

# Mr Alister Comes Home: A Master of Enchantment Christmas Story

*by Subversa*

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## One-Shot

*Chapter 1 of 1*

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Mr Alister Comes Home

A Master of Enchantment Christmas Story

Hermione moved restlessly in her sleep, and the midnight eyes of her companion opened: He was instantly awake. He reached for her and pulled her surely into his arms, pressing the length of his body along hers, establishing as much skin-to-skin contact as he could. As he held her, a tremendous sense of well-being flooded him; he could feel his heart rate slow and steady, matching her rhythm. As The Enchantment thrummed through, working its magic between them, Hermione stilled, the comfort of his presence soothing her, even in sleep. For a time, Severus Snape lay in the seamless dark, his wife held to his heart. At last, his eyes fluttered closed, lulled to sleep by the peace pervading the soul he'd once doubted he possessed.

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The crowding was not too bad, really and Hermione had got him somewhat used to close proximity with other people. No, it was the cacophony that grated on his nerves. How could twelve adults and five babies create such a racket?

The ceremony itself had not been too alarming. He and Hermione had flanked Lupin and Tonks and their infant as it she was officially named, for Severus and Hermione had stood godfather and godmother to Stella Lupin. Severus was damnably uncomfortable with the whole business who in their right mind would want a former Death Eater as godfather to their offspring? but Hermione had insisted that he was the bravest and most honourable man of her acquaintance, and that any parent would rest easier knowing Severus was there, prepared to step into the child's life, if needed. Besides, she also insisted it was a great mark of Lupin's regard for him as a friend and loath though he was to admit it, he would not willingly give offence to the only friend he'd made since his Death Eater days.

Now they were all crammed into the Lupins' Hogwarts quarters, sipping tea and eating cakes, for nothing more fortifying was on offer, more's the pity. Severus had done what he could to convince Hermione to skip the after-event gathering, but she had protested that she really wanted to see all of her friends ... and their exceptionally vocal spawn.

From his safe harbour in the corner of the room, he watched his wife interact with her particular friends. She sat on a sofa beside her boss, Penelope Clearwater now Krum. Penny had permitted her Quidditch-mad husband to name their son 'Vladimir'. The child was undoubtedly destined to be the butt of jokes for the entirety of his school career. Hopefully, it would occur at Durmstrang, outside Severus' sphere.

On her knee, Hermione dandled the unfortunate-looking Vlad, who was possessed of his father's hooked nose and his mother's curly hair. Severus paused for a long moment to consider that a child of his and Hermione's might resemble ... no. No, *their* child would be more presentable-looking than this sad specimen.

Not that they were planning to have a child; Hermione's career was very busy.

The largest of the knee-biters was Longbottom's son, a trusting little soul by the name of Frank. Frank wandered through the forest of adult legs, seeking biscuits. Young Frank had discovered a scrap of parchment on the rug just in front of Severus, and the toddler had bent to pick up the fascinating object. It had taken all of Severus' resolution not to plant his boot in the middle of the nappy-padded bottom and gently nudge Master Longbottom onto his face. It would serve the little bugger right and Longbottom himself would never manage to teach his child about the unkindness of the world at large.

The next-largest noise-maker was Potter's son, who was rather unimaginatively named James. James Potter did not bear the least resemblance to either his father or his paternal grandfather; the child had been fortunate enough to inherit his mother's red hair and brown eyes. On the unfortunate side of the ledger, he had inherited both his mother's and his father's intrepidity of spirit, and he careened gleefully from one narrowly-averted disaster to the next. Potter and his wife didn't have one quiet moment; one or the other of them was constantly retrieving the child from mischief-making. And Mrs Potter had earlier announced the coming of another child in eight months' time. Severus gave a mental shrug. Well, as long as they kept their calamitous brood far away from him, what difference did it make?

The least offensive of all the congregated wee ones was Diana Weasley. Severus knew her age because she had been born on Christmas, scarcely a year after her parents had married; she would be one year old in a month. Of all the babies, Ronald Weasley's daughter was the only quiet one. Held upon her mother's shoulder, she surveyed the assemblage with enormous, slightly protruding grey eyes. In defiance of the genetic imperative, Luna Lovegood's daughter had her mother's fair hair. For some reason, little Miss Diana Weasley seemed to find Severus interesting, for she was staring at him with her wide, curious eyes.

Darting his eyes from left to right to ascertain that he was not being observed, he made a rather fierce face at Weasley's infant daughter. To his annoyance, Diana treated this discouraging action as a delight. A huge smile graced her formerly solemn face, and she let out a trill of laughter, which drew a vague smile and a pat from her mother, but no one else responded. After all, the room was full of baby noises.

Severus glared down at the teacup and saucer in his hand, not wishing to be caught out playing with a baby. No one paid the least heed to him, however; they were all chatting to such a degree that his antics had gone unnoticed. He sighed and sipped, darting a surreptitious glance at the clock over the mantelpiece how long must he endure this nonsense before he could safely abscond with his wife back to their own rooms?

A rather insistent tug at his trouser leg caused him to look downward and to find Diana Weasley sitting on the floor in front of him, smiling a baby smile and drooling on his well-polished boots. How on earth had she got over here? Had her mother simply set her down? Were such tiny creatures allowed to crawl about with impunity? What was the world coming to?

'Oh, look, Severus,' Hermione said, abandoning the Krums to advance upon him. 'Baby Diana has come to see you.'

His lips thinned; this was scarcely news to him. His tiny tormentor raised two chubby hands to him.

'What does it want?' he hissed to Hermione.

'*She*, Severus not *it*!' Hermione admonished, bending and scooping the giggling baby into her arms. 'She's taken a fancy to you, I think she wants you to hold her!'

Ronald Weasley's daughter, then, was deceptively innocent-looking in truth, she was a daemon, set upon making him ridiculous in a roomful of former students and their spouses. Now the diminutive monkey-like creature strained toward him from Hermione's arms, her little hands outstretched.

'Put down your cup and hold her,' Hermione said, admiring the baby as if she was a genius of epic proportions.

'I don't hold infants!' he muttered out of the side of his mouth.

