

His Poisoned Christmas Carol

by Subversa

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: This is not a new story. I wrote it (I can scarcely believe) eight Christmases ago. When I was searching for it, I could not find it in the TPP archive. For some bizarre reason, I never posted it here.

This story is the last of *His Draught of Delicate Poison*, a companion piece that tells the story of their first Christmas as a married couple. It will be helpful to note that in the universe of HDODP, all persons of marriageable age had to be married by the end of the year in which this story takes place.

This story is dedicated to my love and my inspiration, whose wit and vision shine through everything I write. Merry Christmas, darling SubHub all I want for Christmas is you.

His Poisoned Christmas Carol

Malfoy was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that.

Ghostly, shimmering as only a man who, in life, had worn a head of silvery hair that was the envy and despair of his many female admirers *could* shine, Lucius sat down across from Severus, the patented Malfoy smirk upon his chiselled lips.

Severus glanced at him curiously. "Where is your chain?"

Lucius scoffed. "Me? In a chain? Please."

"But isn't it your plight to travel the world at Christmas and ..." he let his words trail away as he noted that Lucius was evidencing signs of enormous amusement. "What?"

"It's a good excuse to get *out* a bit, old friend nothing more. Death is well, it's *deadly dull*, if you must know."

Severus surveyed his former best friend, politely forbearing to point out that describing death as *deadly anything* was redundant. "I see. Why have you come, then?"

A look of genuine mischief crossed the aristocratic countenance. "I must tell you, Severus, that tonight, you will be visited by three ghosts ..."

"Oh, really, Lucius!" Severus interrupted. "I would rather not."

Starting violently, Severus woke, knowing instinctively that he was not in his own bed. Disoriented from the very odd dream, he reached to his left, where he felt the reassuring curve of Hermione's bottom. In only three months of marriage, he had become utterly accustomed to having her sleep beside him; as long as Hermione was beside him, nothing could be too terribly wrong.

Moving stealthily, so as not to disturb her, he swung his feet out of the bed, noting that he was wearing pyjamas, something he seldom did anymore. Why was he dressed for bed? Of course! They were at the Grangers', sleeping in Hermione's childhood bedroom.

Relieved to have remembered where he was, Severus picked up his wand from the bedside table, a non-verbal *Lumos* lighting his wand-tip, which permitted him to find his dressing gown. What he needed was a cup of tea.

Moving upon silent feet, he let himself out of Hermione's bedroom and crept down the stairs, finding his way into the kitchen. Settled at the kitchen table with a mug warming his hands, he mulled over the dream. Undoubtedly, it had come to him because of the foolish Muggle movie he had been subjected to that day.

Severus had readily agreed with Hermione's plan to go and spend a weekend with her parents in Islington, where she could bake and knit with her mother for the church bazaar. He had been surprised at her surprise when she had realised that he intended to go with her.

"But won't you be bored?" she had asked doubtfully when he had joined her with his small packed bag in hand.

He had produced books from both pockets of his cloak, raising a self-deprecating eyebrow at her. "I find that I would prefer not to remain here without you," he had explained. He had been gratified to receive her fierce hug, accompanied as it was by her vehement agreement that she would not care to be *there* without *him*.

Thus it had been that he had found himself spending the weekend with his wife's parents. Hermione and her mother had spent two mornings cooking, filling the house with divine smells of seasonal baking, listening to Muggle Christmas music as they had done so; in the afternoons and well into the evenings, they had knitted. Severus had been amused to see Hermione supervising six pairs of knitting needles, which had flashed through scarves and caps with speedy efficiency. He had known quite well that this skill was the relic of her former desire to free the Hogwarts house-elves, but he had acquired enough of the wisdom of the very-married man to know not to bring *that* up.

Whilst they had knitted, Hermione and her mum had watched Muggle Christmas movies. He had found the inanity did not offend him too much if he kept his attention on the book in his hands; what had surprised him was his inability to ignore the nonsense altogether. It had been the Dickens Christmas story that had drawn his eyes repeatedly to the box with moving pictures and that had undoubtedly caused the dream which had brought him downstairs in the middle of the night.

"Severus?"

He started and looked to the doorway, where stood Hermione, her face puffy with sleep. She wore the flannel pyjama pants she deemed appropriate sleepwear for her parents' home; upon her feet were the ubiquitous pink bunny slippers.

"What are you doing up?" she asked, concern in her voice.

"I couldn't sleep," he told her, moving back slightly from the kitchen table. Answering the unspoken invitation, Hermione came to him and slipped into his lap.

