

Simple Gifts

by Gmariam

A set of two holiday stories exploring the relationship between Dumbledore and Snape. After helping the headmaster move the Mirror of Erised to a new home, Severus Snape receives an unexpected gift as the New Year turns. Several years later, as Albus Dumbledore celebrates his first Christmas after the dramatic events on the Astronomy Tower, an old friend arrives to remind him of the gift he once gave.

A Gift of Trust/A Gift of Faith

Chapter 1 of 1

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A Gift of Trust

December, 1991

Severus Snape stood silently in front of the Mirror of Erised, staring darkly into its reflective depths. He narrowed his black eyes as he beheld his deepest desire and felt his heart flutter in his chest at the vision before him. He frowned as he found himself thinking about what the boy had seen and wondered if it were as shallow a desire as he would have expected from the son of James Potter. He dared not ask the headmaster; such things were best kept private, and the headmaster would undoubtedly keep Potter's secret safe, just as he had protected the arrogant boy all year.

Severus turned away from the Mirror, irritated that his mind had once more turned to thoughts of Potter; the green-eyed git would be the end of him yet. He grimaced to himself, for both his rough thoughts and his naive desires, then wiped his face blank as Dumbledore entered the empty classroom.

"I appreciate your assistance in this matter, Severus," the headmaster said quietly, blue eyes studying the Potions master from behind his half-moon spectacles. "I hope you have not been waiting long."

Severus inclined his head courteously, lank black hair falling in his face to break their momentary eye contact. "Not at all, Headmaster."

"You had a moment to look into the Mirror, then?" continued Dumbledore, his expression both curious and compassionate.

"I did," answered Snape curtly, hoping his tone would preclude any further inquiry. Dumbledore was astute and understood the unspoken signal. He nodded sagely and turned to look into the Mirror himself. The headmaster sighed heavily; Severus briefly wondered what a man as powerful as Dumbledore might truly desire, and why he would sigh with such melancholy upon seeing it in the Mirror.

"All right, then," Dumbledore said softly. "It is indeed time to let go of dreams and live."

Severus narrowed his eyes; what did the headmaster dream about that would stop him from living? He pushed aside his personal curiosity, as well as his recollections of

what he himself had seen in the depths of the strange glass. He would not allow his desires to overcome him, no matter the cost to his sanity or soul. With a silent nod he helped Dumbledore move the Mirror of Erised to its new home in the third floor corridor.

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Several nights later, Severus sat by the fire in his room, idly paging through a new text on advanced potions making. It was complete rubbish, and he certainly would not be adopting it for his classes. With a sigh of frustration that had nothing to do with the book, he tossed the heavy volume aside and stood to pour himself a glass of Firewhisky. He had been unable to concentrate ever since he looked in the cursed Mirror. It had taken an unhealthy hold on him, and he regretted ever gazing into its magical reflection as his mind once more turned to thoughts he did not care to dwell on.

He was shaken out of his bleak reverie by a knock at the door. With a flash of annoyance, he frowned as he set down the decanter and strode quickly to answer the intrusive disruption. He assumed it was a student and unceremoniously jerked the door open, prepared to reprimand whoever was interrupting yet another New Year's Eve spent alone.

It was the headmaster.

"Headmaster." Snape recovered quickly and inclined his head to the unexpected guest. "I wasn't expecting anyone tonight. Why aren't you at the New Year's feast?"

"I'm on my way there now, Severus," replied Dumbledore, smiling. "I was hoping you might join me?"

Severus narrowed his eyes, tempted, but finally shook his head, knowing his prickly personality had no place at the Hogwarts table during the holidays, particularly when plagued by such maudlin thoughts. "Thank you, but I'd prefer my solitude this evening."

Dumbledore sighed in disappointment. "Some year I hope you will take me up on my offer and join us, Severus. A bit of holiday cheer might do you well."

Severus raised his eyebrow at the very thought. "I am not exactly a cheerful man, Headmaster."