He was startled when a silent Luna Weasley plucked his teacup from him, gesturing with her free hand, as if to say, 'Hold my child.'

Without further ado, his loving wife thrust the squirming bit of humanity into his arms and then had the audacity to stand back and watch him with a fatuously fond expression as the enthusiastic daemon-child finally accomplished what had apparently been her fascination from the beginning: She grasped his nose and squealed with glee.

He stood like a statue as the occupants of the room turned to stare some to laugh, and these he made a mental note of until Mrs Weasley peeled the offending tiny hand from his face, and Hermione removed the child once again, a look of utter contrition upon her stricken face.

Never mind. In the privacy of their bedroom, she would be made to pay dearly for the indignities he had suffered today. It was the one bright spot in the whole damn affair.

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The next morning, Hermione stared at her husband with acute indignation. 'You can't be serious!' she cried.

He quirked one infuriating eyebrow at her. 'I never joke about marking,' he replied, folding his hands behind his head and smirking at the ceiling.

'But she's *your* aunt!' Hermione rejoined hotly, 'Your scary old dragon of an aunt!'

He turned his head slightly to see her morning-bushy brown hair spread over her pillow. 'She's your aunt, too,' he pointed out. '*Madam* Snape,' he added with unnecessary emphasis.

Hermione hunched a shoulder at him, turning on her side and presenting him with her smooth, bare back. 'You could have been marking those papers last night, instead of playing chess with the Headmaster!' she said. 'You did this on purpose so you wouldn't have to see Great Aunt Seraphina!' She punched her pillow to improve its position under her head. 'I loathe her!'

Severus moved onto his side, propped on one elbow, looking down at his wife's face. 'You don't mean that,' he cajoled, dropping a kiss on her bare shoulder and moving her hair to one side. 'And she's very fond of you,' he added, his over-large nose nuzzling the back of her neck. 'In fact,' he said, his breath now warm on her ear, 'she prefers you to me.'

'Don't think you can get around me with sweet talk,' she said crossly. 'And stop cuddling! I'm getting up!'

He tugged her over onto her back, neatly trapping her wrists as he loomed over her, his half-lidded ebony eyes full of a heat which communicated itself to her in spite of her pique.

'You don't mean that, either,' he said silkily as his head lowered to claim her lips in a burning kiss.

The hell of it was, he was quite right.

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Great Aunt Seraphina never came to visit them at Hogwarts. No, when she wanted to visit them, she went to Enchanté, their home in Wiltshire, which she had redecorated for them, as a wedding gift. Severus said she wouldn't come to Hogwarts because she didn't get along with Dumbledore, but Hermione believed Great Aunt Seraphina liked coming to Enchanté to check up on Hermione's homemaking skills.

Hermione met Great Aunt Seraphina at the door of Enchanté, a determined smile of welcome fixed upon her face. Quirk, the house-elf, had taken care to make the sitting room warm and inviting, and Hermione had Apparated in well in advance of the appointed time, in spite of Severus' morning delaying tactics.

'You're looking well,' the old witch declared as she swept past Hermione into the entryway.

'Thank you,' Hermione said, desperately looking for something she could sincerely compliment about the elderly woman's ensemble.

Great Aunt Seraphina unfastened her forest green cloak and waited for Hermione to lift it from her shoulders before she settled into the most comfortable armchair. She wore a rusty black tweed suit, ugly black shoes that laced to the ankle, and a monstrous green hat with mouldy-looking ostrich feathers sticking out in every direction.

Hermione hung the cloak away in the cupboard and moved to sit across from Severus' great aunt. Her smile felt a little frozen on her face; she wondered how long this would take, and if she would be back at Hogwarts in time for supper. 'I'm sorry Severus couldn't be here,' she said. 'It's so near the end of term, and he has so much marking to catch up on ...'

The beady black eyes surveyed her shrewdly. 'What on earth would we want *him* for?' Great Aunt Seraphina demanded. 'Men are useless in matters concerning the home and family.'

Hermione pressed her lips together, determined not to argue with the old woman, although she felt Great Aunt Seraphina's views on most things belonged in the nineteenth century. 'Was there something in particular you wished to discuss?' she asked deferentially.

Severus' old relative opened her large handbag and removed a tiny parcel; one tap of her short, rigid wand and the package became much larger. Wordlessly, Great Aunt Seraphina held out the parcel to Hermione, who accepted it, noting that it was squishy.

Next the old woman removed her jade cigarette holder from her handbag, along with her Muggle cigarettes and her charmed ashtray. She placed a fag between her lips, lipsticked an unflattering crimson to match her fingernails, and lit the cigarette with the tip of her wand. She sucked nicotine into her lungs, her sharp eyes moving from the parcel to Hermione's face.

'Aren't you going to open it?' she demanded.

'Of course,' Hermione replied, reflecting that the old witch always made her feel wrong-footed. She tore open the paper, finding a blanket, woven of the softest yellow wool she had ever felt. 'How lovely!' she said with complete sincerity, stroking the fabric.

Great Aunt Seraphina tapped ash into the tray, which promptly caused the ash to disappear. 'It's hand-made,' she observed with satisfaction.

Hermione glanced at the gnarled hands holding the smoking accoutrements and said doubtfully, 'Did you ...?'

The old woman snorted and took another drag on the fag. 'Good heavens, no,' she said. 'Quirk's grandmother knitted it,' she added. 'There are no finer elf-knit items in all of Britain than those things made by old Knack.'

'Thank you,' Hermione said, setting the blanket aside.

'Just another item for the nursery,' the old woman commented blandly.

Hermione declined to reiterate for the umpteenth time that there were no plans at present to make use of the well-furnished nursery Great Aunt Seraphina had seen fit to equip over two years before.

Great Aunt Seraphina finished smoking her cigarette and dropped it into the magical ashtray, which promptly caused it to disappear. Then she stowed her smoking things back into her handbag and turned her attention to Hermione. 'What do you know of your husband's childhood?' she asked abruptly.

Hermione blinked. What an odd question! 'I know it wasn't a pleasant one,' she said. 'Frankly, ma'am, he's scarcely spoken of it, and I don't like to pry.'

'And what do you know of his parents?' the old woman continued, watching her closely.