"Did you have bad dreams?" she asked him.

"Nothing of consequence," he assured her, filled with tremendous fulfilment simply to have his wife upon his knee in the cold wee hours of the morning.

Hermione slipped one hand about the back of his neck, stretching to kiss him. "Come back to bed *I'm lonesome*."

Taking time only to place his mug in the sink, Severus willingly followed his wife back up to bed.

Hermione could not help but notice her husband's air of distraction when they returned to the Estuary. She suspected that he was mentally preparing himself for their return to Hogwarts with the New Year; their honeymoon would be over, they would begin their real lives as a married couple, and she would begin her apprenticeship with him. She was excited about the approaching changes, but she had learnt to give her husband emotional room when he grew distant. His attentions to her in the bedroom were not lacking; if anything, he applied himself to pleasing her more often than ever as Christmas approached. There were times, after lovemaking, when she caught him looking at her in *such* a way as if he could scarcely credit her presence in his bed or, perhaps, in his life?

On one such night, she reached out to him and stroked his face. "Severus? Why do you look at me that way?"

He took her hand from his face and pressed a kiss in her palm, extinguishing the bedside candles with the wave of a hand. "Sleep, my love," he said, and when she turned to her side with a sigh of contentment, he fitted himself against the curve of her back and slept, as well.

Hermione sat at small table in the master suite of the Estuary, surrounded by sacks, wrapping gifts. The small CD player that Severus had charmed to work in their home played her favourite songs and she sang along as she used Spellotape and scissors, wrapping paper and ribbons, mixing wizarding and Muggle materials to create prettily-wrapped presents. She reached into the bag at her side and extracted the box she had brought home that very day, containing a set of engraved crystal wine glasses annotated with SSW, the large "W" taking the place of honour in the middle. Shifting the Christmas paper from the tabletop, she Summoned a roll of silver foil paper covered with white wedding bells. Skye's wedding to Bill Weasley was just days away, and Hermione had one last gift to wrap for them.

She was so intent on her task, carefully measuring the expanse of paper she would need to cover the box that she failed to hear the opening of the bedroom door and the entrance of her husband. It was not until he had advanced into the room, Levitating some rather large boxes before him, that she looked up, her eyes softening as she surveyed his neatly clad figure. She wondered if she would ever cease to thrill at the sight of him, lean and elegant in his superbly tailored robes and austere black coat and trousers. Just now his brow was furrowed with concentration as he deftly brought the pile of boxes to a resting place beside her numerous sacks.

"What in the world are these?" she asked, gesturing towards his additions to her pile.

A sardonic expression crossed his saturnine countenance as another flick of his wand Summoned a chair to the opposite side of the table. Seating himself, he crossed one long leg over the other and raised an eyebrow at her. "I was under the impression I told you this morning what were my plans for the day?"

Hermione moved to the floor and began to open the boxes, setting out first a glittery green snare drum with two wooden drumsticks. The next box held a beautifully carved wooden flute as well as a shiny trumpet. Another box bearing the same shop imprint yielded a tambourine, a cowbell with a wooden handle, a harmonica, an elaborate xylophone with two mallets, a large metal triangle with a striker, Mexican maracas, Spanish castanets, and brass finger cymbals. At the bottom of the box was a plethora of instruction books for the various percussion instruments.

Speechless, Hermione looked up at Severus, who was watching her with a self-satisfied sneer upon his lips. "Severus what in the world ~~are~~ these things? Are you supplying a primary school with musical instruments?" One side of his mouth quirked up. Hermione cocked her head as she studied him. "When you left this morning, you told me you were going to buy a gift for Sirius. Surely these things aren't gifts for Sirius!"

"I must have misspoken," Severus said, a look of feigned surprise crossing his features. "I meant to say that I was going to shop for gifts for Stormy."

Hermione looked at the pile of noisy toys and musical instruments, then stared at her husband. "You *can't* mean to inflict this *bedlam* upon Sophronia and Sirius!"

Severus stood and walked to her, offering a helping hand, which she accepted. Pulling her to her feet, he tucked an errant curl behind her ear. "Sophronia will, unfortunately, be a collateral victim. She is a very complaisant person, however, so I do not imagine that a bit of music will overpower her good nature." His onyx eyes swept down Hermione's body, gathering intensity as they travelled again to her face, where he concentrated on her lips. "I wonder if the gift-wrapping will still be here if you take a break and come back to it?"

Hermione began to unbutton his coat. "But why do you want to make Sirius miserable?"

