

Playing Santa

by beaweasley2

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Chapter 1 of 1

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This was originally written as a Christmas prezzie for all the ladies who beta my stories for me. However, Pookah encouraged me to share it with you, helping me clean up my typos, and, of course, MadBrilliant helped me make it presentable. Thank you both so much. It's so sweet of you. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

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There were one hundred and eleven house-elves in the castle. Benni had divided them into five groups this year, the same as was done every year. The first four groups were for each place the children slept. The dormitories were full this year, because all the students had chosen to stay for the festivities planned for tomorrow night. A huge Christmas party.

But tonight, their job was to take the presents and pass them out. It was a big job, one that had to be done quietly so as not to wake anyone. Not only that, but many of the students had presents for their friends and the professors as well. That was the task of the fifth group, Benni's group, to collect the presents for the professors and deliver them. Benni was using the staff preparation table to collect the professors' presents as the other house-elves carried them in, and she placed each present on the space where the professor would sit in the Great Hall above.

As was usual, the Headmaster had many packages, and several of the professors did as well. But one space, the one at the end, was empty. Well, nearly empty again. Benni stared at the space and felt a pang of sympathy for the Professor of Potions. There were only two packages sitting on the end of the table. Only two. One was in brightly colored paper and tied with lots of curly string. It was from the Headmaster. The other was in simple green paper with a bow on top. It came from the Professor of Transfiguration.

"Benni, what is wrong? Why is you unhappy?" Webs asked, placing another package on the table in the Professor of Charms' place.

"His is empty again," Benni said with a big sigh. "Is not fair he gets only two."

"But that is all there is," Webs said, his ears drooping.

Two more of her group arrived, each carrying packages, wrapped in pretty paper and bows, and Benni placed them on the table. She felt bad for the Professor of Potions. He was always kind to house-elves, said thank you and please, which not all wizards did. Benni tugged on her ears. "There has to be one we missed, surely there is one somewhere for Professor of Potions?"

"All the presents is here," Toddle replied, indicating the returning elves. "Everyone is returning."

Benni shrugged and began assigning each member of her group a pile of packages to deliver. She left the last two for herself.

"Benni?" Dobby asked, returning from the Gryffindor tower with a package in his hands. "What is wrong?"

Benni turned to Dobby. Everyone knew he was a bad house-elf. *He liked to be free. He wanted to wear clothes. He even knitted socks... Socks!* "Dobby, you makes socks!"

Dobby smiled and showed Benni his newest socks, one red with small bells on it, and the other a bright, shiny green with a ring of tiny trees. "I learns how from Miss Hermony, Harry Potter's friend."

"The one that made all those hats?" Toddle asked.

"And scarves," Webs reminded Benni.

"And socks?" Benni asked excitedly. "Do we still have them, Dobby? Is there any left?"

Dobby smiled. "Yes, I couldn't wear them all, so I have them in boxes."

"Show me!" Benni squealed in delight.

Dobby grabbed Benni's hand and pulled her with him all the way to the Come and Go Room, and Toddle and Webs followed in their wake. Dobby pulled down a very large box from a pile of boxes and Benni looked inside. "It is full!" she exclaimed with delight. She dug right in, looking for a scarf the Professor of Potions might like, finding a black scarf with thousands of little green nubbies on it. "This is perfect. He wears black and this is really soft!" she exclaimed.

Toddle and Webs had also been digging in the box. "Here is a round sock in the same wool," Webs said excitedly.

"That is for a head. I have a sock! It is the same," Toddle said. Dobby produced another sock of the same size, but yellow and red. "No, he doesn't wear red and yellow, Dobby. He only wears black."

"But they will match!" Dobby said worriedly.

Webs shook his head as he scrounged around in the box. "That won't matter much. Benni is right; he only wears black." He stood up suddenly, brandishing a sock like the one Toddle found. "I finds it another black one!"

"Good, let's wrap them up and I'll take them to the Professor of Potions," Benni suggested. It took a while, but they found enough brightly colored paper to wrap each sock, the head sock, and scarf, and had even found ribbon to make bows.

