing entirely. His hand, still covered with her own, turned and though his grip was tentative, his thumb moved back and forth across her knuckles. It was an oddly soothing sensation for both of them.

Hermione glanced at the clock. "We should go down for dinner."

"Yes." He withdrew his hand from hers and she straightened. "I doubt your parents would be otherwise pleased."

"You have a positive gift for understatement, sir."

"And you have one for stating the obvious, Miss Granger."

"I think you could call me Hermione now. Or..." she paused, blushing slightly. "You could call me Mynie."

"Hermione... Mynie..." He rolled the names on his tongue, as if tasting them like wine. He looked amused, but there was a warmth to it she hadn't seen before. He made no similar offer to her, but she knew better than to rush him. Instead, he offered her his arm and escorted her down to dinner.

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Dinner was a somewhat stilted affair. Genie teased them in between her chatter about her stay at Chrissie's house. Amelia looked knowing and quietly spoke of her and Robert's situation, listening to her daughter's (edited) version in return. Robert still seemed a bit shell-shocked and said almost nothing.

After dinner was much easier. The tree's candles were lit (real ones, in holders that had belonged to Amelia's grandmother) and Christmas carols were sung. To Severus's relief, they stayed away from the raucous, confusion-inducing modern carols, preferring instead the older, softer melodies. Not that he knew any of them anyway.

"Follow me on this one," Hermione ordered him (albeit softly). "It's a round; I think you'll appreciate it." She pitched her voice lower, to a note he could reach with his own baritone, then skipped up an octave. "Ready?" she asked. "Listen to me the first time through, then join in." He nodded.

Amelia watched the pair from her vantage point in her husband's arms. The candlelight glowed off of her daughter's wealth of hair, the light drunken in by the older man's dark strands. After the first round, he sung easily and with heartfelt insistence as he recognised the words.

*Dona nobis pacem.*

Give us peace.

## Christmas Wine

### Chapter 14 of 19

A little light reading and a chance comment lead Hermione to discover that Snape has nowhere to spend Christmas. But is dragging him home for the holidays really a good idea? (A WIKTT Christmas 2003 challenge fic; AU w/HBP & DH)

AN: Warning: Serious AU alert. This was written long before we knew anything of Snape's past/family situation, so his history from here on out is of my own pure brain. Also, Hermione's assessment of Snape is based partially on the PoA movie; you'll know which scene when it comes up.

#### 14 - Christmas Wine

Hermione's feet were silent as she crept down the stairs; it was barely dawn and she didn't want to wake anyone. She had always risen early on Christmas mornings, filled with the excitement of the day to come, but had learned that her parents, at least, did not appreciate five am wake-up calls. So she simply enjoyed the hushed, expectant atmosphere by herself.

To her startlement, she realised as soon as she entered the parlour that solitude would not be a part of her morning this year. Her professor was at the window again this morning, this time staring out at the snow-covered lawn.

"Good morning, sir," she said quietly. He tensed at the sound of her voice, but did not turn around. "Happy Christmas." She made her way carefully across the room, avoiding the piles of gifts as she took a place on the windowseat beside him.

"You have arisen early today," he remarked.

"You are up late," she countered gently, well aware that he would not be here unless he had not been to bed in the first place.

"Christmas morning is not something I generally care to wake up to," he answered dryly.

"I'll try not to be annoyingly cheerful, then." Hermione matched his dryness. "I make no promises about Genie, though, and I warn you: it will be soon and terrible. Perhaps you should escape now before she gets you."

"If you wish." Snape half-rose before Hermione grabbed his arm.

"That's not what I meant and you know it!" she hissed. "Now sit down, you silly, obstinate man." He glared at her, but allowed her to guide him back to his seat. She sighed as she dropped back onto the windowseat. "I meant what I said last night," she reminded him quietly.

"I don't belong here," he said simply.

"You do if you want to." This wasn't a time for fancy words. "Do you?" He merely shrugged in reply and they lapsed into silence. After long moments, Hermione

commented, "It's beautiful out there."

"It is cold and wet out there," Snape corrected.

To his surprise, she laughed. "No one would ever accuse *you* of being romantic," she teased.

"Hardly," he drawled. "Not even my mother would have accused me of that one. I suppose it was not in her list of perfections."

Hermione saw her opening and pounced. "What was she like, your mother?"

Snape raised an eyebrow at her. "I imagine you wonder what sort of person could spawn something like me?" At her scowl, he shrugged and became pensive, eyes drifting to gaze at the emptiness beyond the window. "She was... beautiful," he said finally, "but fragile. Rather like a spun-sugar dancer. And as damnably easy to break." Hermione said nothing. "You're nothing like her, you know," he added maliciously.

She realised he was trying to bait her, distract her, so she didn't feel insulted. Besides, why deny the truth? "I shouldn't think so," she replied idly. "I'm the good, old-fashioned farmer's daughter, after all. Strong like ox, stubborn like mule. And with the corresponding features. Stocky, with the snub nose and stubborn chin..." She raised the latter. "I'm surprised, really, that I didn't get the freckles and cow eyes to go along with everything else."

Hermione never realised that lifting her chin had brought another feature into prominence. And if she had, she would never have thought it of interest to Professor Snape. So it came as a shock when he took advantage of their proximity and lowered his lips to hers.

Warmth. Like spiced wine: sweet, heady, comforting, with a touch of something more... promising. It swept around and through both of them, creating a realm entirely divorced from everything they knew.

But a slight intrusion, no more than the sound of Crookshanks leaping onto the sofa, was enough to pour cold water on this illusion. Snape pulled away instantly, as though burned. Hermione blinked owlishly at the man who had just kissed her, her fingers tentatively exploring her still-sensitive lips. She watched Sna... Severus... focus on her with an expression that was indecipherable, before he practically threw himself to his feet and rushed out the door. Still in shock, she lost valuable moments, only shaking herself out of her stupor and into a temper when she heard his door open and close. She then began to swear, fluently and with great inventiveness, when she heard the lock slide home. *Two bloody steps forward, three fucking steps back. Well, damned if I'll let him get away with it.* Determined, she got to her feet and quietly stalked after him.

Alohomora wasn't an option, but it didn't make a bit of difference; it was her room, after all, and she knew where the spare key was. And she'd also be damned if she knocked. With *some* consideration for the others still sleeping, she yanked the door open, then shut it softly. The scene that met her eyes pissed her off even more.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" she hissed. His travelling case was centred on the bed, and clothes were rapidly disappearing into it.

"I should think that was obvious, Miss Granger, even to you."

"Ah, I see. Running away, are we?" Hermione's voice was sickly sweet. "The Big Bad Wolf's kissed a girl and turned into a chicken?"

"Hardly." Though the words were said in his customary drawl, a slight flush appeared on his cheeks. "What just happened was entirely inappropriate. Removing myself from your home is simply a matter of prudence."

"Inappropriate?" she snorted. "Tell me, what was so inappropriate? You can't tell me it's our difference in ages; many wizarding couples have up to *fifty years* in age difference. A mere twenty-odd is hardly an obstacle. Nor can you tell me that it's unethical for a student-teacher relationship to form. I've read the school rules, *Professor*. As long as the couple is open and aboveboard and complies with a few minor regulations, Hogwarts is perfectly accepting of such. In fact, no fewer than twenty couples have resulted in the last century. Besides which, we haven't even decided if *one bloody kiss* is going to result in *any* sort of relationship." She finished with a snap and glared at him, daring him to say something.

He was turned away from her, but she could see his shoulders rise and fall as he took several deep breaths, attempting to control whatever emotion she had stirred.

"I'm not good enough for you," he began. "The things I've done... "

"Bullshit," she interjected rudely. "If anyone has a high opinion of you, it's yourself. I've watched you for nearly seven years, Snape; that attempt won't wash. The only problem *you* have with your self-opinion is that you've been trying desperately for someone to share it. Well. You've got what you wanted. Someone to recognise your talents and gifts and applaud you for them. Huzzah. Now try again. Come on. Or is one little Gryffindor too much for you to handle?"

She continued, sniping at any little thing she could think of, trying to find something that would make him tell her the truth. Finally, his emotions got the better of him. His fist slammed down on the desk with such force that it was surprising the wood didn't crack. "*I will not become my father*," he hissed. He refused to look at her.

"That's a rather enigmatic statement," Hermione said carefully. "One that I think requires some elucidation if you want me to accept it." Behind the screen of hair, she could just barely make out thinned lips and pinched nostrils. She waited.

"My mother was barely sixteen," he said eventually, speaking more to the wall than to her. "My father forty-two when he married her. He took advantage of her youth, her innocence, her naïveté in every possible way he could think of. She was dead by age twenty-three. And I will be damned if I do the same."

