

On a Night Like This

by Dreamy_Dragon

Christmas is a time to be jolly. Severus doesn't agree.

One

Chapter 1 of 4

Christmas is a time to be jolly. Severus doesn't agree.

JKR's, not mine.

Many thanks to pyjamapants for the beta.

Originally written as a gift for aleysiasnape in the Secret Slytherin Yule Exchange during the OWL House Cup 2009. Aleysia's prompt was "snowed in".

'I think this one's broken.' Lucius prodded the little figure with a long finger.

Severus wandered over to examine the nutcracker. 'Looks fine to me.'

Lucius narrowed his eyes. 'Shouldn't it move or something?'

A bushy head appeared behind the stack of boxes that were floating through the open door. 'No. It's one of mine. My mum gave it to me for my first Christmas in my own flat, right after I broke up with Ron.'

Hermione directed the cardboard boxes neatly to the ground, where they sat next to a similar stack. 'I think these are the last ones.'

She took the box on top and navigated her way through the various tins, packages, and yet more boxes that littered the floor, tables and every other space in the living room to join the two men in the corner. Outside the large French windows, a few lone snowflakes were drifting slowly towards the ground where they dissolved into a puddle.

Lucius was still staring at the small figure. 'How... odd.' He placed it tentatively on one of the sideboards. In a box next to his feet, paper started to rustle, and then a tiny witch on a broomstick, all dressed up for Christmas, flew up and started to circle around the nutcracker. Soon, she was joined by a glittering, white dragon. Both hovered in the air, peering curiously down at the still figure.

Severus had begun to disentangle strings of tinsel, but his hands stopped as he watched the three figures on the sideboard.

Lucius picked one of the red and silver baubles out of the box Hermione had set down at the table and inspected it closely. 'There's something to be said for decorations that don't move, tinkle or jingle on their own, though,' he said. 'One year, Narcissa accidentally put a fairy with a trumpet and one with a drum next to each other on the tree; first, one began to play whenever the other stopped, but then they tried to drown the other's music out, getting louder and louder. It was rather a nuisance until Narcissa sorted them out.'

Lucius added, 'When Draco was little, he always tried to catch one of the wizards on broomsticks that flew around our tree. We tried to stabilise the tree, but then he started to climb it, which caused an uproar from the baubles and bells.'

'How did you solve that?' Hermione asked.

'In the end, I created a separate display with the flying wizards and a few dragons, just for Draco.' Lucius smiled, remembering the enraptured expression on the face of his five-year-old son as he had watched the dragons chase each other.

Hermione smiled, too. 'Our cat always tried to climb the tree; for some reason she loved the star my mum put on top and was convinced it was there exclusively for her to catch it.'

'What did you do?'

'That was usually the point when my dad would point out that it was a good thing people were using electric candles on their trees these days, and we kept watch whenever the cat was in the room.'

'Eclectic candles?'

'No, electric.' Hermione's eyes narrowed.

'Oh, right. I'm sure it's a fascinating thing,' Lucius said without real conviction.

Severus snorted.

'If you don't have a wand it is,' Hermione conceded, rifling through a large metal tin and causing a cloud of glitter to float into the air. 'So, when did you usually put up the tree?'

'Always on the twenty-fourth. The house-elves brought one in from the grounds and set it up, and then Narcissa and I would decorate it in the afternoon. Later, when Draco was older he'd help, too. Each year, Narcissa decided on a colour scheme, and each year Draco and I managed to put our favourites on the tree anyway,' Lucius said, smirking.

'Yes, my dad and I would do the same, only my mum wasn't so much about a specific colour scheme, but each year she came up with a theme. It never worked.' Hermione's eyes sparkled with mirth. 'Usually, my parents took the day off, so we could go to get the tree in the morning and still have time to put it up in the afternoon.'

Lucius pulled another box towards him. Beneath layers of gently rustling tissue paper, a star came into view, silver and gold. As Lucius held it up, it started to rotate slowly, casting a soft, warm light through the whole room.