Amusement crinkled the corners of his eyes. "You continue to ask too many questions," he complained.

Hermione twinkled at him as she finished unbuttoning his coat and began on the buttons of his white shirt. "Yes, but I no longer do it while waving my hand in the air," she pointed out virtuously.

"We can find better uses for your hands," he promised her, bending his head to still her lips.

Douglas Howser was astonished to have his erstwhile professor drop in unexpectedly one day at the hospital, demanding a tour of the chronic wards.

"Things a bit dull at home, Professor?" the Healer asked, casting a side-long look at Severus.

"Don't be impertinent, Douglas, or you won't get your Christmas gift."

Howser laughed. "Did you bring a stocking for me, sir? Sweets and a Fanged Frisbee, perhaps?"

Severus leant a shoulder against the wall. "Have you seen Varen Vector lately?"

Howser's good-natured face closed. "Come on, then. I'll show you around." He stood from his desk and approached the doorway, but Severus did not move. The two men stared at one another for a moment, Howser radiating umbrage and Severus sneering sardonically.

Unsurprisingly, the Healer broke first. "I haven't seen her in three weeks," he said bitterly, his tone inviting Severus to make something of it.

"Varen is a bit unpredictable," Severus commented mildly. "But it's been a rough year for her, you know she was extremely attached to Lucius Malfoy."

Howser glared. "I am aware," he said shortly.

"Well, she asked me to invite you to my sister's wedding," Severus said, as if that bit of information were of no particular importance. He turned and opened the Healer's office door, leading the way into the corridor. "Show up for the wedding, Douglas. I'll send an owl. Now, where is the closed ward?"

Eager to see her friends again, Hermione persuaded Severus to agree to host a Christmas party. She threw herself into organising the party, owling her handwritten invitations to the members of the Order of the Phoenix. Although he did not object to the party-planning, Severus was unmindful of her efforts to involve him in decision-making. His personal attentions to her did not flag, but his air of preoccupation worried her.

Nanny gave her a blank stare when approached about it. "Nanny has not noticed any problems with the master, Mistress. You must not fret," the old nurse added in admonition. Although Severus had told her bluntly that there would be no Snape babies until after Hermione had completed her apprenticeship, Nanny did not despair of filling the nursery with ravens'-wing-haired little heads.

The night of the Order Christmas party arrived and the house-elves were very busy answering the perpetually chiming bell. Hermione moved amongst her guests happily, proud of her husband and her home and delighted to share her felicity with her friends.

"Hermione!"

She was assailed on all sides by a host of very welcome faces as a large group entered the room. Harry and Ron gave her fierce hugs from either side; Ginny soon elbowed her brother out of the way to hug her friend, followed by Shadow. Crowding behind them came Draco and Luna Malfoy, followed by Neville and Pansy Longbottom.

Hermione greeted each of them joyfully. "Tell me everything!" she invited them.

"Professor McGonagall said I would have made an excellent Prefect if I had begun school before sixth year," Shadow confided. She had appalled her brother and greatly pleased her stepfather by Sorting into Gryffindor.

"Your mum told me your marks are excellent, Shadow," Hermione said, giving the younger girl's hand a squeeze.

"She's really smart," Ron said, looking down at his fiancée with unconcealed pride.

Hermione turned to look at Harry and Ginny, who were whispering together. "You two look like the cats that got the cream," she said with a smile.

Ginny glanced up, a look of blazing excitement in her eyes. "Dad and Harry signed marriage contracts today," she said. "We're really engaged, now it will be in the newspaper tomorrow. Mum even said we can begin to plan the wedding well, as soon as she recovers from Bill and Skye's wedding, of course."

"Of course," Hermione agreed.

Draco and Luna were greatly enjoying their time away from the Hogwarts married students' dormitory, staying at Malfoy Manor with Luna's father. Neville and Pansy were very busy with their greenhouses, breeding unique strains of roses, lilies, and orchids. Mr. Parkinson had put up the funds for them to begin their own business.

Hermione smiled around at the faces surrounding her, then looked across the room for Severus, but she did not see him. Excusing herself, she wended her way through the crowd, nodding to Dean and Lavender where they sat with Seamus and Alicia, sharing photos from their honeymoon trips. At the side of the room, she came upon Sophronia and Sirius, who were in conversation with Remus and Tonks.

"Have you seen Severus?" she murmured to Sophronia.

"He had to slip out for a little while," Sophronia answered quietly. "He asked me to let you know, if you missed him."