"I suppose not," said Dumbledore. "Perhaps someday . . . Nevertheless, I did want to give you this." He handed Severus a box wrapped smartly in colorful paper and topped with a large green bow. "A bit late, perhaps, but something I thought you may need in the coming years. Happy New Year, Severus." With a final tilt of his head, Dumbledore bowed and made his way toward the Great Hall.

Severus slowly shut the door. A strange mixture of emotions touched his heart; he had not received a gift of any sort for years, let alone a gift from the headmaster himself at the turn of the new year. He wasn't quite sure what to make of it or how he should feel. He certainly had no idea what could possibly be wrapped inside the vibrant box.

Frowning to himself, Severus returned to his seat by the fire. He studied the box and pondered what he might find upon opening the unexpected gift. Another book on potions? Rare ingredients for his personal store? A set of new gobstones? His needs were few, and he could not imagine what the headmaster could think so important as to deliver something so personally.

Severus flexed his thin fingers and with surprising gentleness pulled apart the green bow, setting it on the table next to him. With a smirk he simply ripped off the multi-colored paper and tossed it into the fire. He held an ordinary cardboard box in his hands and found that his heart was beginning to beat a bit faster with the anticipation of what lay within.

When he took the lid from the box, his breath caught in his throat at the object which lay nestled inside a pile of soft tissue. It was a delicate glass ornament, exquisite in its etched detail. It was lightly tinted in shades of red and gold and reflected the warm glow of the fire, tossing glittering sparks of color throughout the darkened room.

It was a phoenix.

As he lifted the fragile ornament from the box, a single flower petal fell to the floor...a lily. The moment it touched the worn carpet, it transfigured into a large evergreen tree. Severus stood and watched in amazement as the tree was magically covered in glittering candles and shining glass balls. With a flash of fire, Fawkes suddenly appeared, a golden star clutched in his beak. He circled the room, then gently placed the star on top of the tree. He landed on the chair and began a magical song; it filled the room with a warm sound that resonated like a golden bell. The notes moved Severus's heart, for he knew instinctively what Fawkes and through him, the headmaster had given him.

Trust.

Severus had felt his perseverance severely tested with the return of Harry Potter to the magical community. The years spent in silent waiting were over, and the boy Severus held responsible for much of his unfortunate lot in life had finally come to Hogwarts. He knew that many of the others in the castle questioned his ability to be objective when it came to the boy, and that some even kept close watch on his interaction with the young Gryffindor. Severus's resentment of James Potter had naturally transferred to the son, especially since the boy was every bit as confident and cocky as his dead father; yet his bitterness had multiplied a hundred fold with the suspicion of a faculty who now viewed him even more apprehensively due to his past.

If only they knew the truth.

Severus had looked into the Mirror of Erised earlier that week and seen himself: he had no Dark Mark, no past to atone for, no crimes to regret. There was no chip on his shoulder from the sideways glances and hateful looks he had received all his life, from students and teachers alike. He was rid of Harry Potter and the green eyes that accused him every day. His anger and bitterness were gone, his life free of guilt and remorse. He was respected, he was trusted, and he was loved by the woman he had risked everything for.

Severus hung the elegant glass ornament on the tree, studying it with bright eyes. The headmaster had read his mind, if not his heart as well, and had granted him a truly magical gift this holiday. "Tell him thank you," he said quietly to Fawkes. With one last chirp, the brilliant bird disappeared in a second flash of fire.

Severus poured himself another glass of Firewhisky and returned to his chair. He turned toward the tree and casually studied its glowing branches. It was the first tree he had ever had in his office, even if it was a few days late. The exquisite phoenix reflected the lights of the candles, and Severus found himself strangely mesmerized by the ornament's beauty. Hope blossomed in his heart as he gazed at the dancing glimmers tossed about the room.

Trust was a beautiful thing.