Hermione gasped. 'That is beautiful. I can't wait to see it at the top of the tree.'

Lucius nodded before he carefully placed the star next to the other decorations they had selected and picked up a silver bell. He smiled. 'This is a rather practical little thing. It starts jingling when something untoward happens. My mother passed it on to us the year Draco was born. It proved very useful when he tried to sneak into the drawing room to see his presents before we were awake.'

Hermione grinned. 'I can see that would be useful. I never tried anything like that. But my cousins apparently did. I remember my auntie being rather miffed one year when we went there for Christmas dinner.'

'Did you do that usually?' Lucius asked, sneaking an arm around her middle and pulling her closer to him.

'No, usually we stayed at home, just my parents and me. Our Christmas dinners were always lovely, not very traditional though. We decided each year on what we wanted to eat, and in the afternoon we'd just spend time together, eating sweets and Christmas cake and playing board games. I loved it.' Hermione leaned against him.

Her body felt soft and warm against his. Lucius nodded. 'Ours were lovely, too. Very traditional, just the family. And the same classic menu every year. In the afternoon there'd be sweets and Christmas cake, too and parlour games. There is something to be said for family traditions.'

The noise of a door closing with a snap interrupted their cosy conversation.

'Damn,' Lucius said softly. The room suddenly felt a lot colder.

Hermione's posture had become rigid as she was staring after Severus.

'How much do you know about Severus's childhood?'

She hesitated for a moment. 'Not a lot. He isn't very talkative.'

'There isn't a lot to talk about. His family was very poor and his parents didn't care much about their son,' Lucius explained.

'So not a lot of happy Christmas memories there, I take it.'

'No, probably not. As far as I know, he always stayed at school over Christmas. I've got no idea what he did in the years after he finished school, but ever since he became a teacher at Hogwarts, he has stayed there at Christmas every year.'

'Hm. Do you think that's what he's planning to do this year, too?' Hermione asked with a frown.

'Knowing Severus, the answer is yes, but not if I can help it,' Lucius announced as a plan began to form in his mind.

Hermione nodded. 'I think it's time to start our own tradition.'

Two

Chapter 2 of 4

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From her seat at the breakfast table, Hermione watched the snowflakes outside drifting gently downwards, joining the several feet of snow already on the ground. 'This is completely ridiculous. It's been snowing for a week now. We don't get that much snow. Especially not for Christmas.' She brandished her *Guardian* towards the window. 'The roads are blocked, the trains stopped running, and the whole country has come to a standstill.'

Lucius looked up briefly and shrugged before he continued to read his own paper.

'Did Severus say when he'd be here?' Hermione asked, still looking at the snow.

'No,' came the muffled reply from behind the society pages of the *Daily Prophet*.

'But he *is* coming, right?'

Lucius lowered his paper. 'I was rather adamant about requiring his assistance.'

'What's he still doing at Hogwarts anyway? Term ended yesterday.'

'He said something about an important potions experiment that needed his attention.'

'Uh-huh. I suspect...'

Whatever Hermione had been about to say was interrupted by the dining room Floo. A moment later, a flustered Snape stepped out of it, his hair in disarray, looking even paler than usual.

'Good morning, Severus. Glad you could join us,' Lucius drawled.

'I fail to see what is good about this morning. I've been up since five.'

Hermione quickly quelled her grin. Severus wasn't a morning person. 'Coffee?'

'Hmph.'

She took that as a "yes" and levitated the coffee pot, a cup and saucer over to him.

He poured himself a cup and relaxed visibly after he'd taken a sip.

'Whatever made you get up at five?' Lucius asked.

Severus levelled a glare in his direction. 'Have you looked outside recently?'

Lucius obviously thought it prudent not to reply but to look concerned instead.

'Oh, dear.'

Both men turned to look at Hermione.

'If there are no trains, that means the Hogwarts Express...'

'...isn't running either. Too much sodding snow on the sodding tracks,' Severus finished for her.

'But shouldn't the students have gone home yesterday?' Hermione asked.