There was silence for a long moment before Hermione moved carefully to sit on the bed in front of him. She took his hand in hers; he watched her emotionlessly. "Severus." He looked away. "Severus," she repeated more firmly. "You are not your father."

"I know what I am capable of."

"So do I, Severus," she reminded him. "I am not an innocent, especially not in that respect. I know what you are capable of. But I also know that you would die for me, if need be."

"What?" He looked at her incredulously.

"Third year. The night Professor Lupin changed. You put yourself in front of us, Professor. You didn't have your wand; there wasn't anything you could have done. But it was your first reaction. Not to run or to fight, but to protect."

"You were... are... a student. It was my job," he replied harshly.

"And has that changed?" she asked sensibly. "I'm still a student. You're still trying to protect me." She lifted herself onto her knees on the bed, bringing her face almost level with his. "Would that change because I care about you? Would that change... because you care about me?" Hermione shook her head. "I can't believe that. I can't believe that the man I know... the man I've come to know... would change so completely."

"You *don't* know me, Hermione."

"All I'm asking for is the chance to!" she protested. A frustrated sigh escaped her. "Look, don't think I don't appreciate what you're trying to do, but this is the twentieth century, not the tenth. I don't need some damned chivalrous knight to protect me and I sure as hell am *not* going to settle for some fucked up version of courtly love just

because you're too damned scared to take the risk!"

A tiny smile curled the corners of his lips. "I am too old for this rigmarole, Hermione Granger."

"You're never too old for *anything* until you're dead," she shot back.

"That may be taken care of before long," he remarked, suddenly sombre.

"I know," Hermione said calmly, lifting her hand to cup his cheek. "There are no guarantees for either of us. But no matter what happens, I want memories, not regrets, Severus."

Severus said nothing, but mirrored her own gesture. He then pulled her close; promises don't always require words.

## Light and Shadows

### Chapter 15 of 19

A little light reading and a chance comment lead Hermione to discover that Snape has nowhere to spend Christmas. But is dragging him home for the holidays really a good idea? (A WIKTT Christmas 2003 challenge fic; AU w/HBP & DH)

AN - More AU as we further delve into Snape's past and motivations; there's also non-explicit mentions of abuse/rape. There's a painting mentioned in this chapter; the image for it is found [here](#). And thanks to everyone who's reviewed so far. I'm really pleased you're enjoying this.

### 15 - Light and Shadows

Some little time later, the two found themselves staring at each other in bemusement, Hermione seated at the head of the bed, Severus at the foot.

"You do realise," Severus remarked suddenly, his voice blending with rather than breaking the silence, "that this is a dangerous experiment that you are insisting upon. I am selfish, self-centred, cynical and callous. I make no promises. And do not think you can change me."

"Don't be absurd," she snapped back. "And give me credit for some sense, will you? I know I can't change you. Nor do I want to. Though I imagine we'll end up changing each other."

"Into what?" His mouth quirked in a sardonic twist.

She laughed. "No guarantees on that one. I hate to think of what might happen when... not 'if', *when*... we both lose our tempers."

"If you promise not to turn me into something disgustingly cute and fluffy, I promise not to turn you into a cat." Hermione saw the dark glitter of amusement in his eyes.

"I'll never live that down, will I?" she moaned. "How did you know?"

"That sort of stunt, particularly from a second-year at a time when anything unusual was being noted? Give us credit for some sense, will you?" An eyebrow lifted as he threw her words back at her.

"Well, if it's mutual..." Hermione became pensive suddenly, her gaze turning slightly inward. "You say you make no promises. I think," she said slowly, "that there are only two I would ask you for. And give. The first is that you try, honestly try, to make this... whatever it turns out to be... work. Stop pushing me away and try letting me in." He nodded in consideration, but made no reply. "The second is that you be honest with me." She raised a hand to forestall his retort. "I'm not saying that I want you to tell me everything; I know there are things you can't or won't tell me. There are things I wouldn't tell you, either. But I'd rather you tell me that than have you lie to me."

He said thoughtfully. "It is reasonable. If for no other reason than that we shall have to trust each other in what is to come. Very well. I agree."

"I, too," she added quietly. "And I do trust you. Severus. With everything." She crawled across the bed to clasp his hand in her own, trying to somehow communicate her earnest sincerity.

"You will end up regretting it," he muttered.

She chuckled. "Oh, I imagine I will... any number of times. But I think what we can build will be worth it. *You're* worth it. I'd regret it more if I didn't."

He gazed at her incredulously. "How in the hell did this happen, Granger?"

She shrugged and her mouth twisted into a lopsided grin. "I have no idea. I imagine if we knew, it wouldn't have happened."

"It was probably Albus," Snape concluded gloomily. "The old loon is still trying to run my life. Though I doubt even he could have predicted the limit to which his machinations would take us."

"We could shock him by snogging in the Great Hall," Hermione suggested, "or in the middle of Potions."

"I beg you pardon," he protested stiffly. "I have not, do not, and will never 'snog'. Besides, if we snogged in Potions, I'd never get the little bastards back in order. And Albus would probably just twinkle at us in that damned irritating way."

"You have a point," she admitted. "Hmm... Well, if we can't think of anything else, I could give you a black eye and you could give me a limp and we'd snarl and sneer at each other from the train to the school."

Severus smirked. "You may have something there."

"And then we could snog in the middle of the Great Hall. Preferably over the staff table."

A rich chuckle escaped the Potions Master. "The plan has potential, but I doubt we should like to deal with the number of botched Obliviates that would be sure to follow."

Hermione grinned and shrugged. "It could only improve their intelligence. Besides, as I said, I'm a very tactile person. They'll have to get used to it sooner or later."

"I am not so demonstrative, Hermione," he said warningly.

"I know. And I won't push... well, I will push; it's part of my nature... but I won't embarrass you like that in public." She shifted from her knees to insinuate herself under his arm, leaning against his chest. He stiffened immediately, then, ever so slowly, relaxed. "And some things are better in private, anyway," she murmured, gathering comfort from his warm embrace, learning the feel of muscle and bone as he shifted. For once, she appreciated the silence.

Several long moments passed. "We should go downstairs," Severus remarked quietly.

"Mm?" Hermione felt half asleep, and the rumble of Severus' voice only served to create warm ripples down her spine. She became more alert, however, once he repeated his statement and the meaning of it sunk in. "I suppose so," she agreed reluctantly, slipping out of his hold and to the floor. "There were enough problems yesterday; we shouldn't exacerbate the situation. They like you, though." Hermione stretched upwards, yawning, so much like a cat that Severus half-expected to see a tail. "They'll come around eventually."

"Hm, yes, perhaps," he demurred, falling silent as they crept out of the room and down the stairs.

They separated once they reached the parlour, which, thankfully, was still empty and silent. Hermione gave him a soft kiss on his cheek before going to light the fireplace and then the tree's candles. Bemused, Severus drifted to the sofa, leaning against the back and watching Hermione move easily through the room. Objectively, he knew she wasn't beautiful. He could categorise her faults meticulously (and had done so on more than one occasion): over-tall, solidly built and somewhat overweight (but, to be fair, so would he be, save that he took after his father; both were skinny as rails), unruly hair that proved no more manageable now that she had grown it down to her waist. When *had* she done that? He had never noticed before. No, ordinarily he would have called her plain, at best. But in this still room, in the dead silence of early morning darkness, she seemed transfigured. The candlelight flickered golden in the ringlets of hair that framed her face and sparkled in her eyes, which smiled at him whenever she glanced his way. Her skin glowed warmly, emerging comfortingly from the shadows. Her hands were surprisingly long and delicate, gracing whatever she touched. At this moment, Severus desired that he had been given some of the talent of an artist, that he could convey the warmth, the vitality, the strength... the true beauty of this woman-child with all the promise of the woman she could become. She called to mind the Madonna of a portrait by Batoni that hung in the family manor: strong, capable... and with a heart to encompass the world. It amazed him that somehow, by some strange human alchemy, it had managed to encompass *him*.

As Hermione worked, she continued to glance at Severus, acutely aware of his concentration upon her. Though she smiled at him... and meant every bit of it... behind it she wondered what such intensity meant and how she was supposed to feel. Should she be worried he was measuring against some standard she could never meet? Or should she feel desirable? Frightened? Loved? His features were well-trained; they gave absolutely nothing away and exuded all the warmth of a basalt statue.