Hermione shrugged. 'His father was unkind and his mother was ...'

'Weak!' the other witch cried, a flash of impatience on her hawkish face. 'Unforgivably so she failed to protect her child.'

Hermione nodded, her heart touched with pain at the thought of young Severus' plight. 'He permitted me, at the very beginning of our relationship, to enter his mind and to view his memories but, to be honest, ma'am, I wasn't as curious about his childhood as I was about his association with Voldemort.'

Great Aunt Seraphina winced at the mention of the name, sending Hermione a glare of reproof. 'A person with sense,' she said in a manner of rebuke, 'would realise that the experiences of the child mould the choices of the man.'

Hermione made no attempt to defend herself; she knew the old lady was correct. 'Why do you ask about this now, ma'am?' she inquired.

Great Aunt Seraphina opened her handbag for the third time and removed another tiny item; this time, a touch of her wand produced a good-sized cardboard box, tattered and worn in appearance. An impatient jerk of her head indicated that she wanted Hermione to take the box; Hermione took it and placed it on the coffee table.

'Severus never had much when he was a boy,' his great aunt said, her voice sounding somewhat dreamy, as if she were lost in the past. 'His father was a wastrel and spent every piece of gold he could lay his hands on upon himself. But boys have a way of finding treasures, sometimes in spite of the adults in their lives.'

Hermione resumed her seat, eyeing the box on the table between them.

'He had very little,' Great Aunt Seraphina continued, 'but the things he *did* have he had little interest in taking with him to Hogwarts. The last time his mother brought him to see me before he went away to school was the summer he was eleven, and he brought this box to me. "They're my baby things," he told me, sounding all grown up for such a stringy little thing.'

Hermione found herself mesmerised by the story related to her by the old witch, clearly visualising a thin little black-haired boy on a visit to his great aunt. The old woman's voice had taken on a warmth Hermione had never heard from her before, and she realised that Seraphina Snape had loved her nephew's only child, and that she loved him still. Tears started to Hermione's eyes, and the other witch continued with her story.

'So Severus brought his treasures to me the things he did not wish to take with him to Hogwarts, but which he also did not care to leave where his father could find them.' Great Aunt Seraphina brought her chin up proudly, in contradiction of the next words she uttered. 'I'm ashamed to say it, Hermione, but my nephew was the type of man who would destroy his own son's few precious belongings out of sheer spite.' She pointed her wand at the cardboard box, and the folded flaps moved to reveal the contents. 'This box was discovered when an old, forgotten cupboard was cleared out by my house-elves. I decided to bring it to you, rather than to your husband it will do you good to better understand the boy he was and to come to comprehend the father he will wish to be.'

Hermione stood from her chair, neglecting to glance into the box, and went to kneel upon the old Axminster rug beside Great Aunt Seraphina's chair. 'Thank you, ma'am,' she said, taking the old woman's knotted hands into hers and pressing her fingers gently, looking up into the harsh face with genuine affection for the first time in their acquaintance. How could she fail to be fond of someone who had loved the boy Severus, however imperfectly she may have done so?

For a fleeting instant, the old woman looked her age, her black eyes glistening with unshed tears. Then the moment passed, and she pulled away from Hermione, saying querulously, 'Can we not have a cup of tea?'

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When Great Aunt Seraphina had gone, Hermione carried the soft yellow baby shawl up the stairs to the nursery, the cardboard carton floating along behind her. The shawl matched the cheerful yellow walls of the nursery exactly; Hermione draped it along the rail of the white baby cot and admired the effect. Then she seated herself in the nursery rocking chair, upon the cushions of cream and gold, and examined the contents of eleven-year-old Severus' treasure box.

She saw at once that the size of the box owed to the presence of the teddy bear, which sat upright on one side of the container. The box was by no means full; a few other things littered the bottom of it, but it was the teddy bear unquestionably the *youngest* item of them all which first drew Hermione's attention.

She lifted the bear from the box.

Standing, the teddy was a little more than a foot tall. The original colour of his mohair-like fur had apparently been a pewter grey, but he had been well-loved to a dingier shade. His head and limbs were jointed, and a button was sewn into his ear. On the pads of his paws were soft leather patches. There were places where his fur was quite sparse, but overall, he quite a well-preserved bear.

'Hullo,' Hermione said to him, then she set him to one side and surveyed the remaining items. There was a stack of perhaps ten well-thumbed wizarding comic books about a seemingly normal family who would leap upon their brooms and fly away at a moment's notice to fight the forces of evil. Beneath the pre-pubescent comic books were a series of worn picture books, meant for a younger child, with delightful moving illustrations of magical baby animals, such as unicorns and hippogriffs and dragons. Moving the books disturbed the raggedy canvas pouch in the corner, which, when opened, proved to hold an equally ragged set of Gobstones. Beside the Gobstones was a toy carriage harnessed to a team of the great winged palomino horses, Abraxans; the carriage was missing a wheel. In another corner resided a heavy glass flagon, containing what Hermione surmised to have once been an animal egg of some sort, though the pickling fluid had long since evaporated, and the gelatinous mass on the bottom of the flagon was impossible to identify. It did, however, bring to mind the numerous jars and containers on the shelves lining her husband's office, full of many zoological specimens, pickled in a rainbow of magical potions.

Wrapped in a disintegrating bit of old towel was a length of wood, which had been lovingly polished to a high gleam; it did not take much imagination to see that this had been the boy Severus' toy wand. It nestled within a cracked toy cauldron, amidst several small containers of powder and sludge which had undoubtedly once been part of a toy potions set, reminiscent of the chemistry set Hermione had been given on her tenth Christmas.

But it was the bear which drew her eye, and she picked it up again, considering the emotion which would have driven the boy Severus to take this soft toy to the refuge of the one adult he trusted, before he embarked on his adventure of going to Hogwarts. Was it a sentimental affection or had it been more of a serious sense of responsibility which had urged the boy to take his precious things to a safe haven? She could understand his disinclination to take these things to Hogwarts she could vividly remember resisting her mother's suggestions of taking her own dolls and teddy bear with her to the magical boarding school. She had reckoned it was going to be difficult enough to be a witch from a non-magical family without showing up with a trunkful of babyish toys! But she could see a very serious-minded Severus planning his escape from an unhappy home to the haven of the magical school, down to making provisions for his favourite belongings.