'Minerva thought the tracks might be clear today.' Severus's sour expression clearly indicated what he thought of the Headmistress's optimism.

'I take it they weren't,' Lucius ventured.

Hermione quickly asked, 'How did you get the students home?'

'Flooded them from our offices. Either directly home or to the Leaky Cauldron. Do you have any idea how long it takes to Floo an entire school out through four fireplaces?' Severus rubbed his eyes and visibly stifled a yawn before he took another sip of his coffee and pulled Lucius's abandoned *Daily Prophet* towards him.

Two cups of coffee later, he asked, 'What was it you wanted, Lucius?'

'Actually, it was Hermione who needed help with something.'

'Yes?' Severus looked at Hermione.

She glared in Lucius's direction whilst she decided on how best to approach the matter.

'We thought...'

'Well?'

'We thought we could pick our Christmas tree this morning,' she mumbled.

'Sorry?'

'I thought we could go and pick our Christmas tree this morning. I took the day off.'

Severus's eyes narrowed. 'I came here after merely four hours of sleep, so that we can go traipsing through the grounds? In this weather? To select ~~tree~~?'

'A Christmas tree. *Our* Christmas tree.' Lucius had apparently decided that it was safe to join the conversation.

'There are warming charms,' Hermione added.

Severus leant back in his chair and crossed his arms in front of him. 'Christmas trees are humbug. As is Christmas or Yule or whatever you want to call it.'

'We could pick up some hellebore along the way. I know a few spots where you'd find them under the snow. Don't you always say they're so hard to come by?' Lucius suggested.

'Very subtle, Lucius. You two are not going to give in until I say yes, are you?' Despite his words, Severus looked slightly mollified. 'Let's get on with it, then.'

Lucius led them through the Malfoy grounds, clearing their way through the thick layer of snow with his wand. They stopped a few times, so that Severus could extract some Hellebore leaves from beneath the snow.

After half an hour, they reached a small grove of Silver firs. 'What do you think of this one?' Lucius indicated a tall tree right in the middle.

Hermione squinted up the tree. 'Looks all right to me.' She turned to Severus.

He, too, looked the tree up and down. 'It's thinning out at the top.'

'How about this one?' Hermione pointed to the tree next to it.

'Too small,' Lucius objected.

Several trees were dismissed because they were too small, too big or thinning out in the middle, the bottom or the top. Eventually, only a single row of trees was left.

'That one, then.' With a wave of his hand, Lucius indicated a middle-sized tree at the back of the grove.

'Let's have a closer look.' Without waiting to see if the other two followed him, Severus stomped over to the tree.

He peered at it. 'It's a bit scrawny, but it might do.'

Hermione slipped her arm through his and Lucius's. 'I think it's perfect.'

She and Severus pointed their wands at the ground, and the tree obediently extracted its roots from the frozen earth until it hovered a few inches over the ground. All three of them took turns levitating the tree back to the house and into the former drawing room, now redecorated and usually referred to as "living room". At first, Lucius had winced at the plebeian designation, but none of the three cared for the associations that came with the room's former function.

The house-elves had already provided a silver-coloured pot, decorated with a red bow, and filled it with earth. Lucius carefully levelled the tree into it. With a few flicks of his wand, the roots were covered and the fir stood stable.

After all three of them had taken off their cloaks, it turned out that, despite warming and drying charms, the lower parts of their robes were soaked. Hermione waved her wand in a complex pattern, producing a stream of hot air from the tip. Steam rose from her robes as she dried them out. Severus followed suit.

'We could always get rid of those,' Lucius said, looking pointedly at Hermione's and Severus's robes.

'We could,' Hermione agreed, ignoring the delicious little lurch in her stomach Lucius's suggestion had produced. 'But then we'll never get the tree decorated this afternoon.'

'Besides, I have to be back at Hogwarts at six,' Severus pointed out.

Hermione quickly looked at Lucius. His face didn't betray any reaction to what Severus had just said.