"Had to slip out?" Hermione sputtered. "In the middle of our first party?"

Sophronia wrapped an arm around Hermione's waist and gently persuaded her to walk into the empty entrance hall. "No one else has noticed his absence, Hermione. Don't distress yourself."

Remembering Severus' comment about Sophronia's complaisance, Hermione studied her. Just past her first trimester of pregnancy, Sophronia was full of energy and

health, a walking advertisement for marital bliss. Hermione could only smile and lean over to kiss the older witch's cheek. "I'm not really upset," she assured Sophronia, leading her back towards Sirius and the Lupins. "Pregnancy agrees with you, Sophie," she added.

Sirius looked up as the two women came up beside him, his gaze trained on his bride. "She's never been more beautiful," he avowed. Then he turned his laughing grey eyes to Hermione. "Are you sure you want to stand with us, Hermione?" he teased. "Pregnancy seems to be catching."

Diverted, Hermione looked to Tonks. "Are you?" she asked excitedly, automatically accepting the hands extended to her by the blushing pink-haired Auror.

"Yes," Tonks said, looking to her husband. "Sophie confirmed the scan for us before we came tonight."

Sophronia smiled. "I've had a bit of experience with pregnancy scans," she said, looking across the room at her two eldest daughters, who chatted animatedly with their future mother-in-law.

Hermione laughed and threw her arms around Remus. "Congratulations!" she whispered to him. "You'll make a terrific dad, Remus."

"Thanks, Hermione," the kind-eyed Lupin replied. "I never thought I'd be this happy," he admitted.

Hermione gave his hand a final squeeze before excusing herself to make a circuit around the room. One corner of the room was filled with Hogwarts staff members, chatting and laughing together. Standing to one side, sipping morosely on a glass of pumpkin juice, was Varen Vector.

"She looks rather forlorn, does she not?" a voice purred in her ear.

Hermione turned. "Where have you been?"

His eyelids fell to half-mast, and a glimmer of a smile passed over his lips. "A small matter required my attention. I'm here now how are things going?"

Hermione pursed her lips at him. "Come and speak with each and every guest yourself, and you will see," she muttered.

Three nights later she was instantly awake as Severus slipped out of the bed. Rather than ask him why he was getting up in the middle of the night, she gave him time to dress and leave the room, then magicked her own clothes on and pursued him along the hallway to the staircase, then down to the front door. Slipping out the door after watching through the window as he Disapparated, Hermione spoke the Tracking Charm she had memorised and followed him.

She arrived in a meadow, the grass beneath her feet crunchy with ice. By the light of the moon, she could see Severus moving towards a distant building. Going after him, she watched as he crossed the paved car park and approached a darkened double-glass door. When he paused, she froze in place, waiting to see what he would do next. After a moment, he turned to her and gestured impatiently for her to come to him.

"What are you doing?" she demanded breathlessly.

"Waiting for you," he answered snidely. "Why did you stop?"

"How did you know I was there?" she countered.

He actually rolled his eyes. "Hermione, the day you can follow me undetected is the day it will no longer be safe for me to leave home. Do you imagine I survived two wars by such insensibility?"

She huffed at him. "Where are we?"

He turned from her and rapped sharply on the double glass doors. "Either Disillusion yourself or follow my lead; I have no time for or intention of explaining myself."

Hermione stubbornly stepped up to stand beside him and was surprised when he removed a Disillusionment Charm from a large burgundy velvet rucksack, closed about the top by a drawstring of tasselled gold cord. Before she could speak, a light came on inside the building, and a middle-aged woman in a quilted red dressing gown came to peer out at them. A smiling look of recognition came to her face, and she unlocked the door, pulling it open and stepping back so they could enter.

"Mr. Smith!" the woman said, patently delighted. "Oh, I'm so glad you were able to return!"

Severus nudged Hermione to enter, then came in behind her. "Mrs. Betterhope, this is my wife."

Mrs. Betterhope locked the door and turned to Hermione with a smile, taking her hand and shaking it warmly. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Smith. We can never thank you enough!"

Hermione smiled and nodded, watching her husband to see what he would do next.

"Mrs. Betterhope, do you have a room in which the packages can be left? I am assuming you hope to surprise the children."

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Smith; we'll put them in here," she said, leading the way to a mostly empty storeroom. "We can put them on the shelves, and then I'll lock it up until Christmas morning." She looked rather sadly at the bag Severus carried. "We are so thankful for any gifts you were able to procure there was simply not enough in the budget for Christmas presents ever since the terrible terrorist attack on the village last year so many died then, you know, and so many children lost their families. We haven't been able to place them all in foster homes yet."