Sitting in the room meant for her own children with Severus, holding his childhood teddy bear to her heart, Hermione allowed herself to feel her longing to be holding her own baby to her breast. Seeing all of her friends with babies of their own had stirred to a steady flame the sleeping embers of her maternal desires. It puzzled her a bit, this seemingly sudden desire to have a baby. She had been perfectly content with the very loose agreement she and Severus had made in the beginning of their love that 'maybe someday' they would have a child or two but having recently seen her taciturn husband in company with a roomful of babies, she was beginning to realise that 'maybe someday' could easily become 'maybe never.' In all their time together, they had never had a more in-depth discussion about the possibilities of a family and Hermione recognised, with a sinking heart, that as long as she permitted 'maybe someday' to be the last word in their non-discussion of having a baby, then no resolution of the dilemma would ever be found.

With a wrench of wanting that felt as if it emanated from her very womb, Hermione doubled over the teddy bear in her arms with tears streaming unchecked down her cheeks. She would have to bring it up to Severus would have to risk the possibility of his flat 'never' or, worse yet, have the doubtful felicity of his acquiescence for *her* sake, with no true desire of his own to hold his own son or daughter in his arms.

'Maybe someday' had been the logical choice for them when their love was new and The Enchantment had driven all thought from their minds but nearness to one another but now, the primal pull of her desire to feel the flutter of new life growing within her body overrode all reason she would have to approach him about it.

But when?

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Severus set aside the completed stack of marked parchment and stretched, inconveniencing the cat in his lap.

'I beg your pardon,' he drawled to the sleek black cat who leapt down from his legs, to exit his study with her tail straight up in the air.

Bast's only reply was a disdainful, 'Mrow,' as she departed.

Severus followed his familiar into the sitting room, where he found her curled up on the couch with her mate, Hermione's furry ginger cushion, called Crookshanks. The two of them watched him with half-lidded feline indifference as he moved into the tiny kitchen where he halted in the doorway, dumbstruck by the sight of the old teddy bear residing in the middle of the small kitchen table.

'Mr Alister,' he said, his voice sounding young and full of wonder. He took the teddy bear into his hands with a gentleness bordering on reverence, and lifted the glassy-eyed face level with his own. 'Where did you come from?' he wondered aloud, his large hands dwarfing the creature which had once seemed much bigger to him.

He sat at the table, his attention fixed on the teddy bear he had slept with every night of his life until he had packed it away with his other things, at the age of eleven, to take to safety at his Great Aunt Seraphina's house. There had been no guarantee his father would not go into his room whilst he was away at school and destroy everything in sight in a fit of temper.

Curious, he manipulated each of the bear's jointed limbs. 'You're in prime shape, aren't you, Bear?' he said conversationally.

The bear mouth returned no answer, but it wasn't necessary; he knew quite well how Mr Alister felt on matters of importance. Had his mother not whispered to him when he was very small that Alister was a Greek name, signifying 'Protector' and had not Mr Alister indeed protected him all through his childhood?

'I see you found him.'

Severus turned to see Hermione standing in the kitchen doorway. He felt a bit foolish, but there was no sign of amusement or ridicule upon her face. She came forward and sat down beside him.

He replaced the teddy bear in the middle of the kitchen table and said, 'I suppose Great Aunt Seraphina brought him to you?'

Hermione nodded. 'He was in a box with a number of your other things, but I left the box at Enchanté, in the nursery. I thought you might like to see how well the bear had fared, though.'

'Yes, it's good to see the stasis charm the old dragon put on the box preserved him so well,' he agreed, striving for an even tone. He stood smoothly, turning his back on Mr Alister. 'I have a cauldron on the fire,' he commented as he paused in the doorway, 'I'll just check in on it and meet you in the Great Hall for dinner, all right?'

'Of course,' Hermione agreed, watching her fearless husband flee this treacherous trigger of his childhood memories. She took the bear Mr. Alister into her arms again and remembered the whole different demeanour about Severus when he had seen his old toy. For an instant, when he had greeted the bear by name, she had instinctively known that he was feeling again the comfort Mr Alister had brought to his youth.

*I am a sentimental wreck today* she thought as a further ache of emotion coiled within her. Was she feeling compassion for the sad child her husband had been, or was she feeling a longing to hold his son and to make sure their child would never be so bereft?

Hermione took the teddy bear from the kitchen table and put it upon a bookshelf, where it could not be spoiled by accidental tea spills or jam smears, then went to bathe the evidence of her tears from her face before going to meet with her husband in the Great Hall.

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December announced itself with nasty sleeting, which kept the students underfoot and chafed Severus' usually ill temper to the boiling point. Hermione watched him as the days passed, wondering when *would* be a good time to approach him with discussion about a baby, but he seemed to be irritated more often than usual, so she waited.

The morning of the Yule Ball, just before the students were to be set loose for the holidays, the Snapes were at breakfast in the Great Hall when they received a frantic note from Luna Weasley by owl post.

Hermione opened the parchment and read it while Severus watched her. When she did not promptly announce the purpose of the letter, he said peevishly, 'Well? What does Miss Lovegood want?'

'Weasley, Severus,' Hermione corrected him without looking up from the parchment. She finished reading and tucked the letter beneath her plate of toast before reaching for the pumpkin juice and pouring some into her cup. 'Could you pass the bacon, please?' she asked politely, smiling a morning greeting to Filius Flitwick and Pomona Sprout as they seated themselves at the breakfast table.

Severus passed the plate of bacon. 'What does Mrs Weasley want?' he tried again.

Hermione began to eat her bacon and eggs. 'You know that the Headmaster has instituted a program of inviting former students to attend the Yule Ball and to act as chaperones? Well, Luna's babysitter had to cancel for tonight a bad case of dragon pox, apparently and Luna is writing to ask if we will take her and Ron's place chaperoning the ball, tonight.'

Severus placed his cup in its saucer precipitately enough to splash tea on the tablecloth. 'No!' he said with some force. 'This is the first year in *memory* that I have not been called upon to chaperone at the damned Yule Ball I will *not* take their place!'