Severus absently stared at his left forearm. Perhaps if one aspect of his vision came true, the others might as well. Perhaps one day he would be free of the Dark Mark he knew still scarred his skin. Perhaps he would be free of the guilt that plagued him, the bitterness that poisoned him. Perhaps he would be respected, as he was now trusted.

He might never be loved by the one he had lost, but perhaps one day he would be free of Potter and his damning green eyes.

Until then, he would honor Dumbledore's faith in him and protect the boy. He had somehow earned the headmaster's trust and would not violate that sacred bond. Whether he would achieve the rest of his heart's desire remained to be seen; at least for one night he would have hope.

Severus smiled sadly to himself as he took up the Potions book once more. The light from the tree brightened the gloomy study, and far away across the grounds, he heard the echo of a glorious song, welcoming the New Year with renewed trust and faith in love.

December, 1997

Albus Dumbledore set down the book he had been reading and sighed. He took off his half-moon spectacles and rubbed his weary eyes, then stood and crossed the portrait to a small table, where he poured himself a snifter of brandy.

"Feeling a bit maudlin this Christmas?" asked a sarcastic voice from one of the other nearby portraits. Phineas Nigellus arched a thin eyebrow and continued. "Really, Dumbledore, I never took you as one to drink to his misery."

Albus took a slow sip and let the dark liqueur warm his throat. "I'm merely toasting the holiday," he replied lightly. "Care to join me?"

Phineas seemed to ponder the invitation for a moment before he nodded curtly. "I believe I will, seeing as it is Christmas Eve." He walked out of the frame of his own portrait and was soon standing in the painting behind the desk with Dumbledore.

The most recent headmaster handed Phineas a heavy snifter and raised his own glass. "Cheers," he offered, and together they sipped their brandy.

"So, what's on your mind, Albus?" asked Phineas after a moment. They moved toward a set of chairs by the fire and settled in for a night's talk.

"Too many things, Phineas," Albus replied contemplatively. "Too many things."

"The boy?" Phineas couldn't help it when his lip curled at the mention of Harry Potter; he still had his doubts about the so-called Chosen One, in spite of Dumbledore's confidence.

"Yes, Harry is often on my mind," said Albus. "He has a difficult path ahead of him still. I did not leave things easy for him, and he is struggling."

Phineas snorted at the understatement and took a long sip of brandy. "What else then?" he continued. "What about Snape?"

Albus sighed. "I must confess that I worry about him as well, after all he's been through. He struggles as much if not more than Harry."

Phineas narrowed his eyes at Albus's uncharacteristic confession. "He'll manage, Albus. He's kept the charade going this long. How is the Order faring without an inside source?"

Albus studied the fire for a moment. "They are doing as well as they can, but the task they face is almost overwhelming. Voldemort continues to gain strength, even more than during the first war. There have been a great many losses." He sighed again as he remembered Charity Burbage, Alastor Moody, and the many Muggle lives lost to the ongoing fight.

"They will keep fighting," offered Phineas. "But I suppose now it is up to the boy."

"I only wish . . ." Albus trailed off and smiled to himself. "Ah, well, it does not matter."

Phineas set down his drink and pierced Albus with a sharp stare. "You don't like being dead, do you?" he asked bluntly. "It's your first Christmas in this portrait, and you're feeling sorry for yourself."

Albus raised his eyebrows at the other man. "Hardly, Phineas. I of all people understand the necessity for death. I've accepted my passing perfectly well. I mourn for those left behind." At times he despaired for them, knowing what they faced without him.

Phineas snorted again. "You're so magnanimous, you..." He was cut off by the abrupt sound of the chimney coming to life in the empty office below them. They both stood and moved toward the edge of the portrait, staring down at the hearth. Green flames erupted in the fireplace where, to their surprise, a large man stepped nimbly from the ashes into the circular office.