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Severus Snape woke up and felt something at the foot of his bed. He ignored the lumps, knowing full well they were another book from Minerva and a box of sweets and a book from Albus. Besides, he could have another half hour of sleep before he was forced to endure breakfast in the Great Hall. Christmas in the Great Hall wasn't something Severus liked having to tolerate anyway, and this year it would be even worse. This year, every student enrolled in school had stayed for Christmas hols in anticipation for the upcoming party that night. The rambunctious uproar would be deafening.

Severus rolled over and heard a soft thump of something that had fallen off his bed. He shifted his feet and still felt the weight of the two books. Now curious, he rolled back and sat up. There were four packages on his bed, not two. He leaned over and saw two more on the floor. *Six? What the...?*

Grabbing his wand from the bedside table, Severus checked the four oddly shaped and brightly wrapped packages. *Nothing. No magic, no curses, hexes, or jinxes detected. Presents. For me?* Ignoring the obviously book-shaped packages, Severus opened the first odd present. *A sock. One sock? Is this some kind of joke?* The wool was a soft Bouclé blend and felt really nice in his hand. It was black with touches of green. Nevertheless, one sock was hardly anything to get excited about, not that he'd get excited about socks anyway. He set it aside and opened the next. *A tam. In the same wool. I don't wear tam 'o shanter* he thought tossing it aside. The truth was his old cap was really worn and he didn't wear it anymore. But his mum had given it to him. It had been her last Christmas present to him before she'd died, so he still had it safely tucked away in his wardrobe. Severus set the cap down and picked up the two packages off the floor. The third package turned out to be the mate of the first sock. Severus scoffed at the ridiculous imbecile who'd wrap socks individually. He opened the last package revealing a wide scarf, also in the soft Bouclé wool. Picking up the cap while still holding the scarf, Severus noticed that there was a small tag on each.

'May this make you happy. Wishing you well, Miss Hermione Granger.'

For the love of Merlin, was she kidding? Why in all blazing horntails is that girl sending me these? His eyes flicked to her other gift, and matching socks?

Not knowing why, Severus tried on the socks. They fit his feet perfectly. They were warm and actually felt good on his feet. Still baffled by the gifts, all four of them, he rose and dressed. "Might as well as I'm up," he grumbled aloud.

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Hermione was helping herself to toast and sausages and telling her friends about the new book her mum had sent her, a magical one *Indigenous Magical Dicot and Monocot Plants of Europe*, when both Ginny and Harry suddenly fell silent, staring at something over her head. "Miss Granger, a word please," she heard the soft, velvety voice of Professor Snape behind her.

She turned expectantly and rose. "Professor?" she asked, bewildered by his presence.

"Thank you. You could've put them together, but I appreciate the thought," he said cryptically, soft enough that she had to strain to hear him. He thrust a tiny bauble in her hand. "Enlarge it later when you are alone."

Hermione stared at him in disbelief as he walked away.

"Oi, are you going to sit down or what?" Ron asked, walking up and taking his seat.

Hermione joined him, still holding the tiny bauble in her hand.

"What did Snape want?" Harry asked.

"Professor Snape," she corrected him. "I don't know. He didn't make any sense."

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Benni snuck a peek at the Professor of Potions as he strolled down the corridor. "He is wearing them!" she gasped in delight.

Iddy and Senny both popped their heads out to look as well. "Wearing what?" Senny asked confused.

"My presents!" Benni said, ducking back into the girls' loo. She was elated. "He is actually wearing my presents. That means that he likes them!"

Iddy looked at her incredulously. "You gives Professor of Potions a present?"

Benni couldn't stop smiling, her ears were perky and her eyes were sparkling in sheer delight. "Yes, I gives him socks and scarf Miss friend of Harry Potter made."

"Oh, then," Iddy said, returning to the task of scrubbing sinks, "that is okay. Is good to be rid of them."

Benni perked up. "Maybe we gives more of them away!"

Sendy looked at her confused. "To who?"

"Headmaster always likes socks," Iddy suggested.

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Hermione returned to her room and enlarged the bauble as Professor Snape had instructed her to do. She gasped in shock at the pretty bottle in her hand.