Hermione began to spread jam on her toast. 'Well, all right but if we don't take their place chaperoning, the least we can do is offer to keep baby Diana.'

Severus eyed his wife suspiciously. 'What would that entail, exactly?' he demanded.

'Babysitting, Severus,' she said patiently. 'We would look after Diana whilst her parents chaperone the ball, and then they will take her home.'

'The ball is from eight until midnight,' he said, frowning. 'So the baby would only be with us for that long?' He seemed to relax and began to eat his eggs again. 'How much trouble can it be in only four hours?'

Hermione resisted the urge to correct his pronoun usage and reflected it was simply a lucky thing that she would be able to tell Luna she could help out, at all.

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That night, Severus was happily ensconced in his study, reading a bit of Dickens, simply for pleasure. Hermione had been in the sitting room playing with the baby, and now she had put it to sleep in some sort of travelling baby basket. The ball was going on above, and *he* was not there no, Lupin was on chaperone duty this year what could be better?

Until, of course, the pounding at the door came.

He strode into the sitting room to find Hermione kneeling on the floor, speaking to one of his first-years Ophelia Brown, if memory served. The child was tear-streaked and distressed. Usually, the Prefects handled these types of issues, but all the Prefects were at the damned Ball. Bugger!

Miss Brown allowed Hermione to dry her face, then scampered out the door whilst Hermione headed for the bathroom.

'What's the problem?' he asked resignedly.

'Ophelia has got her period,' Hermione answered him, emerging from the bath with some sort of feminine product under her arm. 'I'll be back as soon as I can.'

Severus extended an arm to prevent her from passing him. 'You can't leave me alone with that!' he said, indicating the basket holding the peacefully sleeping Diana.

Hermione pursed her lips and studied him for a moment. 'All right,' she said. 'I'll stay here with the baby, and you can go instruct Ophelia in how to use a sanitary towel.'

'Don't be ridiculous!' he snorted. 'That's why the school employs a matron, Hermione. Send the child to the hospital wing.'

'Madam Pomfrey is at the Ball,' Hermione reminded him. 'Don't you remember? It's the first time in ten years that she's been able to attend, because there are no patients in the hospital wing.'

Severus stared at her, a terrible scowl on his face. Dammit! Did he want to take care of an eleven-year-old suffering her first menses, or a sleeping baby? Why the hell should he ever have to *make* such a decision?

'Very well,' he snarled.

Hermione touched his arm gently as she passed him. 'I'll try to hurry, but you know how girls can be ...'

Thankfully, he *did* know how menstrually-compromised girls could be, and he had no wish to experience that particular torture this night. Heaving a huge, put-out sigh, he went into the study to retrieve his book. As he wielded his wand to extinguish the candles, he heard the baby wake and begin to cry.

BUGGER.

Moving back into the sitting room, he found Bast, sitting beside the basket full of crying baby, looking at him reproachfully.

'I didn't make it cry!' he defended himself, striding across the floor and staring down at the red-faced, flailing scrap of humanity.

Bast decided to add her voice to that of the squalling infant, and soon the two were dueting in an acute counterpoint guaranteed to replace the Dementor's Kiss as capital punishment in the wizarding world.

'All right!' he hissed, and gingerly, he lifted baby Diana from her basket, holding her beneath her armpits whilst her bootie-clad feet kicked in time with her cries. 'What seems to be the problem?' he said, attempting to cradle the screamer as he had seen people do with babies.

But baby Diana was having none of it. Her eyes were screwed shut, her face was the colour of a Gryffindor jumper, and Severus rather thought he could see the child's tonsils down her throat. For the love of Merlin, she was loud!

How else had he seen people hold babies? He pulled her to his chest and began to pace the room, one arm hooked under her bum, the other hand patting her on the back as he had seen Hermione do earlier. How did people with infants avoid deafness?

'I do not see what you have to complain about,' he said in his schoolroom voice. 'Hermione put on a fresh nappy and fed you before she put you in your basket.'

There was a slight diminution in the flailing and the volume of the screeching. Encouraged, he continued. 'It is generally considered to be good manners to be thankful for a bit of feeding and petting,' he pointed out. 'Where would the world be if the fawned-over just continued demanding more and more?'

He smirked. Wasn't that the actual state of the world? Warming to his subject, he went on, 'I can't imagine your mother, who has more good sense than one might think on first acquaintance, would permit you to get away with that sort of nonsense.'

He was on his tenth lap of the small living area of their quarters when it dawned on him that the caterwauling had come to an end. If Nimue were smiling upon him, the little twit would be asleep again. He continued to pace, relaxing his grip on the creature just a bit. She was obviously not going to squirt out of his hold like a Snargaluff seed out of its pod, so it was undoubtedly safe to relax his arms.

A friendly gurgle from the region of his shoulder informed him that baby Diana was not asleep, but was awake, and desirous of communion. Tentatively, he lifted her higher on his shoulder, and was rewarded by alert grey eyes and a soft cooing noise.

'Yes,' he said, 'a definite improvement on your part. An adequate transition,' he added, feeling as if the cessation of unnerving noise deserved particular praise.

In answer, his companion reached the hand that had lately been shoved into her mouth and damply grasped his nose, the act once again accompanied by a squeal of self-satisfaction.

He glared at her. 'I suppose you're proud of yourself,' he said, careful not to infuse too much acidity into his tone.

Diana gurgled her agreement and exchanged one damp hand for the other, giving his nose a good squeeze, as if expecting it to squeak.

Severus pried the offending appendage from his face. 'We obviously need to find a more rewarding activity for you,' he said, turning his face away from her so she could not reach him and beginning to walk around the room again. 'What would you like to hold?'

He was alarmed when his burden lurched to one side, as if attempting to reach for something. He readjusted his hold on her then glanced over his shoulder to see what she was fixated on.

One-year-old Diana Weasley was reaching for Mr Alister, who was seated on a bookshelf right on level with Severus' shoulder. Did he want wet baby fingers on his bear? For that matter, did he want wet baby fingers on his *face*? With a sigh of resignation, he picked the bear up. 'The bear interests you, does he?' he murmured.