And, dammit, she loved him for it. He would, she knew, always be a challenge for her. She could spend decades, centuries, with him, learning every nuance of voice and expression and still never know what was going on in his mind. But while this thrilled her, it also terrified her. She had spent nearly seven years with boys she could read like a book. Would she have any idea how to deal with one who was not only locked shut but of a complexity she could only begin to imagine? What sort of mistakes would she make? How many could she make before he again despised her as a "mere child" not worth his time?

She started when she felt a large hand cup her cheek. "You are about to gnaw a hole in your lip," Severus commented with a hint of amusement. Hermione flushed, realising that she had been biting her lip, a habit of hers when she was nervous or uncertain. She hesitantly glanced up at him, then stared blankly at the hint of warmth in his eyes. Severus, in turn, found himself startled by the uncertainty in her eyes... not something he had expected from a girl who had, not a quarter of an hour since, effectively bullied him into a relationship. He was even more surprised when he realised he didn't like seeing her like this.

"What are you?" he muttered harshly. "What are you that you make me consider actions I swore I would never commit?"

"Just a girl," she whispered back, barely loud enough for him to hear. She couldn't hear herself over the beating of her heart.

"Just a girl..." A moment in which he paused, his hand moving to tuck unruly curls behind her ears. "I think not. I have become acquainted with many girls... and many women... over the years. Not one of them has come close to testing my resolve. Few have ever attempted to. If you were beautiful, I should think you were a creature from Hell sent to torment me. But you are so frighteningly real, Hermione. And I cannot understand it... or you... or me."

Hermione was somewhat nonplussed at the latter half of his statement, but quickly passed over it, knowing that Snape would never flatter her; the most she would receive was just... and very hard-earned!... praise. "I don't understand it myself, sir," she told him, hesitantly mirroring his gesture. "I won't pretend I do. Or can. But what I have learned from... the past few years is that love, whatever kind it may be, must be held in both hands and cherished for as long as one can. And I love you. It fills my heart so full that it scares me, too." She longed to step closer to him, to embrace him fully, but she felt that it was impossible. He needed to see her, hear her. She needed to be fully honest with him... and with herself... if she was to break down the barriers... both his and her own... between them. To gain his trust and to let him know that he had hers. "It scares me to think I might lose you. Not that you'll die... though I know that's a possibility for both of us... but that you'll turn from me. Look at me and wonder why you thought me worthwhile in the first place. It scares me that I feel so much, so quickly. I never thought you... anyone... could touch my heart this way. It scares me to think of what happens now. But I love you. I believe in you. And I won't run away from that."

The dark man turned and walked towards the fire, his eyes glittering in its light. "No one," he began, then took a deep breath. "No one has said those words to me since my mother died. I did not think to hear them, much less believe them. I don't know what to do with them Hermione. Do I love you? Would I know if I did?" He gave a short, unhappy laugh. "I don't even know if I'm deluding myself. I don't know what to do in either case. Gods! I am an old fool to even consider such things after all these years just because some chit of a girl says she loves me. That you say it makes me more of a bastard to consider accepting it, to consider..."

"Consider what, Severus?" she asked softly, trying to hold back tears, seeing him jerk as she said his name. "What spectre haunts you so horribly?" What he had said gave her hints, but she needed to hear it from him, so that there would be no misunderstandings.

"I should have thought you knew," he spat bitterly. "I should have thought Potter shared all of his adventures with his gang, laughing over what he saw when he invaded his hated professor's mind."

Though he did not watch her, she shook her head. "He never mentioned anything of that sort. When did he... *how* could he...?" Her mind raced, putting together random facts in the way that made her the brightest witch of her time. "The Occlumency lessons..." she murmured. "He was acting so strangely at the time, I never noticed... but something happened just before he stopped taking those lessons with you."

"I placed... certain memories... in a Pensieve during those lessons, Miss Granger," he explained, his voice sounding tired and, for the first time, old. "Potter's talent was so bloody unpredictable; I did not want my mind rummaged through like a child looking for a toy. It was bad enough dealing with the brat in my surface thoughts."

"Some of those memories were of my childhood and they would have given a very clear picture of my experience of 'family life'." He sounded so bitter that Hermione fought to keep her distance; he would not thank her for her sympathy now. "I did not know the details then; other relatives and my mother's friends informed me of them later."

Severus walked over to the window, gazing out at the lightening landscape. "I told you she was beautiful, my mother. She was the most beautiful witch of her generation. She was sweet, gentle, caring. As you can see, I inherited little from her. When my father was forty, my grandfather died, leaving him to inherit the family estate. It isn't much... a moth-eaten manor and just enough land to build it on... but Snapes are cursed with an overabundance of self-importance. He decided it was time to get a wife and an heir. He decided beautiful and submissive were what he wanted. And what he wanted, he got."

"The bastard could ooze charm when he wanted. He became a guest at Hogwarts, courting my mother during the day, attempting to seduce her at night. She wanted to finish school, but pregnancy soon put an end to that idea, just as he'd planned. She quit Hogwarts and married him. He always made her feel that later, that she was inferior to him for not completing the basic wizards' education. That she was silly and stupid and incapable. And weak. She believed him."



"I was born... a scrawny, pathetic thing by all accounts. He had treated her like crystal until then. But with an heir, who cared what condition a wife was in? Her body was exhausted from the pregnancy; he didn't care. No more than a wife's *duty* to attend to her husband's *needs*. And what he *needed* was a punch bag, a slave, and a rape victim. It was more exciting that way, it seems. When I was a child..." He trailed off, leaning his forehead against the cold glass.

"He never cared if I heard," he continued tightly, "though Mother would order me out of the room. But I could never block out the sounds. The more she cried, the more she screamed, the more excited he became. I didn't fully realise what happened until I was older, you understand. It became quite clear with the first Dark Revel I attended. When I heard those sounds again... I realised what those sounds had been, what my father had done. And what I was doing. He broke my mother, Hermione. He broke her spirit, he broke her body. One of the few truly beautiful people in this world, the only person who ever did... ever could... love me, and he killed her before I was old enough, skilled enough to protect her. I swore then that I would never be weak like that again. I poured my energies into learning the spells that would keep my father away from me. That would protect me and anyone else I cared to shield. I didn't care whether I delved into Dark or Light magic.

"Joining Voldemort seemed like the best way to continue the course I had chosen. He offered power and skill, the ability to be the one to inflict pain rather than receive it. I was a fool, consumed by a warped vision of my original goal. From my years at Hogwarts, I developed a burning hatred against those who hurt and humiliated me." His lips stretched in a grim smile. "You may have notice I find it difficult to forgive and impossible to forget. I remember every jibe, every hex that was ever pointed in my direction. I no longer wanted to preserve, I wanted to destroy. And I did. Without discrimination, without remorse. There is blood on my hands, Hermione. If you wish to accept me, you must accept that as well. Not only the blood from being a Death Eater, but the blood of those who were my friends, who called me comrade, from being a traitor."

He straightened suddenly. "But that is I burden I can shoulder. What I could not stomach was the realisation that I had become exactly what I swore I would never become. That I was just as capable and willing to inflict pain, to destroy that which is beautiful in the name of my own vanity. I could see my mother's body before my eyes, shattered and bleeding on the carpet where she died. And I saw my own face on her tormentor. I knew then that my father's blood ran strong through my veins and determined that I would not let it continue. I would not continue the cycle of violence and hatred. I would not allow these traits to pass to the next generation. And I would never put myself in a situation which would tempt me to revert to the monster I know is inside me."

Another bitter laugh escaped him. "Now do you comprehend what I face, what *I am*, Hermione Granger?"

## Whom Do You See With Those Eyes?

Chapter 16 of 19

A little light reading and a chance comment lead Hermione to discover that Snape has nowhere to spend Christmas. But is dragging him home for the holidays really a good idea? (A WIKTT Christmas 2003 challenge fic; AU w/HBP & DH)

### 16 - Whom Do You See With Those Eyes?

"I wouldn't insult you by I saying I do," Hermione replied quietly, moving to sit on the windowseat. "I don't think I ever could." She crossed her hands uselessly in her lap and stared at them. "The pain... the rage... the guilt... Nothing I've experienced could give me more than the faintest glimpse of what you've been through. All I can do is feel anger at my own helplessness."

"Why should *you* feel so?" he asked, watching her with expressionless eyes.

"Because I wasn't there. Because I *couldn't* be there," the girl answered tightly. "When you needed someone the most, when 'the smartest witch of her age' could have been of some fucking *use*, I wasn't even born! There's nothing I can do! I can't even pick up a damned Time-Turner and... All I can do is sit here, with magic practically sizzling in my veins, and do *nothing*." Her hands twitched and stilled, as if to prove her point. "If only... Damn." Hermione shifted her gaze to the window, but Severus could see its strangeness in the candlelight. He knelt before her, lifting a hesitant hand to cup her cheek and turn her face towards his. The girl looked at him and the tears in her eyes began to spill over. "Oh, damn," she choked out just as she began to cry in earnest.