'Well, lunch then it is.' At Lucius's words, a tray materialised on the table, filled with various sandwiches, a bowl of crisps, fresh fruit, a plate of hobnobs, a jug of water, and a pot of black coffee for Severus.

After they'd eaten their fill, the tray vanished. Only the coffee pot was left, plus two cups of tea for Lucius and Hermione that materialised in the very spot where the tray had been. The delicate scent of fresh fir filled the whole room, and the eyes of all three turned now and again to the tree in the corner. On the sideboard next to the door, the little witch and the white dragon had taken up residence with the motionless nutcracker.

Finally, Hermione put down her empty cup. 'Where did we put the boxes with the decorations we selected, again?'

'In my study,' Lucius replied.

'Severus, would you help me levitate them over?'

With a long-suffering sigh, Severus rose and followed Hermione.

Soon, they were again surrounded by boxes filled with glittering baubles (wizarding and Muggle) in various colours, fairy lights, and tinsel.

Lucius picked up the string of fairy lights. 'Severus, would you help me?'

Severus murmured something that sounded suspiciously like "humbug", but he took out his wand and helped Lucius to place the fairy lights on the tree.

'Do we want to stick to specific colours?' Hermione asked, rifling through the boxes.

'What do you think?' Lucius turned to Severus who had begun to look through the boxes as well.

'No, let's just choose the things we like.' Severus had taken out a silver glass bauble and was carefully levitating it to a branch of the tree.

'Fine with me,' Lucius said and Hermione nodded her assent.

It had grown dark outside by the time they had finished decorating the tree as each bauble, each little figure, each string of tinsel had to be inspected closely, its position on the tree discussed and the result admired. The only thing that remained was the silver and gold star for the top.

'Severus will you do the honours?' Lucius asked.

Severus nodded. During the course of the afternoon, a soft pink had spread over his usually pale features, and his expression had softened considerably. Now his eyes were shining as he directed the star up to the top of the tree.

'It's beautiful.' Hermione gave Severus a kiss.

Lucius did the same before he said, 'Let's have a glass of mulled wine whilst we decide what we want for supper.'

Severus's expression froze, his posture went rigid. 'I have to get back to Hogwarts. I'll see you on Boxing day.' Without waiting for an answer, he took a pinch of Floo powder from the mantelpiece, threw it into the flames and was gone.

Hermione and Lucius stared after him, then they looked at each other. Hermione felt like a ball of lead had dropped to the bottom of her stomach. 'It won't be the same without him,' she said, 'I hope plan B works.'

Lucius nodded. 'It's a good plan. Let's continue with our preparations.'

As Hermione went upstairs, she noticed that the elves had put up wreaths of holly throughout the manor and wound strings of fairy lights round the banister. The sheer beauty of it made her feel warm and festive, despite the niggling worry about Severus.

After she had changed into fresh robes, she went downstairs again. Lucius, too, had put on different robes, and he smelled very nice, Hermione thought as she snuggled up to his side on the sofa, a glass of mulled wine in her hand.

'Are you hungry?' he murmured into her ear.

'I...'

At that moment the flames in the fireplace turned green.

Three

Chapter 3 of 4

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At that moment, the flames in the fireplace turned green.

Out of habit, Hermione tensed for a second, her hand twitching to where she usually kept her wand until she remembered that the number of people who had Floo access to Malfoy Manor was extremely limited.

An irate Potions master stepped out of the fireplace, brushing a speck of soot off his robes with so much force that a few sparks followed in its wake. 'She ordered me out,' he huffed.

Hermione and Lucius shared a quick look.

'Who did?' Hermione asked, keeping her voice carefully neutral.

A dark glare turned her way. 'The *Headmistress*. Mangy bundle of fur.'

'Ah.' Hermione decided not to comment on the fact that he had turned up at the manor rather than going to his own house at Spinner's End.

Around the place where Severus was standing, the air crackled with magic, causing the holly garland around the mantelpiece to burst into flames. The house-elf who had just come in, shrieked, dropped a plate of mince pies and disappeared with a bang.