He was almost as tall as Hagrid, though quite a bit more round. He had a bushy white beard and deep green eyes that twinkled as he looked around the room, grinning widely. He was dressed in garish robes of red velvet trimmed with white fur and carried a large sack over his shoulder. He wore a matching red hat, which he removed as he entered the office, and black buckled boots, which he stomped clean on the rug.

"Kristopher!" exclaimed Albus, a smile lighting his own face. "It's so good to see you, old friend. It has been far too long!"

The large, bearded man glanced around the vacant office, looking puzzled. "Up here, giant," offered Phineas Nigellus dryly. The man finally found the portrait behind the desk and strode over.

"Hello, Phineas," said the man in the red robes with a rumbling laugh. "Still as grouchy as ever, I see." He reached a hand toward the portrait, and it passed right through the canvas, reappearing in the painting to shake Phineas's hand.

"Albus," said the man, and his hand moved through the portrait to clasp his friend on the shoulder. "It's good to see you again, at least."

"I hope you'll join us, Kristopher," invited Albus, stepping aside and indicating the way toward a third chair now set by the fire.

"Don't mind if I do!" exclaimed Kristopher with another deep laugh. "Let me see if I can recall how . . ." He pulled his hand from the portrait and took out a wand. He tapped himself on the head, muttered a quiet spell, and with a sparkle of light appeared in the painting with the two former headmasters. "That is one of the strangest charms I've ever done," he remarked as he looked around the portrait, then back into the spacious office.

"Not very many people can work that spell," said Albus, pouring his guest a drink. "I'm glad you remembered."

He handed Kristopher a drink, which the large man promptly transfigured into a steaming cup of tea. "Sorry, Albus, I'm on the job," he explained as he took a small sip. The three men went to the chairs by the fire.

"Job?" asked Phineas, eyeing the larger man's vibrant red robes. "Would that have anything to do with your unusual . . . costume, then?"

Kristopher laughed merrily. "It would indeed. You don't think I'd wear something this fancy just for fun, do you?"

"You've always been rather larger than life," Phineas replied dryly.

"And now I'm a legend!" exclaimed Kristopher with another hearty laugh.

"Not the Muggle myth?" asked Albus curiously, taking a sip of his brandy as he studied the large man.

"None other," answered Kristopher, inclining his head proudly.

"How remarkable," said Albus. "I haven't thought about him since I was a child. For a while I believed quite strongly in him. It seems even wizards can keep secrets."

"Indeed," said Phineas, sounding irritated. "Not being well versed in Muggle traditions myself, I'd love to know what's so remarkable about this brilliant outfit and the secrets it reveals."

Kristopher exchanged a wry look with Albus and set down his teacup. "I'm Father Christmas," explained the larger man.

"You don't say?" asked Phineas skeptically. "And do you perhaps know the tooth fairy?"

"I met him at the last staff meeting," answered Kristopher with a wink. "He's a right jolly bloke, great sense of style."

Phineas snorted and drained his glass.

"I'd ask what's new around here," began Kristopher, eyeing Albus sympathetically, "but I've heard quite a bit already." Phineas made a huffing noise as he stood to refill his snifter.

"I'm afraid much has changed since we last met, Kristopher," answered Albus.

"Obviously," said Kristopher, his face sympathetic. "What happened? No one seems to understand."

"It is a long story, but not one for the holidays," replied Albus quietly, staring into the fire for a moment before turning back to Kristopher with a smile. "So tell us instead what brings you to Hogwarts."

"I bear gifts for the students, of course," said Kristopher with broad smile. "It's Christmas Eve; that's my job now. I have something for both of you as well."

He reached into his sack and drew out a finely made pair of gloves and a small book, both of which he handed to Phineas. "These are for you, Phineas. I hope you enjoy them."

Phineas inclined his head as he examined the dark leather gloves. "They are quite nice, thank you." He opened the book and raised his eyebrow when he saw the title. "*Songs of Innocence and of Experience?* How unusual."

"I think you'll like them, even if you never admit it," replied Kristopher. "William Blake had a good deal of insight to offer through those poems, and your skeptical mind could use a bit of broadening in these times."