The tiny script on the tag simply said, 'In return for your thoughtfulness. May this make you happy. SS.'

Hermione opened the stopper and inhaled the most delightful scent. It was essences of flowers, spices, and woods, perfectly blended together in a perfume. She eyed the gift in wonderment. Emboldened, she dug into her trunk and pulled out the book she'd bought for Professor Snape as a Christmas gift but had been too intimidated to give to him.

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Time got away from her. It was two weeks after Christmas and Hermione still hadn't found an opportune time to give Professor Snape his Christmas gift. She'd tried several times, but he was rarely *in* his office. When he *was* in his office, he'd had Slytherins sitting with him obviously discussing something or other, or some student serving out a detention. She didn't really want to disturb him when he had students serving detentions or was conducting his Head of House duties. There'd be questions, rumors, and gossip that she would rather avoid starting.

On the other hand, *she* wasn't alone much either, because with all her friends staying at the castle, they expected her to do things *with* them, and they didn't leave her alone much. With the castle still full and since lessons hadn't started yet, there hadn't been any good time to give Professor Snape his gift. And she wanted to be discreet when she did, just as he'd been with hers.

Finally realizing that fifteen days had passed, she felt that she just couldn't put it off any longer. Her best bet was to simply take it to his office and hand it to him. She really hoped that this time he was alone.

Hermione knocked on his office and waited.

Silence.

She'd been down here twice already that morning, and she was hoping that the third time might be the charm. She tried again and waited.

Nothing.

Sighing, she turned, realizing that he simply wasn't in his office.

"What is it, Miss Granger?" Professor Snape asked gruffly from behind her.

Hermione cursed silently, berating herself for jumping like a first-year at the sound of his voice. She turned around to face him, knowing that she wasn't in trouble yet. "I wanted to give you this," she said, holding out the book, wrapped in green paper and silver ribbon.

"What is this?" he asked, staring at the package.

"It's for you," she said, curious about his reaction.

He was staring at her gift as if he was afraid to touch it.

It suddenly hit her. "It's not a joke, and I haven't put any spells on it that it didn't already have when I bought it."

"Inside my office," he snapped, opening the door for her.

Hermione entered and waited while Professor Snape eyed the shiny green paper and silver ribbon. "Slytherin colors, how subtle," he mumbled under his breath.

"Pardon, Professor?" Hermione asked, missing what he'd said. She tried to hold it out to him, urging him to take her gift. He finally raised a hand and grasped the gift, but continued to stare at it as if he'd never received a gift before. He turned it over and examined the present. His fingers stroked the paper longingly before he looked up as if realizing that she was still standing there. "I suppose you expect me to just open it."

"Well, yes," she replied, tilting her head and creasing her brow in confusion.

He was still holding it, fingering the paper and the ribbon as if the wrapping was the intended gift. "You... How did you..."

Hermione simply waited, letting him enjoy the moment, knowing somehow that this was the right thing to do. He untied the ribbon slowly, and put it on the desk next to him, then undid the tape as if with a wandless nonverbal spell. He carefully unwrapped the magical journal and examined the book as if he'd never seen one like it before.

"It's for your potions, the ones you invent or wish to copy down. The front pages are indexes, and from what I was told, it will add up to six hundred pages..."

"Thank you," he said softly as he traced the silver embossed lettering on the black leather.

"You're welcome, sir. I hope it makes you happy," she said, smiling with delight that he apparently liked his gift. She turned and left, knowing that Ginny would be looking for her.

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Severus was still looking at the silver letters on the cover of his new journal *A potions journal at that*. It read: *Master of Potions, Professor Severus Snape*. Severus was stunned. No student had ever given him a birthday present before. *It's strange enough that a student outside of my house gave me Christmas gifts. Individually wrapped* he mused. *But a birthday present. One I might actually use, at that.*

He opened the cover and fingered the fine quality parchment of the pages. The clock chimed the hour and he looked up, noting the time. He hadn't realized he'd been standing there that long simply contemplating the novelty of his gift, and the slip of a girl who'd given it to him. *Hermione Granger. I suppose I'll have to thank her for the birthday gift.*

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A few years later, the war was over, but the skirmishes weren't. They had won, but at great loss. The new era, as many were calling it, was a time of reconstruction, reorganization, and regrouping. There was no more tolerance for hateful prejudices, and the old manner of referring to Muggle-borns as Mudbloods was nonexistent. Even the Ministry was revamping itself to the new ideas, reorganizing, and in Severus' mind, it was for the better.