Lucius frowned. 'I thank you not to scare my elves witless. I, for one, would like my Christmas dinner tomorrow not burnt or spoilt by a frightened elf.'

Severus quickly restored the holly garland to its original state with a wave of his hand. 'Sorry,' he muttered.

'It's all right. What happened?' Lucius asked.

'Minerva. She threw me out. She phrased it a bit differently, nattering on about how I really deserved a few days off and so on. She threatened to use force if I didn't go.' Severus remained standing stiffly where he was, but at least the crackling magical energy around him had stopped.

'Poor thing.' Hermione walked over to him and drew him into an embrace.

His eyes had narrowed at her words, and his posture remained rigid, but when she started to run her hands up and down his back, she felt the tension begin to ease out of him slowly. She touched her lips to his. Tenderly. Carefully. Until he started to respond.

They stopped kissing, and she rested her forehead against his. 'Are you hungry?' she whispered.

'No, all I really want is a bath and sleep,' Severus said, his voice low.

'That can be arranged,' Lucius said from behind them. 'Come.'

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Severus closed his eyes and leant his head against the rim of the bathtub. Warm water surrounded him, smelling pleasant. Lavender, sandalwood, and a hint of orange, his nose informed him. In a second he would pick up the sponge, right after he'd catalogued the properties of the oils. Lavender for relaxation, sandalwood for...

His eyes snapped open again when he heard the door open and close. The water had grown tepid. Odd. He'd just closed his eyes for a minute. The water became warm again, and a voice whispered into his ear. 'I think you fell asleep.'

'I wasn't asleep,' he protested. 'I merely rested my eyes for a bit.'

'Of course.'

Severus felt the sponge running over his neck and shoulders, followed by small kisses, then he felt Hermione gliding in behind him, the tub obligingly elongating itself to make room for her. She continued to wash him: collarbones, upper arms, torso, lower arms, his hands. All the attention she lavished on him made him wriggle. After all, he was perfectly capable of washing himself.

'Relax,' Hermione admonished him, soothing her order with more kisses on his neck. He could feel her arm sneaking around his middle, the sponge now gliding over his stomach, hips and thighs, when the door opened again.

'Let me help with this,' Lucius said, and with a practised move, his dressing gown—dark grey silk—slid from his shoulders.

He knelt in front of Severus—the bathtub had happily accommodated him as well—conjured a second sponge and proceeded where Hermione had left off: thighs, knees, lower legs, feet while Hermione started anew at his shoulders.

Severus didn't know whether he wanted to jump out of the tub and run or stay and close his eyes again and let the other two indulge him. His problem solved itself when Lucius lifted one of Severus's legs out of the water and started to kiss along his calves. A little moan escaped Severus, and he forgot all thoughts about getting out of the tub as another part of his body expressed definite enthusiasm about the proceedings. Hermione pulled him back against her warm, soft body and proceeded to pepper his neck, shoulders and face with little kisses. With a sigh, he closed his eyes again. It didn't matter whose mouth kissed him where or whose hand it was that eventually closed around his cock. What did matter were the strokes: slow at first, and then faster, the hand around him tightening a little bit until all was warmth and light.

Later, as he lay in bed, snuggled between his lovers, his head on Hermione's shoulder and Lucius spooned behind him, his glance fell briefly on the window. Outside, snow was still falling. Severus burrowed deeper underneath their duvet and drifted away into sleep.

Four

Chapter 4 of 4

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Something was tickling him. Severus's eyes slowly opened to find that a strand of Hermione's hair had made itself comfortable under his nose. He brushed the wayward curls away. Outside it was already light, but both of his lovers were still asleep.

Usually, this was the day of the year where he would wake up alone with a hangover, try to make it somehow through the school's Christmas dinner and stop being sober as quickly as possible. Not today. He lay in a comfortable, large bed with Hermione's head on his shoulder, Lucius's arm around his middle, and...

He squinted at the fireplace. Three stockings were hanging in front of it. Three. All of them red with white fur trimming and a little tag. And all of them obviously filled with something. His heart began to beat a little faster at the sight of the stockings: one for Hermione, one for Lucius and... one for him?