Severus did not speak, but opened the rucksack and began to remove wrapped Christmas presents from it. Hermione stifled her gasp of surprise and reached out to hold the bag open to free both of his hands. He glanced at her with a droll wink, which startled a giggle from her; she had never before seen him do something so whimsical.

"Were you were you able to acquire many of the items on the list I gave you?" Mrs. Betterhope inquired tentatively.

"I was able to obtain them all," Severus answered, his tone strangely reassuring.

"Oh!" Mrs. Betterhope said, faint relief in her exclamation as she eyed the size of the rucksack again. "You're going to have to make more than one trip out to your car."

"My love, why do you not allow Mrs. Betterhope to show you about the premises?" Severus suggested pointedly with a faint jerk of his head.

Hermione started forward. "Oh, could you, Mrs. Betterhope? My husband has told me so much about the facility."

Twenty minutes later, Severus came to find Hermione and Mrs. Betterhope seated in a small parlour, sipping hot tea whilst Mrs. Betterhope regaled Hermione with stories of the children in her charge.

"We must be on our way, my dear," Severus said to Hermione, reaching a hand to her. As Hermione rose, Severus trained his wand on Mrs. Betterhope, murmuring, "*Obliviate!*"

The Muggle woman's eyes became slightly unfocussed, whilst Severus bent to place his fingertips on her forehead; after a moment he turned to Hermione, who stood dumbstruck in the doorway.

"Come," he said, grabbing her hand and tugging her out of the building, stopping to lock the double doors before leading his unresisting wife down the deserted village street, past darkened houses and shops. Crossing the road to a large sign, he pointed. "Does it look familiar?"

Hermione stared at the words before her. "Welcome to Little Hangleton," she read out loud.

"Does the name mean anything to you?" Severus asked her.

"This is the village where Tom Riddle's father lived," she said.

"And?"

"And the site of the worst Muggle massacre in the last century," Hermione said, her voice sounding hollow. "Death Eaters murdered and burned their way through this town, last December." She turned to look into Severus' face. "Tell me."

He shrugged. "The children would have had no presents on Christmas morning."

"You bought them? The presents?"

He nodded.

"But why did you Oblivate her? She didn't know your name."

"Her memory has been modified; it will do her no harm. This way, she will not wonder why Mr. Smith always visited in the wee hours of the morning, or why she never heard or saw his car."

Hermione put her hands on his shoulders. "This is what you've been doing," she said.

"Some of it," he allowed. "The homeless shelter needed the food sooner ..."

"... and that's where you went the night of our party," she finished for him.

Again, he nodded.

"You may as well tell me the rest of it," she said.

"What gives you the impression there is more?" he inquired carefully.

"Varen Vector told me you'd been to see Douglas Howser at the hospital, Severus. I can't imagine you paying that kind of social call."

He looked at her steadily for a moment, then put his arms around her. "I suppose I will have no peace," he muttered.

She nodded emphatically. "None at all."

"Hold on," he instructed.

Hermione wrapped her arms about his waist and pressed her face against his shoulder, bracing for the unpleasant sensation of Side-Along-Apparition. When she opened her eyes, they were standing in a dark alcove along a corridor. Glancing toward the light, Hermione saw a desk around which lime green-robed Healers stood, conferring.

"St. Mungo's," she said. "How did you Apparate directly inside?"

"This is the waiting room for the critical care patients," he told her, taking her hand and beginning to move along the corridor, away from the light. "It is the only area in the hospital directly accessible by Apparition."

Hermione followed him to a wooden door, bearing a hand-written sign stating that the room beyond was under renovation. He pushed the door open, lighting the oil lamps hanging from the ceiling with a wave of his wand. Hermione was amazed to be standing in a room outfitted like a Muggle physical therapy room.

"Howser tells me that he has been researching the use of Muggle methods of rehabilitating persons with physical disabilities. He had not been able to obtain the funding to test his hypothesis."

Hermione ran her hand along a stationary bicycle. "This experiment alone could bring wizarding Britain screaming into the twentieth maybe even the twenty-first! century."

Severus stood to one side, watching her face. Realising that his scrutiny was focussed on her, Hermione looked at him. "This is ... unexpected, Severus."

He nodded, as if much struck by the accuracy of her observation. "How true."

"What's this all about?"

Severus averted his eyes and turned back towards the door as if to lead the way out. Hermione held her ground, her arms crossed combatively over her breasts. "Remember, Severus no peace."