Severus couldn't believe how things had turned out for him. A house-elf had heard him somehow, had known he was in danger, and had appeared at his side in the Shack, taking him to the kitchens and to safety. Severus had been dying, but the little creature, Benni, had found his hidden supply of Fawkes' tears and healed him.

Even his trial had been a surprise, though drawn out and practically a circus. Besides, many of the students of 'Dumbledore's Army', the Order members, and the surviving faculty of the school, several house-elves had appeared to speak on his behalf. Phineas Black's and Dumbledore's portraits were set up in the court room. Lupin had overheard about Draco's plans to kill Dumbledore from Greyback, and his letters of concern were put into evidence. Firenze and Bane had been in the forest the night Severus had been speaking to Dumbledore and overheard the vow he'd made Headmaster. There were even several school ghosts who spoke up for him.

In the end, he was acquitted of most of his Death Eater activities, mostly because so many felt that because of his spying, more lives were saved than lost. Of the various charges of inciting, involvement, or participation in the murdering of Muggle-borns, Mugglecide, destruction of public and private property, and unlawful use of Unforgivables, he was given a full pardon.

Severus was found guilty of the murder of Dumbledore, but with special circumstances since Severus had technically killed a dying man, who had made Severus take a wand oath to kill him (which was verified and witnessed) while under an Unbreakable Vow to kill him (that even Narcissa and Potter confirmed).

In addition, he was honored with the Golden Winged Boar for the efforts he'd made in trying to protect the students from the Carrows while Headmaster. His name was added to the war memorial in the Ministry Atrium, he was awarded the Dagworth-Granger Silver Cauldron for his potions contributions, and an Order of Merlin for being in the Order of the Phoenix and for his role in bringing down Voldemort.

But his biggest surprise was the arrival of Hermione Granger on his doorstep, carrying a chocolate cake to congratulate him.

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Benni organized the gifts for the professors again. She was pleased to see that the section she'd designated for the Professor of Potions had packages again this year many packages this year. Benni added her small package of newly knitted socks to the pile. It had become a tradition for Benni to knit thick socks for the Professor of Potions. In fact, it had become a house-elf tradition to knit socks for all the professors, and because of the gifts, the professors had started the house-elf Christmas party idea.

Of course, it had taken a few years for the house-elves to accept the idea that for a whole hour they were to sit and sip on butterbeers, eat chocolates, and suck on peppermint sticks! A whole hour to play games and not work. It was the Professor of Potions' idea. Well, he'd insisted on it, and the Headmistress had agreed. Truth was it was the Professor of Potions' lady friend's idea, and he'd implemented it to make her happy.

Benni collected the packages and wished herself into his sitting room. She opened the door to his bedroom to see if the Professor of Potions was alone, or not, or if he was awake. He wasn't alone, but he and his lady friend were asleep. Benni entered as quietly as she could and set the packages on the small bench at the foot of the bed. The Professor of Potions didn't like his packages left on his bed anymore, not since he had accidentally broken the item in a package his lady friend had given him when he'd unknowingly knocked it off the bed a few years ago.

Although she knew it was wrong to do so, Benni snuck a peek at the sleeping couple. The Professor of Potions was holding the sleeping lady in his arms, protectively, with a peaceful, satisfied look on his face. She smiled, pleased to see him so happy at last.

She hurried from the room before her presence woke the professor.

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He sat in his office waiting for her. She had left only a few hours ago, wanting to spend Christmas day with her parents. He unfortunately had to stay in the castle. As Deputy Headmaster and Head of Slytherin House, he had obligations he couldn't avoid. Minerva had been appointed as Headmistress after the war, something that hadn't sat right with Severus at first, but Hermione had soothed his temper, reminding him that Minerva had been badly hurt the night Dumbledore had died and had been hurt again during the war, especially the final battle.