Severus carefully disentangled himself from his two lovers and crept towards the end of the bed. He'd be able to reach the fireplace or Accio one of the stockings from there. As he was leaning over the foot of the bed, stretching his hand towards the fireplace, he heard a tinkling, not very loud, but insistent. He quickly withdrew the hand. The tinkling stopped.

Tentatively, he extended his hand again, and again there was the sound, a little louder this time. Again it stopped when he withdrew the hand. *Accio* stocking.' No stocking. Instead, a little silver bell floated into view, ringing as loudly as it could. Severus scowled at it.

From behind he heard a soft laugh. 'Accio bell,' Lucius said.

Severus turned around to see a now very much awake Lucius smile at him, the silver bell in his hand. 'It guards the presents,' he explained.

'Hmph.' Severus felt embarrassment creep through him.

'I think it's about time we had a look at what's in our stockings,' Hermione announced briskly, jumped out of bed, and walked over to the fireplace.

She came back to the bed, the three stockings in her hand. 'This one's for you,' she said, handing Severus one of them. 'And that's yours.' Lucius got his stocking, too.

His very own Christmas stocking. An odd feeling spread through Severus's stomach. Inside the stocking, he found a couple of mince pies, satsumas, chocoballs and a Honeyduke's Milk Chocolate bar. He was so immersed in staring at his sweets that he nearly forgot about Lucius and Hermione until something soft and sweet touched his lips. He looked up to see a smiling Lucius tempting him with a piece of chocolate. He took it, closing his lips around Lucius's fingers, swirling his tongue around them. Lucius swallowed.

When Severus let go of his fingers, Lucius offered him the next piece from between his lips. Severus bit off a piece of the chocolate and then touched his mouth to Lucius. They shared the chocolate between their lips and tongues, Lucius's taste mixing with that of the chocolate.

When they broke their kiss, Hermione fed him a piece of the satsuma she had just peeled. Its slightly tart taste mixed with that of Lucius and the chocolate, and later with Hermione's when she leant over to kiss him, too. He felt her lips on his; Lucius's arm was still draped around his shoulder, holding him close. Surely, the strange warmth that had started to spread through him was only the result of the fire that had begun to crackle in the fireplace after Hermione had collected the stockings.

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Later, as they made it down to breakfast, Severus glanced out of one of the windows. More snow had fallen over night and it was still snowing, turning the world outside the manor into a white winter wonderland. Silent and beautiful.

Severus was at his third cup of coffee, contemplating another piece of toast when a tapping at the window interrupted their peaceful morning meal. After Lucius had opened it, an eagle owl flew in, for once not looking haughty and regal, but windswept and bedraggled. It landed on the breakfast table, nearly toppled over and then sat, holding out its leg with a scroll tied to it, looking up at the humans reproachfully. Lucius quickly untied the scroll while Hermione offered a piece of bacon to the owl.

A shadow went over Lucius's face as he read the parchment. 'It's from Draco. They can't make it for Christmas Dinner. Apparently the Floo is down, and it's too dangerous for Astoria to Apparate or take a Portkey in her condition.'

'I'm sorry,' Hermione said, putting her hand over his.

'How can the Floo be down?' Severus frowned.

'No idea.' Hermione turned on the wizarding wireless just in time to hear the newsreader announce that for the first time in wizarding history the Floo system had broken down due to the worst snowfall the country had seen in a century. A number of roofs had caved in under the weight of the snow, burying fireplaces and Floo routes under them. Luckily there had been no casualties. Landing conditions for Portkey travel were affected, too, and the wizarding population was advised to avoid all travelling unless absolutely necessary. Weather conditions would remain serious over the next few days as more snow was expected.

Hermione turned the wireless off. 'It seems we're snowed in.'

'We could probably Apparate somewhere,' Lucius said, 'but why would we want to?'

Severus thought that he was perfectly comfortable right where he was.

Hermione stood up. 'Presents,' she announced and disappeared to the living room, both wizards in tow.