Baby Diana received Mr Alister into her enthusiastic arms and gave the bear a whole-hearted hug. Severus could not prevent the grin that spread across his face. He had done the same thing a time or two himself, if memory served.

He seated himself in his favourite armchair and sat the baby on his lap, her back securely situated in the crook of one arm; in the opposite hand, he held Mr Alister so she could see him, and he moved the bear a bit as he spoke in a musing voice.

'Do you have a bear, Miss Weasley?' he asked conversationally. 'Every child should have a bear; I am a firm believer.'

Diana shoved a fist in her mouth and entertained herself by alternately petting the teddy bear and tilting her head back to look up at Severus' face.

'You know, Mr Alister, I thought I might have one of these, one day,' he said, inclining his head gently towards the baby, as if to make himself clear to the bear.

Bast approached him, apparently mollified now that the baby was no longer crying, and she leapt onto the arm of the chair opposite Diana. Severus slanted her a look of indignation. 'Oh, *now* you come around,' he said. 'Where were you when I needed aid?'

Bast flicked her tail and did not deign to respond, her china-blue eyes fixed on the baby.

'You've had babies,' he said to his familiar. 'You made it look easy. Well,' he amended, after a moment's reflection, 'aside from the disappearing and exploding into flames, your offspring turned out all right.'

Diana made a lunge for Bast, perhaps mistaking her for a soft toy, as well. Bast leapt down from the chair and sauntered off, seemingly having satisfied her curiosity. Severus allowed Diana to grab Mr Alister, a consolation prize for being denied a handful of kitty, and watched with a slight grimace of distaste as she attempted to put the bear into her mouth.

'Do you think it's wise to put that in your mouth?' he inquired of the child, reflecting that it was a good thing the baby was such a poor aim; at this rate, it would take her all night to manoeuvre the teddy's arm or leg into her maw.

'I shall have to procure a fresh teddy for my child,' he decided. 'Mr Alister deserves a peaceful retirement.'

Baby Diana turned to look up at him again, suddenly solemn. 'Not that I'm going to *have* a child,' he said hurriedly, as if Diana were questioning his avowal. 'Hermione is far too busy with her career to be bothered with motherhood, just now.'

At that moment, the door opened and Hermione came in. She was instantly diverted by the tableau before her. Wreathed in smiles, she advanced into the room, coming to kneel down on the floor and to smile and speak in soft tones to the baby. 'Look at Professor Snape and the next generation,' she said, darting a gleam at her suddenly stony-looking husband. 'Why on earth did you pick her up?'

He bristled. 'Could you not hear her blood-curdling screams from the Slytherin common room?' he demanded, now allowing his usual sarcastic tone into his voice.

Baby Diana held her arms out to Hermione, who plucked the baby from Severus' lap. He promptly stood and strode over the bookcase, placing Mr Alister once again out of harm's way.

Hermione spoke to Diana in a sing-song, nonsense tone. 'Were you crying while I was gone? Whatever for?' She watched Severus place his old teddy bear on the shelf with careful precision. 'Why did you let her have your bear? She has a whole bagful of her own baby toys.'

Severus glared at his wife. 'Pardon me if I was not thinking about baby bags when the little harpy was screaming fit to bring the castle walls down,' he snapped.

He retreated into affronted silence on the sofa, his attention seemingly glued to the book in his hands, while he watched from behind the curtain of his long black hair as his wife interacted with the small person. At last, the Weasleys were standing in the sitting room in their dress robes, gathering all of the baby's innumerable bits of paraphernalia into the bag that Severus had failed to remember in the doubtful excitement of having a screaming child in his arms. He stood and moved behind Hermione to

see the Weasleys out. At the door, Luna Weasley turned and said to her daughter, 'Say bye-bye to Hermione and the professor, Diana.'

Diana looked directly into Severus' eyes and held up one baby hand, deftly managing to open and close her little fist twice, in a parody of a wave. That she had her hand pointed toward her own face, and had effectively said 'bye-bye' to herself, hardly seemed to matter to the women, who exclaimed over the baby's cleverness.

Weasley met Severus' eyes over the heads of their cooing wives and said, 'That's the first time she ever did that,' with such wonder in his voice that Severus felt a tiny twinge of something he would only identify as envy under the cover of darkness, holding his sleeping wife and contemplating fatherhood.

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Hermione woke early on the morning after the Yule Ball, a soft *Lumos* igniting the candles nearest the bed. Severus slept on at her side, his face strangely young in repose, unguarded and peaceful. She thought of the night before, walking into their rooms to find him sitting in his favourite chair with a baby on his knee, at his ease, looking ... *right* to his wife's eyes. She could so clearly see him, now, with *their* baby in his arms, and the wanting swept over her again, an ache so deep and primordial that her hands fell to her lower abdomen, as if to cradle her empty womb.

Tears started to her eyes, but she forced them back, slipping from the bed and padding into the bathroom for a shower. The students would leave this morning, and then she and Severus would go to Enchanté for the Christmas hols. Surely, snuggled up before the sitting room fire, with the Christmas tree twinkling with real fairies, she would find the courage to tell Severus she wanted a baby.

She *had* to. The idea had taken firm root and would not be banished and now her very happiness depended upon it.

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The first Monday of the Christmas hols found Hermione and Severus in Diagon Alley, Christmas shopping. She had done a fine job of wheedling him into accompanying her, and he had let her coax him. He had meant to go with her anyway it was heaven to have her all to himself, with no students to interrupt, and no work to pull either of them away from the other but he was not above allowing himself to be coddled by his wife. Life ought to include far more moments of personalised coddling and far fewer moments of dealing with dunderheads, truth be told.

With her gloved hand tucked in his elbow, they strolled along the wizarding shopping district, enjoying the holiday decorations and displays in the windows. Hermione seemed a bit preoccupied, but when she looked at him, her expression was warm and loving, so he was not concerned.

'For whom are we shopping?' he asked her when they had strolled down to Knockturn Alley and turned back.

'I want to buy a little something for the children,' she answered.

He slanted a sardonic look into her face. 'All the children in existence or a particular set of children?' he inquired snidely.

Hermione turned a laughing look up into his face, and he was moved, as ever, by the beauty of her smile.