"Hermione..." Severus watched, helpless, unsure how one was supposed to handle crying women. How he was supposed to handle this one crying woman, who was crying because of him. Perhaps it isn't surprising that his reaction ended up being classic Snape. "Oh, do stop blubbering, you silly child," he grumbled, turning away. "I wouldn't have wanted you there, anyway." It was enough to make Hermione blink owlishly at him, then began to giggle.

"Always a *mot juste*." She smiled at him, though it was still a little watery. "Thank you, Severus," she said, following it with an embrace. "You're right," her voice was warm and resonant next to his ear. "It doesn't do much good to 'blubber' about what can't be helped. But," and here she held him even more tightly, "it still hurts to think of how you've been hurt. As much as I love the man before me, I can't help but mourn the Severus who was lost. The Severus who could have been such a happy... mind, I didn't say energetic or outgoing..." she added quickly and he could almost hear her grin, "such a happy child. What you ought to have been with love and a home."

"It was never a possibility, Hermione, he replied. "We are either blessed or damned by our circumstances, which are beyond our control. The years have taught me that; despite anything we do, we are constantly overmastered. No amount of power... of any kind... can prevent that. Perhaps wizardry is not so much a blessing as a curse, that, given powers above those of Muggles, we come to see ourselves as gods."

He felt her head give a quick, denying shake. "Humanity, the universe, doesn't change, Severus. Wizards have magic, Muggles have science. There is little difference, in the end, between the Killing Curse and a pistol, in whether a man decides to use Dark Magic or fists on the helpless. Muggles have no less of an ability to consider themselves gods merely because they have the power to destroy.

"We may be..." the girl's words took on a hesitant, thoughtful character, "circumscribed... by our situations, Severus, but we are not defined by them. Everyone has a choice: to fall under their weight or to rise above them. You have risen above them. You may be your father's son, but you are *not* your father. You are Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master and member of the Order of the Phoenix. And you have my respect because of it."

He broke away from her, regarding her soberly. Her face was red and splotchy from crying, but her eyes shone with emotion. "I wonder," he said, "who you see when you look at me. I do not recognize the man you see with those eyes."

She smiled, the genuine warmth still startling, confusing, frightening. "I think you will, one day," she told him, reaching to take his hand in her own, her fingertips caressing the skin, then holding it fast. "In the meantime, you will have to trust that the man I see is truly there."

Severus turned to the window. "The sky is becoming lighter," he commented.

"Yes," Hermione agreed, standing beside him. "The sun is about to rise."

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Knowing her family's habits, Hermione retired quickly into the washroom to bathe her face, removing the tell-tale signs of a good cry. By the time the rest of her family had awakened, she was comfortably settled with a blanket, a book and Crookshanks in an oversized easy chair. Severus had returned to the window, though his expression had gone from grim to merely thoughtful. The expression was not to remain in the face of Genie's assault. The child was armed with the disgustingly energetic enthusiasm of the young at Christmas and she was quite ready to tear into every package under the tree, whether it bore her name or not. The elder Grangers possessed a quieter, more bearable cheer as they settled into their own chairs and began the opening. As many are familiar with such holiday orgies, we shall focus on a few specific instances only.

Perhaps unsurprising were Hermione's and Snape's gifts to one another. The former received an entire crate of parchment, no piece of which was more than three feet long. "So that you might be encouraged to actually *follow* assignment guidelines," Snape remarked dryly. Hermione, in turn, replied that such a gift only meant that he would have to keep track of more rolls. "It is your responsibility, Miss Granger, if your assignment is too unwieldy to be properly attended to," he told her in a final tone. Hermione privately resolved (with, it must be confessed, rather Snape-ish glee) to introduce him to the wonders of staples.

Severus himself was the recipient of a gross of red Sharpies. "To spare the population of birds that have to supply the quills for your grading pens," Hermione told him impishly. He raised an eyebrow, but said little after testing them, the merest hint of a wolfish grin attesting to his satisfaction with the thick red lines.

Hermione's mother had taken Snape's measure over the past week and had purchased gifts accordingly. He blinked as he removed the wrappings. "They're films. Muggle moving pictures," Amelia explained, "I know you don't have video players in the wizard world, but I imagine you and Hermione can sort something out between you. At the least, you can view them while you are here."

"There are synopses of the stories on the back of the boxes," Hermione added, sounding subdued. Snape did not realize why until he read them, summaries for two films called "Schindler's List" and "La Vita e Bella."

Genie was, of course, the most enthusiastic of the group; her wrappings flew far and wide, landing everywhere (which was the reason everyone checked to make sure the candles were out before Genie reached the tree). She cocked her head at one particular present, wrapped in plain, dark green paper and labeled in a spiky hand. "Oh! This must be yours, Professor!" She tore into the package with the ferocity of a half-starved hippogriff and remained unfazed by the well-sealed box inside, which didn't last much longer than the paper had.

"Oh!!" Genie's eyes widened until they threatened to escape entirely. "... oh!" A large plush snake slithered out of the box winding around her forearm, tongue flickering. It was patterned in the same colours as Snape's own Agrippina, though smaller at four feet instead of Agrippina's six. It bumped noses with Genie in what was obviously a serpentine kiss and she giggled at the fuzzy feel.

"I assumed other Muggles would think it mechanical," Snape explained awkwardly, "and there would be no problem in that respect. I saw several such items in the store Hermione took me to." This statement caused raised eyebrows to be directed the girl in question, who shrugged as she cuddled Crookshanks on her lap.

"It's a pretty amazing piece of enchantment, Professor," she remarked.

He nodded in recognition of her comment. "In addition to the animation," he added in a low voice, "the toy has been imbued with a number of wards and defensive spells keyed to your daughter. Too little attention has been paid to protecting the families of the Muggle-born."

Amelia smiled at him, her eyes glistening suspiciously, while her husband thanked him quietly. The slightly somber moment made it all the more startling to Severus when Genie's attention finally turned away from her new toy and back to the giver. When she leapt on him, her arms practically choking him in her ferocity, he never knew what hit him.

"Thank you, Professor Snape! Thank you thank you thank you thank you!!" She let go with the same suddenness and beamed at him.

Snape could only blink for a moment, superbly conscious of the grin Hermione was hiding behind her hand and the blood that wanted to rush to his face. "You are quite welcome, Miss Imogene," he managed to reply in a reasonably even tone. Did that child ever turn *off* that abominable level of energy? He should probably be grateful there was only one witch in the Granger family; he shuddered to think of having to deal with two of them at Hogwarts. Imogene would probably have the entire place in chaos within days. As it was, he was quite grateful enough when she disappeared upstairs to "phone her friends."

The rest of the day was surprisingly... and blessedly... quiet. There were no drunken revels to be forced into, no house elves singing "Rudolph the Bread-Nosed Reindeer" off-key outside his door, no eye-smarting decorations. There were the traditional crackers, but overall, it seemed a small price to pay for a Christmas dinner that did not include a dozen miniature wizards on sugar highs or Albus twinkling at him. The holiday in the Granger house shone with a quiet joy that was far more convincing than any of the overblown festivities he had been forced to attend in his lifetime. And perhaps it was even contagious.

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It seemed to Hermione that her own Christmas was spent watching Snape, hoping he was... content, at least, if not happy. Comfortable, maybe. She kept glancing at him to make sure that Genie's overwhelming cheerfulness wasn't irritating him, that the festivities didn't make him feel left out or trapped somewhere he didn't want to be. It made her edgy and annoyed with herself and irritated at how pleased she felt that he seemed to be... content.

Still, she couldn't deny that his good spirits made her happy.

"Mynie." Her mother's quiet voice cut through her introspection. "Mynie, it's time for the dishes." Hermione rose automatically, before she remembered what that phrase meant in 'mother-speak'. It meant, 'We need to have a chat.' Oh, dear.

"It would seem your professor had a nice time today," Amelia commented idly. "Do you believe so?"

"Prevarication is not your style, Mother," Hermione reminded her as she hauled out containers to put the leftovers in.

"True." The older woman tested the temperature of the water. It was true they had a dishwasher, but Amelia rather enjoyed the chore. It kept her hands busy and the men out of the kitchen. "It's a rather touchy subject, dear, and I was trying to work out the best way to handle it. But you've always been a direct soul. I'd like to know how things stand between you and that professor of yours. And don't ask me what I mean, child."

Hermione's mouth opened and closed several times as she searched for an appropriate answer. Her hands continued with their work until she found... something... to say. "I don't know, Mum," she confessed. "I think I've fallen in love with him. And he hasn't thrown me out on my ear, yet."