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Severus paused for a moment in the doorway, taking in the sight before him. His heart started to beat a little faster. The tree~~the~~*their* tree glittered with fairy lights and baubles, the star on top slowly rotating, casting the whole room into a soft, golden light. He had seen Christmas trees before, of course, but none as beautiful as this one.

Then he saw the stack of presents under the tree. Severus's heartbeat sped up a little more. He spotted his presents for Lucius and Hermione among the parcels in various shapes and colours. There were a few more. The presents for Draco, Astoria and the soon-to-be-born grandchild? Lucius had looked so sad when he had read the letter. Before Severus could get lost in his musings, Hermione tugged him along to the tree.

All three knelt down beside the tree, sorting the presents until each of them ended up with a little heap in front of them. Lucius and Hermione started to unwrap theirs at once. Severus waited for a bit, looking at them. Relief and something he didn't want to name spread through him as he watched the expressions that crossed their faces as they opened their presents. Lucius grinned when he unwrapped the antiquarian book on wizarding paintings, sniffed at the aftershave Severus had made for him and ran his fingers over the soft grey leather gloves. Hermione's face glowed as she took the antiquarian book on Alchemy out of its wrapping paper, sniffed at the perfume he had concocted for her, and stroked the dark blue silk scarf.

Only then did he start to unwrap his own presents. There was a Potions book from the eighteenth century, a black cashmere turtleneck jumper and bottle of Egyptian massage oil from Lucius. Hermione had given him a set of Wilkie Collins's novels, a pair of black slippers that came with a permanent Warming Charm, and a Muggle fountain pen. More warmth spread through him, and he felt something strange and unfamiliar lodged in his throat. It took him three attempts before he could say, 'Thank you.'

'Thank you, Severus,' Lucius said, and Hermione gave him a peck on the cheek before she added, 'Thank you.'

By the time they had finished admiring their presents, a delicious smell had begun to waft through the ground floor.

'Let's get dressed for Christmas dinner,' Lucius announced.

They quickly went upstairs to change, Lucius into dark grey dress robes, Hermione into a carmine velvet dress, and Severus into dress robes, black of course, that he had hastily transfigured from some of his usual robes. When they returned to the dining room they found the table laid out for three with the finest silver, glass and china the manor had to offer. Each plate was adorned with a silver-coloured Christmas Cracker. Severus pulled one with Hermione; a loud bang was followed by a shower of silver sparks and then a little cauldron toppled out of it. 'How fitting,' Lucius commented.

A roasted, stuffed goose sat in the middle of the table, surrounded by dishes filled with roast potatoes, parsnips, chestnuts, buttered peas, and silver boats filled with gravy and cranberry sauce. *It looks every bit as a Christmas Dinner should look like*, Severus thought as he fought again to keep his usual tight rein on his emotions.

After the main course, they had Christmas Pudding and Port, and Severus knew that this was the best Christmas Pudding he had ever tasted.

They retired back to the sofa in the living room to have coffee. Leaning back into the cushions, Severus felt mellow and very sleepy. A look at Hermione's and Lucius's faces confirmed that they weren't feeling particularly awake either. 'I'm going back upstairs for a nap,' he announced.

Lucius and Hermione nodded and trotted up the stairs after him. Neither of the two noticed that Severus had taken the small bottle of massage oil with him.

On the sideboard in the living room, the little nutcracker stretched his legs for the first time and took the hand of the witch, who turned to smile at him whilst the white dragon spread his wings over both of them.

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'Aren't you glad that you're here rather than at Hogwarts?' Hermione asked after they had spent a very cosy afternoon in bed.

Severus nodded. 'It seems Christmas can be a very nice time,' he conceded.

Hermione beamed at him and Lucius said, 'Happy Christmas, Severus.'

Severus had never really understood how, six months ago, they had ended up as a trio and why Lucius and Hermione wanted him. But now, seeing the love shining from their eyes, he finally understood that they loved him every bit as much as he loved them. 'Happy Christmas,' he replied.

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