Albus chuckled at the affronted look on his friend's face. Kristopher laughed with him as he dug deep into his sack once more. He reached farther and farther, until his head was in the bag, and he was searching through it with both hands. "Yours is here somewhere, Albus," they heard his muffled voice rumble, as if from far away.

"It's really not necessary," said Albus, standing to refill his drink. "I am content."

"Bollocks," said Kristopher, untangling himself from the bag. "Everyone gets something from Father Christmas, whether they believe it or not." He held two wrapped packages in his hand and presented a small blue bundle first. "These are for you. I know your fondness for them."

Albus unwrapped the soft package and found a warm pair of fuzzy socks. He laughed as he sat down again. "Thank you, Kristopher. I have always said that socks are better than books!" He set down his drink and pulled on his new gift. There was an intricate pattern woven into the blue socks, and his feet instantly felt warm and relaxed. Albus smiled with delight. "Did you knit some sort of charm into them?" he asked.

Kristopher touched the side of his nose and smiled. "I did. It was a bit tricky, not being much of a knitter myself. The first pair bit my toes; these simply warm them."

"They're perfect!" exclaimed Albus, leaning back and closing his eyes contentedly. "Thank you very much."

"I have another gift for you, Albus," said Kristopher, and his voice grew serious. Albus opened his eyes and sat up straighter in his chair. His breath caught in his throat as Kristopher held out an exquisite glass ornament in the shape of a golden phoenix.

"Where did you get this?" he asked softly, taking it gently and turning it over in his hands.

"From the one you gave it to six years ago," replied Kristopher. "I spoke with him earlier tonight. I know your trust was difficult to give, Albus, but it was well placed. He remains loyal, and I have faith that he will do the right thing when the time comes."

Albus sighed softly. "I know, Kristopher. I have never doubted Severus. I fear it was harder for him to trust me at the end. I can only imagine how he must feel."

"He is finally starting to understand, I think," replied Kristopher. "So trust that you did the right thing."

"That is far easier said than done," said Albus. "I carry the burden of an old man's many regrets." He gazed in wonder at the beautiful ornament. He had given the glass phoenix to Severus the first year that Harry had come to Hogwarts. It had been a difficult time for Severus, and Albus had sensed that the Potions master had needed a sign of reassurance. The phoenix represented Albus's trust in Severus, and now it came back to him as a reminder to keep that faith. As he held the delicate ornament, he felt a comforting warmth course down his arm and through his body; he thought he heard the soft echoes of Fawkes's beautiful song somewhere out on the snowy grounds.

"You must trust yourself as you trust others, Albus," said Kristopher quietly. "I know you have faith in Severus...as well as Harry Potter." Albus glanced up in surprise. "I'm not as out of the loop as I pretend to be," explained the large man. "If you believe in them as you say you do, then you must let go of your guilt, your regret, and trust the decisions you have made. Only then can your faith in them be true. Only then can your love truly guide them."

Albus stared at Kristopher as if taken aback at the man's words. Phineas Nigellus watched them both, astounded at the deep exchange. Albus looked down at the phoenix once more and closed his eyes. After a long moment he opened them with a smile. "You are right, of course," he finally said, his voice barely a whisper. "It is not Severus whom I question, or Harry whom I doubt, but myself. It is difficult to watch them go on alone, without me."

"You must believe in them, as they believed in you," said Kristopher simply. "They will do what they need to do, just as you did."

Albus nodded slowly. "Yes, I did. And I know they will as well, though I hope with far less regret than I."

"Do not despair, Albus," said Kristopher. He stood to leave. "The phoenix is a reminder: faith, loyalty, and love surround you, in life or death. Pass on the reminder, if need be."

Phineas and Albus stood as well. Kristopher shook Phineas's hand before grasping him in a solid hug. Phineas grimaced as he patted Kristopher awkwardly on the back, and the larger man stood back with a grin.