Hermione had a way about her, understood him like no one did, and she'd been right. The Wizarding world had needed time to forget, the public to accept that he'd been on the right side all along, and forgive him. And he hadn't really wanted the headaches and drama being Headmaster entailed. At least not yet.

Besides, she was right. Minerva would retire in a few years anyway. It was only a matter of time, and he would be Headmaster of Hogwarts again. Minerva had insisted that Severus be made her Deputy after the war trials had concluded and had personally asked him to return. Truth was, he felt honored by the appointment. He was even able to tolerate the dunderheads in his classroom since he had the weekends and hols with Hermione to look forward to.

Severus reached for his book, the one that had arrived by post a week before. His early Christmas present, his book, the one she'd submitted to Dust and Mildew Publishing House as a surprise for him. It was the new *Advanced Potions* book, updated by her, using all his annotations from his old *Advanced Potions* book. The one Potter had used his sixth year. However, she'd had the book published in his name with only a small acknowledgement to the work she'd put into its creation. *Advanced Potions* by Severus Snape. Already it was making him famous, not that he wasn't already famous. *Infamous, actually*, he scoffed. But at least the book was making him famous for something positive.

He looked at the clock. *She'll be here soon*. He couldn't believe how his life had turned around. Hermione was the reason, his beloved. What had started out as tokens, merely the exchange of a few presents had evolved into a friendship that grew into a relationship. Now he didn't dread Christmas as much.

The Floo flared and Hermione came through, saw him, and rushed across the office. He'd had just enough time to set down his book and stand before she flung herself into his arms. "I missed you," she said, kissing his cheek and rubbing her nose on his jaw.

"It has only been six hours," he sneered, although it hadn't any of the bite his sneers at her had in the past.

"Mum and Dad send their love," she said, pulling back to hand him three packages in garishly festive paper and bows.

She stood back, smiling. "Well?"

"Not here," he said, guiding her from his office and toward his rooms. He wanted her alone without the possibility of interruptions. Once in his sitting room, he sat on the sofa and picked up the first package. Hermione sat on the other side of the sofa, facing him, and flicked her wand, enlarging his presents to their normal size. The first was a book on *Elemental Organic Chemistry*. "Interesting."

"From Mum," Hermione said jovially. "Believe it or not, she picked it up in Diagon Alley."

The second was a very nice jumper. In blue. He looked up at her and quirked his eyebrow questioningly. "From Dad."

The third was a very nice black leather coat. "Go on. Put it on. I want to see if it fits," Hermione said, jumping to her feet to help him with the coat.

"There are spells to make it fit," he said as he rose obligingly. The long coat fit his frame perfectly. Her smile, seeing him in her present made him feel warm inside.

He took it off and sat back down, pulling her onto his lap. He summoned the package from the mantel and handed it to her. "Here," he said simply. He watched as she examined the small square shape, forcing down the lump in his throat. She seemed to take forever to untie the bow. He tried ignoring the feeling of angry doxies in his gut, and the slight rise in physical temperature that made him suddenly feel sweaty as she opened the small black box.

He hadn't time to sort out what her gasp meant before he was strangled by her arms and smothered by her hair. "It's! Iloveit! Thankyou."

"There is something I wanted to ask you," he managed to say before she kissed him.

"Yes!" she said exuberantly. "My answer is yes!"

"Do you mind if I ask first?" he snapped, all too amused and quite relieved.

"Okay," she said, letting go and sitting back to look at him expectantly.

"Do you like it?" he asked. He'd picked it up in an antique shop. It was old. He'd bought it because he'd really liked the delicate filigree on the Goblin-made band.

The little crease between her eyebrows deepened. "Of course I like it."

He told her where he'd found it. She listened attentively. "Severus?" she asked, looking at him, knowing he was stalling.

"Patience, witch, I've never done this before," he snapped, more from nerves than impatience.

"Done what?" she asked, tilting her head.

Normally he found the pose adorable, but tonight his nerves were strung tight. "Asked a woman to marry me."

"Yes!" She flung herself at him, once again strangling him with her arms and smothering him with her hair.