'I meant the Weasley grandchildren,' she scolded.

He blanched. 'All of them?' In addition to Diana and young James Potter, the Weasleys had a number of other grandchildren, the gene pool having been enriched by Bill and his French wife, Charlie and his Romanian wife, and the diabolical twins and their wives had produced one set of identical twins each. Severus never tried to keep up with how many there were; the number was constantly increasing, after all.

'We *will* see them at the Burrow for Christmas lunch,' she pointed out. 'And I don't mean expensive gifts some small thing for each of them, I would think ....'

Severus willingly followed her into Gladrags, wandering in her wake through the adult section of the store to the Wee Witch & Wizard Wing. Severus found himself diverted by a large display of teddy bears. Having recently become reacquainted with Mr Alister, he felt it was his duty to investigate the current teddy bear technology what improvements had been made in the field of teddy bear construction since he had been a lad?

He picked up one or two of the finer specimens; he saw that not all teddy bears were jointed, as Mr Alister was; some were simply soft all over. He was sorry to see that the materials used to create these modern bears were inferior to those used to make his bear. It was a shame, really, that quality had to go down as society advanced.

He was distracted from his teddy bear audit by his wife, who had wandered away from him. Although she had assured him that she did not plan to purchase clothing for the child of every person they knew, she was drifting from display to display of tiny garments, seemingly entranced. Before his bemused eyes, she lifted a romper suit, first holding it up, then lifting it to her cheek and closing her eyes. She put that down and moved on to inspect a shiny pram, her fingertips exploring the padding within, as if to test for softness.

Wandering on from the prams, she paused before a display of maternity robes, tucked into a section of the baby wing, for the expectant mums. The robes did not hold much interest for her, apparently, for she moved past them to a rack of Muggle-style tee-shirts with clever sayings emblazoned on them. She plucked a Gryffindor-red shirt from the display and held it up, chortling softly. On the front in whimsical font were the words, 'Does this baby make me look fat?'

She replaced the shirt and moved on to a table spread with baby cot bedding in every shade of the rainbow, and she spent a long time examining many different sorts of sheets and shawls and tiny baby pillows. Next, she moved on to a display of booties and soft shoes. As he watched her, it was as if he was peering down a long, dark tunnel with a small light, growing larger by the second, heading straight at him. Frozen and blinded with wonder by this oncoming luminous object, he was struck head-on by the indisputable locomotive fact: His wife wanted a baby she wanted *their* baby. The elation which spread unexpectedly through him did not touch his face his years of hiding every feeling and guarding every reaction had likely robbed him of the ability for spontaneous displays of emotion but for a dizzy moment, gladness sang in his blood. He would have a son an heir and *damn* if he would not be a good father! To *hell* with the bastard who had begat him!

The euphoria was swiftly followed by a serious caveat: If she wanted a baby, why had Hermione not told him so? He had put his desires aside, in consideration for her he was determined that she would have everything she wanted and she had clearly wanted to succeed in her career. She had certainly attained that end in quite short order perhaps that was why she was ready now to move onto another goal but it did not explain why she had not *told* him of her decision.

He frowned down at the bear he still held in his hands; it was a pastel-coloured teddy with a rainbow ribbon about its throat. Did she think *he* would object to a baby? He wracked his brain for the conversations they had shared about it, for things he had communicated to her regarding his thoughts on parenthood. As he reviewed his memories, her reticence became very plain to him.

Leaving her in rapt contemplation of baby bags, he slipped to the front of the store and made a purchase, then disturbed her absorption with a collection of frilly bonnets and bore her away to lunch.

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Hermione looked around in the quietly smart restaurant and took a sip of the festive wine Severus had ordered with their meal. They had dined on pheasant and were in a happy after-meal glow. She slipped one foot from her shoe and stretched her leg until her toes encountered his trousers leg. His gaze met hers across the table, and his eyes darkened with satisfaction as her stockinged foot stroked down his calf.

'Wine with lunch,' she said, 'and such an elegant lunch it is! Are you stacking the deck in your favour for afters?'

'Perhaps,' he allowed, studying her. 'I can't think of a better way to pass a holiday than in studious practice.'

Her trill of laughter pleased him; every positive reaction from her added another bit of mortar to the wall of security she had begun to build in him. She was such a gift her

advent into his life had started him down a path he had never dared to hope to tread and the Enchantment added a facet to their relationship, which raised them head and shoulders above the other couples of their acquaintance. It was not only love between them, but affinity, as if they took every breath as one. What could be more natural than for them to share that love with a child born of its fruition?

'And what do you want to practice?' she asked suggestively.

Reaching into his cloak pocket, Severus removed the pastel bear and placed it upon the table between them. Hermione became very still, her brown eyes round, her lovely face thoughtful. At last, she raised her eyes to his.

'You know,' she whispered.

He nodded. 'I know and I concur.'

He was a bit unprepared for her sudden rush of tears, but he simply exited his side of their booth and slipped in beside her, putting a steadying arm about her shoulders and drying her face with his handkerchief.

'But you don't like babies,' she managed, her voice choked with tears.

'I will very much like *our* babies,' he replied staunchly.

She blinked. 'B-babies?' she repeated, stressing the second syllable.

'Wasn't that the plan?' he inquired mildly. 'I did rummage about in your mind, if you'll recall, Pet you want one girl and one boy.'

'You want a son,' she said. 'I remember from the Mirror of Erised.'

One side of his mouth curved up. 'I want our child the one we create from love,' he said simply. 'I'll take what we get and the second time around, if you like, we can make conditions favourable for the gender we want.'

It was a rather esoteric field of study, but a Potions master certainly had at his disposal the knowledge of how to brew philtre to influence the womb to accept sperm bearing specific genetic markers. Hermione's lips curved into an answering smile. 'That's what I was thinking, exactly!' she said happily, her voice soft and wondering. 'That we'd take our chances the first time and influence the environment the next time.'

'Brilliant minds reach the same conclusions,' he told her. With a whimsical air that none save Hermione had ever witnessed, he said, 'When did you wish to begin this project?' A wicked gleam lit his dark eyes. 'I would want to clear my calendar to accommodate you, of course.'