"I see." A moment of silence. "What does your school have to say about such... situations?"

"Well, they're not against them." She'd finished emptying platters and had moved on to lids. "But they don't allow just anything, either. A student must be at least in sixth year. The... couple must be open and aboveboard... with the Headmaster and other faculty, at least. No sexual intercourse until after the student graduates. I think there is some magical means of enforcing that. The student may continue taking classes with the professor, but all marks are given by an independent evaluator, normally the Headmaster."

"I see." Her mother was being entirely too neutral, which was frightening in and of itself. "And are you thinking of invoking these rules?"

"Oh, Mum, I don't know." Hermione stopped her work to collapse in a chair. "I don't even know his mood from one minute to the next, let alone his opinion of me. And why aren't you going nuts over this? Why didn't you go nuts when you found us together?"

Amelia looked over her shoulder at her daughter, then set things down and took her own seat across from her. She smiled, pulling her feet up on the chair and looking more like a teenager than her daughter did. "I didn't say too much earlier, love, because I know you," she explained. "If anything... inappropriate was going on between the two of you, you would have made very sure not to get caught in a compromising position. And if something *had* happened," she grinned mischievously, "you would *not* have been wearing a full set of clothes."

"Mother!" Hermione turned red.

A small chuckle escaped before Amelia sobered. "I can't say I'm... pleased... with the situation," she continued, "but I can't say I don't understand, either. You've always been far beyond your contemporaries mentally and... barring a few years during puberty... emotionally. I've always sensed... dissatisfaction from you when you've tried having relationships with them and I've been afraid that that would put you off the idea entirely."

Hermione frowned slightly. "I think I see what you mean. The boys... well, they always thought of me as 'The Brain', which is a rather androgynous creature, it seems. Even when Ron *did* realize I was female... It never worked. He would be jealous or ignore me completely or act like I was supposed to help him with his work just because I was his girlfriend. And I didn't like having someone whom I had to be after all the time just to get him to do what needed doing. As for Viktor... It was flattering to be treated like a desirable girl for once. But I think the greatest thing I inspired in him was relief, to be honest. I approached him as a person, not a Quidditch star. But it wasn't enough for a romantic relationship."

Amelia nodded, letting her feet swing to the floor. "You're a sensible young woman, Mynie, which is what is going to bring you problems in relationships. Most young men... and older ones, I might add... want a girl who will fall all over herself for him, preferably one equipped with large breasts and a nice face. A brain is neither desired nor required. It only gets in the way and manages to intimidate. And you need a man who is capable of challenging you... not dominating, Mynie, challenging. I rather think you might have found one, which is why I'm not making as much of a fuss over the age difference... and the teacher-student factor... as I'd like to. But I want you to take things slowly, my dear."

"Why?"

"Because you're just eighteen. Now," Amelia held up her hand to stop Hermione's protest, "I'm not saying you're too young to know your own mind; I wouldn't dare." She grinned again and her daughter grinned wryly back. "What I *am* saying is that you need time to make sure you know your own heart. You're also going to change quite a lot over the next several years as you make the transition from teenager to adult. It's inevitable; we all do. Your professor won't change nearly as much. You need to give yourselves the time to change and adjust to those changes and decide if you still fit together after that. Keep that in mind, will you, Hermione?"

The girl nodded. "I will, Mum."

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Somewhat later, Severus found her in the front room, staring out the window. "You appear rather grim, Hermione," he commented.

"Not grim," she corrected, "just pensive. My mother said a few things to me and I wanted to mull them over a bit."

"Trying to figure out whether I'm challenging or domineering?" he asked mildly, taking a seat across from her.

She gaped at him. "You were eavesdropping!" Somehow, she was more surprised than she realized she ought to be.

"That is what I do, child." Snape was enjoying her reaction immensely. And calling her 'child' seemed to rile her even more.

"But not in my mother's kitchen!" Hermione protested. "That... I... Oh! I wish I could hit you."

"Violence, my dear?" He smirked at her.

The sheer and utter gall of the man! "You should be proud," she informed him. "You're one of the few people who can drive me to it." She paused a moment. "And you're provoking me deliberately."

"Very true," he agreed. "I might say it's because you're beautiful when you're angry, but that's a very tired cliché and not precisely correct. You're not beautiful, though the term 'handsome' might apply. And I don't 'provoke' you, as you say, for that purpose, but to be amused by your temper."

She looked at him incredulously. "You find my temper amusing?"

He nodded once... rather like a condescending emperor, she thought. "I also find it... refreshing, you might say. Very few people are strong enough to stand up to me. Fewer still like me... or appear to. It's an... intriguing combination."

"You're a strange man, you are," Hermione informed him. "So does that mean you'll like me better if I call you a bastard to your face?"

The corners of his mouth curled up. "Under certain circumstances. Though I would prefer if you made use of the extensive vocabulary I know you possess and not in front of the other students, or I shall be forced to give you detentions from now until your children enter Hogwarts. I would then transfer the detention to your first-born."

She salaamed him like a character from an Arabian Nights movie. "Yes, O Great and Magnanimous Professor," she intoned. "So what did you 'overhear'?"

"Everything," he replied blandly.

"Ah." Hermione paused to swallow that particular pill of information. "And?"

"I fully understand her feelings on the matter," he continued meditatively, "though I am surprised at her... liberal judgment. I would have been less surprised to find you father hexing me out of the house."

"They're non-magical, remember? It would have been a shotgun. Or maybe my great-grandfather's cavalry sword," Hermione said drily. "And it may happen yet, since she hasn't said anything to Dad."

"I bow to your superior experience. In any event, I rather believe she's right. You will change... greatly... over the next several years. Your mind is certainly capable of a great deal of dynamism and we are due for several life-shattering events, not the least of which is the final... encounter, shall we say. I know you've been through quite a bit already, but that doesn't lessen the effect... or the trauma."

"No, it doesn't," she agreed, and he watched as she started chewing her lip again. She would never be able to play Wizards' Ten-Card. "So what are you saying?"

He shrugged eloquently. "Merely that we should make no permanent commitments." Severus rose to his feet. "I know that you will change; I rather look forward to seeing the woman you become. I will change, as well," he shot a glance at her. "I rather hope your influence will inspire improvement, whatever that may be. We are limited in our options by the school rules... which you stated quite correctly, I might add... so our progress in intimacy will be limited, in any case."

"You make your case quite clearly," she noted calmly. "Now will you kiss me again?"

Silly girl. Obvious, blunt, and direct, as always. And comfortingly warm and honest. And quite surprisingly desirable.

Had she been born knowing how to kiss like this?

## Reflections in a Winter Pond

Chapter 17 of 19

A little light reading and a chance comment lead Hermione to discover that Snape has nowhere to spend Christmas. But is dragging him home for the holidays really a good idea? (A WIKTT Christmas 2003 challenge fic; AU w/HBP & DH)

### 17 - Reflections in a Winter Pond

The days between Christmas and New Year's slipped through the new couple's fingers like pearl beads from a broken string. They spent a great deal of time together simply talking, sharing memories and dreams... though it was difficult to get Severus to admit he had any of the latter. But it seemed that they were not as dissimilar as they had thought; both wanted a quiet home and plenty of time to work in peace. Hermione wanted to pursue her Arithmancy studies at Oxford, possibly attempting to read Mathematics at one of the Muggle colleges there as well. Severus merely wanted to get out from under the thumb of Albus 'I Own You' Dumbledore. And, reading between the lines, Hermione found that Severus wanted recognition, not for his espionage, but for his contributions in both Potions and Defense tactics for the Order... something that might never be possible unless they took care of every Death Eater and sympathizer. Severus might yet be forced to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder, no matter which side won.

With her friends on holidays away from London, Genie found herself at loose ends and often tied them by "pestering" (his words) Professor Snape. Still, the sharp-tongued man was surprisingly patient and restrained with the girl, though Hermione couldn't decide if it was an actual appreciation for the curious child's conversation, company manners, or trying to stay on her (Hermione's) good side. None of them seemed particularly likely. And, after receiving a number of amused looks from Severus himself, who seemed able to read her thoughts, she gave up the question and merely enjoyed the tutorial exchanges.

She left him strictly alone, however, when it came time to watch the films her mother had given him for Christmas. Late at night, after her family had gone to bed, she set up the machine, showed him the controls, and left him to it. Instinct told her that this was time best spent alone. She was not wrong. After both films, Severus remained in his chair, staring at the flames in the fireplace until near dawn. And he was far more subdued the next day, keeping to his room, not forbidding company, but neither did he welcome it.