"May you always remain your skeptical, scornful self, Phineas," he said, his voice light again.

"And may you find a new job soon," retorted Phineas, shaking his head as he once more took in the giant's eccentric costume. "Red is definitely not your color."

"I think I'll keep this one for a while, thank you," answered Kristopher with a last wink. He turned to embrace Albus, encircling him so tightly that the former headmaster seemed almost to disappear into the red robes.

"You make a fine Father Christmas, Kristopher," Albus said, finally stepping back. "You've given me a priceless gift. Thank you."

"You're very welcome," said Kristopher, replacing his hat and taking up his sack. He moved over to the fireplace. "When you find your heart has doubts, you have but to remember the gift you once gave and have faith once more."

Kristopher reached into the pocket of his robes and withdrew some grey powder, which he tossed into the hearth. "I think I'll take the shortcut." He grinned before stepping

into the fireplace. "Happy Christmas, gentlemen!"

"Happy Christmas, Kristopher," said Albus, and Phineas inclined his head.

With a shout of, "The Burrow!" the fireplace erupted into green flames, and Kristopher disappeared to continue his holiday rounds. Albus and Phineas returned to their chairs by the fireplace. Phineas began to flip through the book of poetry he had received while Albus idly examined the golden phoenix by the light of the fire.

Suddenly Albus stood, still clasping the glass bird in his hand. "Excuse me, Phineas. I have some gifts of my own to distribute this evening. I'll be back in a short while." He strode out of the portrait, leaving the other man to his volume of poetry. Phineas huffed to himself, poured another drink, and settled down to wait. It was almost an hour before Albus returned, looking pleased. Phineas noticed immediately that the glass phoenix was gone, as were the blue socks. He merely raised his thin eyebrows, and Albus raised his in return.

"Happy Christmas, indeed," murmured Albus. He settled down once more, a smile on his face.

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Far away, in a cold, grey forest, a young man strode out of his tent several hours later to find a single wrapped box lying in the snow. He narrowed his eyes and ran a shivering hand through his messy black hair as he stared at mysterious present. Glancing around, he finally shrugged and began to unwrap the paper. He was startled when he beheld a beautiful glass phoenix, exquisitely detailed, its red and gold color reflecting the morning sun shining through the treetops.

The young man studied it with serious green eyes for a long while, puzzled. Soon a smile came over his face, as if he grasped something about the strange gift that only he could understand. His heart lightened by the simple ornament, he nodded to himself before placing it in the pouch around his neck.

"Thanks, Professor," he whispered to the air, ready to see his journey through to the end.

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Back at Hogwarts, a thin, greasy-haired man woke in his cold room. He glanced around in disdain, as he did each morning, and began to rise. He stopped when he saw a small gift at the foot of the bed. Sitting down again, he frowned as he opened the lumpy package. Inside he found a pair of cozy blue socks, knit with a complex pattern of spells.

The man studied the odd gift with glittering black eyes, his heart pounding strangely in his chest. With a small shrug, he pulled on the odd socks and noticed immediately that they warmed his feet wonderfully well. He stood and glanced around the empty room.

"Thank you, Headmaster," he whispered to the air, ready to see his duty through to the end.

Author's Note:

These two stories were originally written for separate challenges on MNFF before book seven was released. The first was written for a prompt in which Severus Snape receives a gift, and the second for a prompt in which a canon character had to meet Santa Claus during seventh year. After seeing "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince" recently, I decided I wanted to retool them to fit canon a bit better. I also decided to combine them in a set as one relates directly to the other. The originals were published under the titles "A New Year's Gift" and "A Gift of Faith" at MNFF in December, 2006. Many thanks to Grey Lady for her quick and thorough beta work on the original and to Sunshine the Southern Witch for looking over the revised version for both canon and comma consistency. I really appreciate your help! I hope everyone enjoys this revised version. Thank you for reading and Happy Holidays!