Concern clouded her face. 'You're not saying this just to please me, are you? Just to *accommodate* my wishes?'

He was touched by how bravely she offered him an out, in spite of her obvious burning desire to conceive. Solemnly, he shook his head. 'I suspect we have been travelling parallel trains of thought, each thinking the other was not quite ready to embark upon the adventure of parenthood just yet,' he told her.

Relief brought back her smile. 'Then I want to begin *now*!' she averred.

Severus made a show of looking all about the restaurant. 'Never let it be said I stood in the way of your happiness, Pet,' he said drolly. 'Here on the bench, or did you wish for me to take you on the tabletop, amidst the cutlery?'

She gurgled her laughter, and he felt as if he had the world in the palm of his hand.

'Not here, silly,' she said primly, her own wicked gleam belying her words. 'At home, of course.'

'When are you due to take your Potion, again?' he asked, moving one hand to cup her cheek and watching her tilt her head to allow him access to her throat.

She turned her half-lidded eyes, alive with passion, to his. 'Today,' she said huskily.

'And have you done so?' he asked, allowing his thumb to trace the contour of her full lower lip.

The tip of her pink tongue darted out to lave the pad of his thumb as she shook her head once.

'Then I suggest we go home and get started,' he murmured, feeling the desire building between them, the Enchantment synchronising even their reproductive instincts. 'If we are diligent in our efforts, you may return to Hogwarts in January in an interesting condition.'

Hermione picked up the small blue bear with pink ears, nose, and pads of its paws, and tucked it into her pocket, then she gave him a rather purposeful push. He smirked and stood, assisting her to rise before escorting her out into the street, where they could Disapparate to Enchanté.

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Her hunger for him had not been this keen since the early weeks of their marriage, when the Enchantment had pounded in them with incessant force, causing them to join again and again, rapturously exploring the magic connexion which bound them. He was thankful for their holiday, and they both luxuriated in the new intimacy born of the decision to increase their family. Not a room in the house went unused as they industriously pursued impregnation. Quirk, the house-elf, tactfully cast revealing spells before entering any room, while Crookshanks and Bast simply watched them with knowing cat-eyes. Shopping for Christmas gifts went by the wayside; they had little interest in wandering far from their own home, content to lay wrapped in one another's arms into the long winter nights, with only the light of the fire witness to their tranquil waiting.

Ten days slipped past, and it was Christmas Day. Severus lay back upon his pillow, sweaty and panting, one arm thrown over his eyes as Hermione curved against his side, humming.

'I like all this practice,' she purred.

'You'll likely shag me into an early grave, minx,' he said, opening his eyes and looking into her glowing face. 'I can think of no better way to cross the Veil,' he added. 'I swear you grow more luscious with every passing day. You've never been more delicious.' His long tongue darted out, as if to savour again the essence of her, upon which he had feasted until she had cried out.

She gave a self-satisfied smirk, an expression she had undoubtedly learnt from him, and pushed herself into a sitting position. 'You're just trying to talk me into another go, and we don't have time,' she informed him. 'We're expected at the Burrow for Christmas lunch at one and it's after ten already.'

She swayed for a moment and he turned to her, a slight frown on his face. 'Are you all right?'

'Just dizzy for a second,' she assured him. 'If you promise to behave yourself, I'll let you wash my back in the shower.'

He sat up beside her, a furrow between his eyes. She literally tasted differently and now she was dizzy. Perhaps...

He leant across her, picking up her wand and placing it in her hand.



'What?' she asked, giving him a puzzled look.

'Cast the diagnostic,' he said.

'I checked yesterday,' she reminded him. 'It's too soon it's silly for us to be checking so often, anyway.'

'Humour me,' he insisted.

She stilled. 'You're serious.'

He nodded.

She swallowed. 'You do it I think my hands are shaking.'

'Lie down,' he said, turning to pick up his wand.

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Severus slipped into the nursery, fully dressed for their outing to the Burrow, his hair still damp from the shower. He walked past the pristine white baby cot with its soft yellow elf-knit shawl and approached the shelf on the wall, upon which Mr Alister sat in solitary state, a silent sentinel.

From his pocket, Severus withdrew the small pastel coloured bear and with infinite care, he settled the newcomer beside his old teddy.

'It's looks as if you're going to have some company,' he remarked to Mr Alister. His large hand passed gently over the thinning fur on his oldest friend, and inclining his head to the pastel bear, he said, 'Look after him, won't you?'

Hermione's bushy head came around the doorframe. 'Are you ready to go? We're going to be late!'

'Yes, dear,' he said and followed his wife from the room.

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Promptly at one o'clock, they stood in the snow outside the Burrow, their arms laden with hampers of Christmas fare, Quirk's contribution to the Christmas lunch to come.

'Will you tell them or shall I?' Hermione asked shyly.

Severus looked down into her face, marvelling at her incandescence. 'I shall tell them, Pet,' he said, a half-smile on his face. 'It's a father's prerogative to brag.'

Hermione's glistening eyes brimmed over, and he let the hamper in his arms float in the air as he dried her face; pregnant women were known for fluctuating emotional states, were they not? If was a man's job to ride the waves with patience and to mop up the happiness along with the sadness, he supposed.

'Merry Christmas, Severus,' she managed in a tiny voice when he had her presentable again.

'Have I thanked you for my gift?' he murmured, pressing his hand to her tummy.

'Yes,' she breathed, covering his hand with her own. 'But you can thank me again when we get home if you have the energy.'

Arthur and Molly Weasley opened the door to the rare sight of Severus Snape in an honest belly laugh, and they exchanged wondering looks before herding the Snapes into the bosom of their Christmas celebration.

It was a happy Christmas, indeed.

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A/N: Happy Christmas to you all! Beta reading thanks to Keladry Lupin and DeeMichelle; Brit-picking was done by MagicAlly - and where would I be without Shug (sshg316) to alpha-read and cheerlead? Additionally, thanks to Ferporcel for a preliminary read of the first two sections.

SubHub and I have been brewing this story since *last* Christmas. Many of these incidents are particular to our pregnancies and bring fond smiles to our faces.

This story is dedicated to every woman who ever longed to have a baby and to every girl who ever dreamed of one day being a mum.