He never discussed the films with her.

He did, however, ask her to accompany him the morning of New Year's Eve. He said little more, but she promptly agreed and, after informing her parents, was rapidly apparated away.

Hermione found herself in front of a perfectly enormous house... Elizabethan, if she was any judge. It appeared to be crumbling slowly into bits; the paint had peeled and worn and chipped from large patches, window panes had broken and been boarded rather than replaced, and the woodwork seemed to be staying in place only by the grace of God. The gravel drive on which she found herself was overgrown with winter-dead weeds, shrinking to a size barely wide enough to accommodate a modern car, though it might have been big enough originally for three old-fashioned carriages. There was no snow, but somehow that made it worse. The grey slush and broken ice hid none of the disrepair and highlighted the barren nature of the grounds and house.

And this, she realized, had been his childhood home.

Hermione glanced at her silent companion. He said nothing, nor did he move, simply watching her from hooded eyes. Resolutely, she turned and crunched her way up to the front door.

It was neither locked nor warded. Hermione pushed it open and entered. The inside was little better than the outside. The varnish on the wood floors had long since worn away from the traffic crossing it and the bare boards showed signs of hungry termites. Paint and wallpaper was faded, carpets worn through, curtains limp. No one had bothered to shroud the furniture in dust covers and though it had fared better than the rest of the house, it showed the places faded by sunlight. Dust and dirt covered everything in thick layers. The entire house carried an aura of tired despair. And yet...

"It was beautiful once, wasn't it?" Hermione allowed her question to fill the still, stale air, to find its way to the dark man standing in the doorway, watching her. He said nothing. She continued, "It's like a beautiful woman." A pause. "A beautiful woman broken by a life she should never have even seen." *Like your mother*, she realized and stopped herself just before she said it aloud. She turned back to him.

"Come," was all he said. She followed mutely, knowing better than to offer any sort of comfort, either physical or verbal.

The rest of the house was in similar condition, dying from neglect and from the harshness of the lives... and somehow she *knew* that the misery had begun long before the last generation... that it had seen. Silence so deep that she felt it around her in a stifling layer, muffling the sounds of her footsteps, even, she felt, trying to muffle the life in her. Severus must have felt it as well, or maybe there were wards she couldn't sense, for once they left the entryway and front parlours, he wrapped an arm around her shoulder and kept her tight against his side. It was a little awkward trying to walk, but the feeling that he was keeping the worst of the shadows at bay more than made up for the discomfort. He said nothing more as they navigated the dark hallways, the only light coming from their combined wands, until they reached a dark door.

Nothing distinctive, just aged mahogany that seemed to have never seen anything brighter than a candle. Hermione watched as Severus removed his arm to fish about in his pocket, producing a large key that was so prosaically normal, she had to stifle a burst of hysterical laughter. Severus glanced at her. "This room," he told her, "is the only thing keeping me from tearing this entire place down and selling the land to some ghastly Muggle industrialist. My third great-grandfather set the spells here, both light and dark, and I haven't been able to untangle the whole." With a characteristically wry twist of his lips, he continued, "As we cannot bring the mountain to Mohammed, we shall bring Mohammed to the mountain." He opened the door.

The light from beyond it, far brighter than the minimal illumination from their wands, blinded the girl for a few moments. Once it resolved itself, Hermione found she was looking into a room of walls. A room of walls and... portraits. She was on the threshold of a family gallery. The subject of the wizard paintings all turned to stare at her, the silence palpable as she took her first hesitant steps inside, feeling rather like the main attraction at a side show. Only the realization of how important this must be to her companion kept her from shouting *Yes, I'm Muggle-born! Fucking deal with it!*

Indeed, Severus had said nothing more himself and a glance showed him standing to one side with apparent diffidence. He wasn't going to guide her through this maze, nor give any hint as to why this particular room mattered far more to him compared to the rest of the moth-eaten pile of architecture. She carefully paced through the dividers, watching each portrait she passed curiously. There were old men and young ones, pretty women and plain, couples, a few children. Some crowded ten to a frame to watch her go by, though they maintained their air of haughty dignity. The Nose was an obvious family trait, used mostly, it seemed, for looking down at people. Women rarely had it, but then, she knew that the tradition was that girls who married had their portraits given to the families they married into. The blood daughters shown here were ones who had been too plain (or, perhaps, too unbearable) to marry or who had died young.

The 'brides', as Hermione thought of them, were more varied in mien and manner. Some were fantastically beautiful, others verging on plain. (Though there didn't appear to be any honestly ugly women among them; did Snapes marry that deliberately? Or was it simply 'a guy thing?') Many were just as stuck-up as their husbands, though one girl (no more than sixteen, Hermione thought) was positively gleeful and another gazed at Hermione with wistful despondence. The reason for that expression was rather obvious; she seemed to be trying to hide behind the draperies away from the Snape who glared at both Hermione and her with almost murderous rage in his eyes.

The farther in she went, the more modern the paintings became. Finally, she came to the end of the portraits (though not of the enormous vault they occupied) and was arrested by the sight of the most truly beautiful girl she had ever seen.

Like the earlier girl, she was perhaps sixteen. A heart-shaped face was framed by long hair as dark as Severus', though she was almost impossibly pale where he was swarthy. Perfectly enormous eyes glowed an amazing shade of violet. Delicate features; small, delicate body. And an obvious sweetness of character that caused everything to almost glow. Startled, Hermione looked to the portrait frame and somehow was not surprised to find the inscription there: *Mme. Sejanus Snape, née Aquilia Evans, m. 19...* Severus' mother. The 'Evans', however, did surprise her. "Evans?" she questioned.

Severus, who had come up behind her, nodded. "Wizard families do throw out the odd Muggle branch, on occasion." Hardly a confirmation, but probably as close to one as she could get from him, and the possible permutations were headache inducing. She decided to leave it alone for the time being; it was not why he had brought her here.

She curtsied deeply. "It is an honour to meet you, madame. I am Hermione Granger." Looking up, she saw the girl's face dimple in amusement as she rose from her chair and curtsied back. Hermione could have sworn she was giggling, but no sound issued from the painting. "Severus?" The girl turned, puzzled.

He gave a small sigh, his hand lifting slightly before he stilled it. "This was painted shortly after their honeymoon. My father silenced it after her death. I'm not sure but that I prefer it this way; it is hard enough to see what was and compare it with what I knew."

Hermione turned back to the painting. The girl had come up to the edge of the frame, her hands held up as though she were only on the other side of a window. Her eyes held a sad longing. Severus turned away and walked back towards the entrance. Aquilia backed away, turning the brilliance of her eyes full on Hermione, who was once again struck by the force of such sheer... gentleness. She was distracted from her musings by the girl's frantic gesturing. Hermione blinked as the girl indicated Severus then her, then tapped her hand against her heart. The inquisitive tilt of her head made it obvious it was a question.

"Um." Hermione couldn't deny she was a little rattled by being questioned by her... lover's?... mother, who was in a painting using rudimentary sign language. "Uh, yes, I do. We do, I think."

Aquilia snickered soundlessly and beamed. More gestures, this time indicating Severus. The girl then crossed her arms over her chest and scowled, so much the spitting image of her son that Hermione giggled. Her hands moved again Wait, wait. Another indication of Severus and a strong thump over her heart. Hermione wrinkled her brow for a moment before she was suddenly illuminated.

"Oh. Yes, he does have a good heart. A very good heart." She glanced over her shoulder, no longer able to see Severus through the forest of panels. When she returned her attention to the silent girl, she found her smiling and crying, her hands clasped in front of her face. "I know," Hermione whispered. "I'll do my best to be with him."

Yet another flurry of hands. Severus. Hermione. A number of different heights from the floor. Finally, a pantomime of rocking a child in her arms. Hermione could feel the heat rising in her face. "You want a lot of grandchildren?" she choked out. Aquilia nodded vehemently. "I, um... Well... It's a bit early for that, don't you think? I mean, we're just starting..." The interruption of a lifted eyebrow... *so that's where Severus got it..* and the indication of Hermione and pointing to the ground. *You're here, aren't you?* "Oh. Oh!" *I must be insanely dense today! He brought me here to meet his mother!* "I see. Well, um, I'll see what happens. I don't know about a lot, but if, um, anything happens, we'll let you know." That was the best she could do. After all, how do you talk about procreating when you haven't even progressed to the sex part of the relationship? Particularly to a man's mother, oil-based or not.

Aquilia merely grinned.