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Once again, Benni was sorting out the packages for the professors of Hogwarts. It was her favorite duty after all. This year the Headmaster had many packages. She was delighted by the size of the pile. The problem was she'd had to make a new space available for the Headmaster's wife. Her pile of packages was quite sizable as well but there was little room on the preparation table to set her packages, so Benni was using a large mixing bowl on the floor to carefully place her packages. After assigning which of her group of house-elves would deliver which pile to which professor, Benni elicited the help of Iddy, Toddle, and Webs to carry the packages to the Headmaster's bedroom for him and his wife. A small, brightly decorated tree stood in the corner of the room, and Benni instructed that the packages be placed underneath.

She carefully set her own small packages of new thick socks under the tree, one for the Headmaster and one for Mrs. Granger-Snape, the head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. It wouldn't do to make her think Benni didn't appreciate the things the missus did for the house-elves and all magical creatures.

She tiptoed over to peek at the sleeping couple. It warmed her heart to see them, his arms wrapped around her so protectively. He looked peaceful. She knew he was happy.

Benni's eyes widened as the Headmaster stirred, and as quietly as she could, she scurried from the room so that she didn't wake him.

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Several years later, Hermione was curled up against her husband in the oversized chair by the fire, toying with the old scarf he always wore on Christmas. "Severus?" she asked, running the soft wool through her fingers.

"Yes," he replied, his tone reflecting the contentment he felt at the moment.

"Why don't you let me get you another scarf?" she asked, letting it go to lie against his chest.

"Because I like this one," he said, holding her tighter.

"It's old and worn. It's falling apart. Don't you want a new one?" she asked.

He shifted so that he could look her in the eye. "No. I like this one because it was from you. You made this for me."

Hermione didn't know what he was talking about. "I didn't make this for you."

He laughed. "Yes, you did. This happens to be my first Christmas present from you."

She looked stunned. "My first gift to you was your journal, the one you wrote all the potions you invented and the ones you improved upon."

It was his turn to be confused. "No, you gave me that for my birthday."

Hermione thought about it and shook her head. "I was late in giving it to you... Oh, Merlin! I did, didn't I?"

"Yes," he said, not understanding why she was so confused. "You gave me socks, a tam, and this scarf for Christmas, then gave me the book for my birthday. I had never admitted my birthday to anyone but somehow you knew. Every year since, you have remembered my birthday. It's one of the reasons I..."

Hermione sat up and faced him. "I didn't give you socks. Ever."

"Hermione, they matched, like a set. You wrapped them individually." He reached out, wandlessly summoning the old journal from his shelf. Catching the book, he opened it up to the page he'd written down the shampoo she liked so much. "Here is the label you affixed to it."

Hermione giggled.

"What is so funny?" he asked, not really appreciating her reaction.

"The house-elves!" she gasped between giggles.

"What?"

She was laughing now. "This is the label I attached to the hats and scarves I made the house-elves when I was a student!"

Now he was really confused.

"Yes, the house-elves. I made socks, hats, and scarves to try and free the house-elves," she explained.

Severus looked at the label he'd kept, thinking she'd made his gifts for him personally.

Hermione kissed his cheek. "You sentimental wizard. You've kept this all these years because you thought Oh, you did!" She hugged him. "I love you!"

"I'm glad you do," he grumbled.

"Don't you see? You received this the year the house-elves started giving the professors socks! You thought I'd made it personally for you, so you gave me a gift in return. Your gift emboldened me to give you the present I'd been holding for the longest time, afraid to give to you, because I thought you'd reject it reject me!" She was beaming.

He suddenly understood what she was saying.

"Yes! If the house-elves hadn't given you the presents, this scarf, the cap, and the socks, you and I would have never have exchanged our gifts!" She snuggled back against him. "I tell you what; I'll make you a new one, by hand. But this one I think has seen better days."

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For his birthday, Hermione gave him his new scarf. It was black with tiny bits of green throughout. He loved his scarf, the softness on his skin, but it still didn't have the same meaning of the original. He carefully folded the old scarf and set it in his wardrobe with his old cap. He'd never get rid of it; it was special and precious to him. It was what brought him and Hermione together.

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Happy Christmas and a wonderful New Year!