He froze in the doorway, his shoulders slumping, then slowly straightening. "At home, Hermione. Not here."

Nodding in agreement, she turned on the spot and Disapparated; extinguishing the oil lamps, he took a deep breath and followed.

Hermione was waiting when he Apparated into their bedroom with an audible pop; without speaking, she indicated that he should seat himself, and she took the chair across from him.

"Now: what *is* this all about?"

Severus leant back, his lips pressed in a stern line, his eyes fixed as if on a faraway scene. At last, in tones of deep discomfort, he began to speak. "If there were any justice in this world, I would not be alive not have this" he gestured about them at the richness of their surroundings, "not have *you*." On the last word, he brought his eyes to her face and his expression softened. In a gentler tone, he said, "My life does not reflect justice for the deeply horrible things I have done."

Hermione knelt at his feet, her hands reaching for his. "You're a good man," she asserted quietly.

He took her smaller hands in his own, looking down into her eyes. "Better than I was," he allowed. "But I am suffering under grace, Hermione. This is my paltry attempt at atonement."

"Why didn't you tell me? I could have helped you."

"For it to have value, it was necessary that I do it myself, by my own efforts, and in secret."

"But why?"

"It is not *your* guilt and gratitude for which I owe reparation."

"But you did find *some* use for me back there," she reminded him.

"Indeed," he said with a faint smile.

"And where did you get that Bag of Plenty? Isn't that what it is? A bag with infinite storage capacity that is never overfilled and is never too heavy to lift?" He raised an eyebrow at her and she explained, "I saw a picture of one in a book, once."

"Is there any magical object which you haven't seen in a book?" he wondered out loud, his eyes full of pride. "I borrowed it from Dumbledore and ~~he~~ doesn't ask too many questions."

Hermione smiled mischievously and said, "*He* is not married to you."

Severus nodded sagely. "Another thing for which I am grateful," he said. He released one hand and tenderly cupped her cheek. "You must never speak of this to anyone, if you wish to assist me next year."

"Truly?" she said, quite pleased. "We'll do it again next year?"

As he carried her off to bed, Severus wondered if Ebenezer, that Dickens character, had repeated his seasonal acts of goodwill in later years. Scrooge certainly had not possessed such a lovely, willing accomplice as his Hermione.

As the co-conspirators endeavoured to demonstrate the breadth of his gratitude versus the depth of her acceptance, they found, each in the other, the transcendent peace of the gift of giving.

Bill and Skye's binding, on Christmas Eve morning, was an entirely festive occasion. Even the appearance at his brother's wedding of Percy Weasley, with his icy French wife upon his arm, did not dampen the enjoyment of the others in attendance. At the wedding breakfast, Severus was gratified to see Varen Vector looking quite pink-cheeked and self-conscious, sitting within the circle of Healer Howser's arm. As the newlyweds Disappeared away on their wedding trip, the guests dispersed to their holiday doings in a mood of great conviviality.

On Christmas afternoon, the blue salon of the Estuary was the scene of the Snape family gift exchange. Little Stormy sat in a blizzard of torn gift wrap, surrounded by her many presents. Sirius puzzled over the small package bearing his name, "from Snape" written on the tag in a recognizable spiky hand. He removed the paper to find a clear case with many tiny soft blue cylinders all in a row. Turning the case over, he saw the words on the cover of the box: Disposable Earplugs. He looked up to find his benefactor sitting across the room, watching him with a truly evil smile.

Standing, Sirius navigated around the edge of the room, neatly sidestepping Stormy's musical menagerie, until he was directly behind the sofa where Snape sat. Bending, he rested his forearms on the back of the sofa and spoke so quietly that only Snape could hear his words.

"You know, Severus, I realise that Hermione is only thinking of her career now, but when she's a bit older, she is going to want a baby. Or two. And I imagine that Stormy, in her grown-up wisdom, will want to share all of her toys with her little niece or nephew."

Severus snorted and stood, walking across the room to engage Sophronia in conversation. Hermione slanted a smile at Sirius.

"Your husband is a very *generous* man," he said sourly, watching as Stormy took up the drumsticks and began to thump erratically on the glittery green snare drum.

"You have no idea," Hermione replied, her eyes tracking the movements of her husband. As if he could feel her eyes upon him, Severus looked up, and for a long moment, they gazed at one another in total communion. At last, Hermione turned back to Sirius, her eyes still glowing. "But his secret is entirely safe with me."

A/N: The first two lines are from A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens only slightly altered.