When Hermione reappeared from the forest of paintings to find Severus waiting at the door, she thought of a million and three different things she wanted to say. And realized silence was probably best. He, in turn, said nothing as he led the way back to the upper levels of the manor. After all, what could either of them really say? If it had been anyone else, Hermione might have found the situation farcical. As it was, it bordered on the heart-rending. Once outside, she breathed in large gulps of fresh air, relieved to be out of that mausoleum. After a few moments, she returned her attention to Severus, a still, black column facing the ghostly brown and grey of the grounds. She slipped her hand in his and squeezed. His face turned to her, expressionless, just before she felt the tug of Apparation. But she could have sworn she felt the slightest pressure enveloping her own hand.

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On names:

'Sejanus' is from Lucius Aelius Sejanus, a nasty character if there ever was one. For more info, go read some Roman Imperial history (Julio-Claudians) or watch *I, Claudius*, which should be available at any self-respecting library.

'Aquilia' is from Julia Aquilia Severa, who was from the Severan dynasty and (briefly) married to the emperor Elagabalus. (And, oddly enough, if you look at her coins, she appears to have the Severus nose...)

Anyhow, this story was so far off by the time HBP was written, I decided to make/keep Snape's family as totally AU characters, rather than trying to fit them awkwardly into canon.

## In and Out of Time

Chapter 18 of 19

A little light reading and a chance comment lead Hermione to discover that Snape has nowhere to spend Christmas. But

## 18 - In and Out of Time

The silence remained, vaguely uncomfortable, as they reappeared in Snape's bedroom in the Granger home. But what could she say, after all? Trite, clichéd phrases were all that came to mind, and she rejected them instantly as cheap and false. "Thank you" was silly. "I'm sorry" was insincere. There was nothing to fit her feelings; anything she could say would, she felt, damage what had happened.

She couldn't see herself as Severus did. He watched the emotions flit over her open features, and now he knew better to construe them as pity. Still, he could not find words to answer them, either. He chose, instead, to close the distance between them and press a kiss to the forehead above those great, dark eyes. They fluttered closed and she leaned into him, resting her head against his shoulder.

A soft knock at the door interrupted their reverie. "Hermione?" Amelia's voice called quietly. "Are you back?"

The couple straightened. "Yes, Mum," Hermione answered, advancing towards the door.

Amelia smiled as the door was opened. "I just wanted to remind you that it's time to get dressed."

"It's that late already?" Hermione stared blankly at the darkness outside the bedroom window. She hadn't even noticed when they left the Snape estate.

"Yes, it's that late. I'm surprised at you, Hermione; you usually have a much better sense of time." Amelia teased her daughter, "It must have something to do with your state of mind."

"Mum..."

"You have half an hour, dear," Amelia remarked. "I know you have faster ways of doing things, but there's not much time."

"Half an hour?" Severus could almost see Hermione freeze in shock. "I've got to run. Severus, I'll be back once you've dressed to make any alterations." She dashed out of the room and disappeared into the one she was sharing with her sister. Amelia gave Severus a wicked grin and returned to her own room to finish preparing. Severus closed the door with a relieved sigh. He had heard rumors about women's fussing over their clothes and hair, long ago in his student days. It didn't look like anything had changed over the last few decades and, in truth, he was rather grateful he didn't have to deal with it first hand.

The event, it seemed, was a New Year's Eve party hosted by the Granger's associates. Hermione had attended for the past few years...primarily to please her parents, she had confided, since the thing was deadly dull. She had mentioned it only the day before, having, she admitted, forgotten about it. It wasn't something, after all, she would have expected him to want to go to, but as things stood now... Well, it would be nice to have someone to talk to. Half out of sympathy (oh, the number of Hogwarts parties and balls he had suffered through alone...) and half out of morbid curiosity, Severus had agreed to go. He had brought formal attire, but they agreed that Hermione would make adjustments to create something passable for a formal Muggle soirée.

Some time after he had finished his own toilette, Hermione rapped on the door and, at his answer, entered. Severus stared. He had seen her formally dressed before, but never in the Muggle fashion and certainly not when thinking of her as a woman grown. She stood before him now, stately in a gown of rich blue satin, her hair mysteriously tamed and piled upon her head. Sapphires gleamed at her ears. She carried herself, he thought, like a queen. Indeed, a woman grown, ready to take her place, able to face even the likes of Narcissa Malfoy and the other *grandes dames* of Wizard society. And then she smiled at him and he could again see the Hermione he knew...and loved.

"There's not much to change," she mused, and for a moment, he could not think what was to be changed in the first place. She circled him. "Just wear your coat instead of the formal robes; I'll change the cut of that and your waistcoat." She grinned mischievously at his worried expression. "Don't worry," she assured him. "I've done this for years and never yet lost the original garment. Madam Malkin was happy to show the poor Muggle child a few tricks to keep herself properly dressed." Snape nodded his acquiescence, albeit with a sceptical twist to his expression.

Hermione frowned slightly as she visualized exactly what she wanted. She rather wished she could put him in Slytherin green...it would probably make him feel a bit better...but green just made the man look even yellower than he already was. As she closed her eyes and began her charms, she prayed he wouldn't object overmuch to what she had in mind.

When she looked again, he was dressed exactly as she had imagined. She given him a style that was vaguely late Victorian, changing the cut of his coat only slightly. The buttons and high collar were gone, though, as she shortened the waistcoat considerably and transfigured the collar into an unobtrusive cravat. Hermione had also changed the color of the waistcoat from the original black silk into a very dark blue, just a hint of matching her own dress.

Severus frowned as he studied himself in the mirror. Being without his actual robes was almost embarrassing; he kept looking for them, his hands itching to pick them up and put them on over these flimsy garments she had created. His hair, too, was tied back and he missed the feel of it against his cheeks, hiding his profile from people he could not see. He fought the urge to reach up and feel where it had gone to. Perhaps, he thought, he should feel fortunate that formal Muggle clothing still possessed sleeves long enough to hide his wand. Leaving it behind was by no means an option. He realized then that Hermione wore long white opera gloves, one of which seemed to be slightly large. It would appear, he thought approvingly, that Hermione felt the same.

Everyone (save Genie, who had been packed off to a friend's house earlier) was bundled into the car and off to the hall where the party was being held. After a few introductions, the Grangers wandered off to do their socializing, leaving Severus and Hermione to their own devices.

She had been correct; the party was extremely dull. The only advantage he could see, actually, was that here, at least, he did not have to stop teenagers from spiking the pumpkin juice or threaten to hex overly-hormonal couples. Not to say that these weren't issues...Muggles and Wizards were apparently equal in their capacities...but *he*, at least, didn't have to deal with them. What he *did* have to deal with were snotty teenaged brats who came to inquire and insult his date. Still, he had over thirty years of experience in this area; while he still wanted to hex them, it wasn't a larger problem than, say, getting rid of bothersome mosquitos. Besides, the company was worth the irritation, particularly as he could gaze at said company's cleavage. Perhaps she could apply for early NEWTs...

Which brought him to a particular line of thought. They still had time of course, but...

"Hermione?"

"Hmm?" She leaned back against the wall, appreciating the emptiness of the foyer they had wandered into. She drew off her left glove, stretching her fingers in the process.

"What happens?" Severus stood beside her, carefully watching her hands' movements.

"You'll have to be a little more specific, Severus," she said absently, wishing she could dare to take the right glove off, too.

"When we return to Hogwarts, I mean. We have mentioned it before, but more along the lines of technicalities rather than realities. If this was peacetime, we could simply follow the rules, but as it stands, Hermione, we have at least half-a-dozen other factors to consider."

Hermione's hands slowed, then stilled. "I hate it when you're right about these things. It's not just about school rules and student-teacher ethics. It's about things like Voldemort and Malfoy and my friends and their responsibilities. And ours."

"I want you to be safe, Hermione." She had such small hands, really, with delicate fingers and slim wrists.

"I honestly don't see how this could endanger *me* any more than I already am." She turned to face him squarely. "I've had a target painted on my back since I was ten years old, Severus. That won't change. I... I've already killed because of it. But I can't begin to imagine how *your* dynamics will change if this becomes known. How will Voldemort...or Dumbledore...use this? Use *me*?"

Snape turned away with a shrug. "I cannot say, exactly. With...the Dark Lord...it will depend greatly on how he perceives it. I think that I would have to portray you as a mouse, something I play with in order to gain information and control. I have...somehow...seduced you and plan to use you somehow against Potter. Affection does not enter into His plans, unless it is to be twisted and used. I would not give him that tool against us.

"I don't want that for you, Hermione."

She sighed. "None of this situation is particularly ideal, Severus. All we can do is work with it. Do you *really* think we can keep this quiet?"

He paused, seriously considering her question. The music from the ballroom drifted around them. "I think it's possible. I certainly wouldn't want to be... demonstrative, in any case. We could connect my rooms with yours so we could spend time together in the evenings..."

"Which would be the only time we'd have together anyway," she finished, frowning thoughtfully. "That's a point. I just... I don't like going behind people's backs. It could be so much simpler if we could just follow the rules." Her hands played with the empty glove.

Severus gave a small snort of laughter. "Following the rules hasn't been an option for you since you were ten, Hermione. It's simply a matter of establishing our priorities. I would prefer that you not be involved in my service to two masters. Both will use you, use our relationship, without a second thought...Dumbledore no less than Voldemort."

"I know. I don't like it, but I know." She tossed her glove on a nearby table and took his hands in her own. "It's just... I love you, Severus Snape. I want to be able to shout it from the rooftops if I feel like it. I want to be able to walk down the hallway with you or into Rosmerta's on a Saturday afternoon."

He felt... beyond words at this point. She had said before that she loved him, but it was still so new, so unexpected, so... impossible. For once, he gave in to a whimsical impulse, drawing his hands free and using his nimble fingers to pull the pins from her hair, causing it to tumble down her back. She shivered at its feather touches against her shoulders. "I want to be able to kiss you senseless," he murmured, drawing her close to him. "I want to be able to lead you to my chambers and into my bedroom with no sense of guilt or shame or secrecy. I want to be able to show the world that you are mine and only mine, because I love you with all that I am."

"Severus..." She was intensely conscious of the hands at her waist, the black eyes that for once revealed his soul.

"I love you, Hermione," he repeated, "out of all time, out of all measure. It isn't much, but all that I am is yours.

"And," he added, with a wry twist to his mouth, "if you tell anyone I said that, I'll be forced to hex you several times over."

"Severus!" Hermione chuckled. "All right," she agreed laughingly. "I'll keep your soppy romantic side to myself. Nobody'd believe me anyway."

"True." He tucked the strands of hair that were falling forward behind her ears. "But then, no one will believe that either of us would *do* this voluntarily." He leaned forward to press what was at first a very gentle kiss to her lips. As it deepened, both were vaguely aware of the sounds...first of the hall clock, then of cheers...that began the New Year. As the cheers became 'Auld Lang Syne', they ceased to be aware of it entirely, their universe contracting to include only two people whose hearts and souls were merging.

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ANs: Trying to bring myself up to date still... which is complicated because often I don't even want to look at this antique example of my writing. \*\_\_\* (Seriously. The original publishing dates for this puppy were 2003-2007.) *But*, there's only the epilogue after this and then I can set it aside.

The title of this chapter is from a poem by Maya Angelou, which she recites in the movie, Madea's Family Reunion. [Links to both text and video are on my website, under the FFG extras.](#) Beautiful and very apropos for our favorite pair.

## Epilogue - After the Fire

Chapter 19 of 19

A little light reading and a chance comment lead Hermione to discover that Snape has nowhere to spend Christmas. But is dragging him home for the holidays really a good idea? (A WIKTT Christmas 2003 challenge fic; AU w/HBP & DH)

### *Epilogue ~ After the Fire*

They parted with little more than a glance at the train platform, Snape striding purposefully to the professors' car, Hermione rejoining her friends in a compartment towards the rear of the train. They had made their arrangements the previous evening, both fighting a sense of loss as they told each other it was only five months. Five months to be careful and cautious, of each other's feelings as much as of their public personas. Five months to learn and teach; a month had sufficed for much, but there were always little things to be discovered. Five months to let things grow and change, to consider possibilities and ramifications, confessions and introductions.

Five months to wait and worry as each led a life almost entirely separate and so very dangerous in its own way.

Hermione envied Severus as she stepped into the compartment. His ordinary behaviour made it easy for him to brood undisturbed. She, however, had to express interest in her friends' holidays and deflect the questions about her own. But it was easier than she had thought it would be; half a lifetime of practice in keeping secrets from others apparently made it easier to include her friends in that category.

Five months, she told herself. Five months to act as though her life hadn't changed a whit.

Albus eyed Severus when they reached the castle, that thrice-bedamned twinkle searching out the differences he expected. Severus grunted and groused his way back to his dungeons, barely even allowing himself a sigh of relief when he reached them. He had half-acted for every waking minute for nearly half a lifetime, he had simply added

another facet to be hidden within the depths. Still, he envied Hermione. She didn't have to play the dog to two masters, at least one of whom could keep an eye on him every single second of every day. *She* didn't know the restriction of being afraid to even let a single thought flow through her mind in the moments between waking and sleeping, lest it be snatched from her and examined under an alchemist's magnifier. Gods, he hoped that this deception wouldn't be the straw that broke him. Or worse yet, broke Hermione.

Five months, he told himself. Five months to keep hope in the innermost place of his soul and to pray that, for once, whatever sort of fate there was would treat him with consideration.

And yet they passed, somehow. Slowly, tensely, with days made of stolen glances and nights of rare, hidden moments. A word here and there. A letter on occasion. A conversation when they felt about to break. Worry when Hermione disappeared on various errands. Near-panic when Severus was Called. Hope and fear in a fragile web around them, growing love and faith supporting them.

And then, suddenly, with the abruptness of a cut thread, it was over.

There had been a chaos of blood and magic and shouts and fear. Of agony and helplessness and triumph. They had lost each other again and again in the melee as they focused on the tasks they had been set, the roles they knew they had to play. And then it ended, leaving an odd, empty stillness behind as everyone—good, evil, combattant, and bystander—gazed in shock at the gasping, blood-stained Harry and the still, deformed corpse of Voldemort.

It was over.

Decades of uncertainty and terror, of bravery and greed, were over.

What was supposed to happen now?

Severus gazed at his arm in bewilderment; the traces of the cursed tattoo were barely visible. It was, somehow, a concept too great for his mind to comprehend. It was supposed to be darker than that, wasn't it? He dimly recognized that someone was approaching and it was his body more than his brain that reacted, putting him immediately *en garde*. Only after did he realize that it was a young woman in Muggle clothes, the jumper slightly scorched at the shoulder, the pants stained and torn at the knees. It took a few seconds more to recognize Hermione in those clothes; Hermione, who had picked her way through the still crowds to stand beside him. Hermione, who watched him with a curious look in her eyes, one that he couldn't quite decipher and couldn't quite bring up the mental capability to try.

And then she smiled at him.

It was a small, tentative smile, as though she were trying it on and wasn't quite sure it fit. He didn't try it, himself; he knew a smile wouldn't fit on his face. "Hermione," he said instead, watching the movement of her eyes, the slight twitch of her chin as she tilted her face.

"Severus," she replied, her voice just as quiet and solemn. "Severus, will you kiss me now?"

He stared as he tried to process her question, then, out of habit, quickly scanned the room. Potter was hunched over, hands on his knees to support himself while Ron Weasley clapped him on the back. Minerva was helping a tottering Dumbledore to his feet. Pomfrey was... Wait, what did it matter now? "Yes," he said and leaned forward carefully to touch his lips to hers.

Nothing else mattered then. Nothing else existed until the torches, spelled to extinguish at dawn, went out with their loud, heavy sound. The two started apart, then stepped together. Hermione gazed out the windows at the clear, grey light.

"The first faint glimmer," she murmured. Severus lifted an eyebrow in query. "I just remember that phrase from somewhere," she explained. "I can't recall where. But that's what this is, isn't it? The first faint glimmer of..." she couldn't seem to find the right words, "...of *everything*."

Severus shook his head slowly, turning his attention back to the scenes inside and beyond. "No, the first faint glimmer was in the dungeons on a December afternoon. This, Hermione, *this* is sunrise."

She closed the last bit distance between them, wrapping an arm around him and leaning against his shoulder. "I still can't figure you for a sappy poet."

"No, I am by nature an evil-tempered, nasty bastard," he replied blandly, his arm snaking around her. "You bring out the worst in me."

"But our lives are ours, now, aren't they?"

Bemused, Severus blinked. "Yes. Yes, I suppose they are. Shall we begin by scandalizing everyone?" Hermione blinked at him in turn. "I believe you expressed a desire to, if I recall correctly, 'snog in the Great Hall!'"

She grinned. "I certainly don't object to it. Will we continue as we begin, do you think? Shocking everyone we come across?"

"My dear," Severus's expression was positively evil, "I am counting on it."

"Then let us do so."

And so they did.

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ANs: That's it. That's all she (I) wrote. There are a few extras on my webpage, like photos and playlists that are mentioned in the story, but that's the sum total. I hope you all enjoyed and are *too* irritated at the time it takes this lazy bum to recode and post. Either way, please leave an offering in the little box, if you have the time and inclination. -Lm. Samiko.