

Not a Present

by kellychambliss

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The package had appeared at the foot of Severus Snape's bed early on Christmas morning, but he had yet to open it. He didn't trust it.

Who would be giving him presents? The only person he could imagine doing such a thing was Albus Dumbledore, and Albus had already personally handed Snape his gift, a box of Honeyduke's assorted sweets. Snape appreciated the gesture, he supposed, even though he didn't like sweets and planned to leave the box anonymously on the table in the Slytherin common room.

But this other present was a surprise, and Snape liked surprises probably even less than he liked sweets. All he wanted from this miserable first year of teaching was to get through it with as little exposure to the derision of students and staff as he could manage. He didn't need anyone's misguided good cheer, and he certainly didn't need anyone's pity gifts.

He thought of simply tossing the mystery present into the fire, but hesitated, since who knew what manner of irritating charms might be protecting it? And part of him didn't really want to destroy it. It was attractively-packaged, he had to admit that, although the wrapping gave no clue to the giver; its colours seemed to have been chosen deliberately to conceal any House allegiance.

The rectangular-shaped gift was swathed in a piece of silk so deeply purple that it was almost black, yet so lustrous was the fabric that it fairly shimmered. Tied around the silk was a wide ribbon of white brocade that looped itself into an elegant, unfussy knot, and within the knot was a single white peacock feather that trailed softly against the regal dark background.

He had already interrogated Binta, the house-elf who did what little tending he would allow in his rooms, but she could or would tell him only that the package had been one of several on the table where the staff traditionally left their holiday gifts to be magicked by the elves to their recipients. The purple box had been labelled merely "Snape." Binta knew (or chose to vouchsafe) no more.

Snape paced his sitting room half in annoyance, half in consternation. If he accepted the present, would he be expected to reciprocate? He had no experience buying gifts and could think of no one to whom he wanted to offer one.

And there was always the horrible possibility that this one might turn out to be from someone who was romantically interested in him. Much to his dismay, Charity Burbage had already been (to his mind) suspiciously friendly in the staffroom, and there was a young barman at the Three Broomsticks who sometimes actually seemed to be flirting with him.

Snape had just decided to seek the advice of Dumbledore when a knock sounded at his chambers. Muttering in irritation, he flung open the door without even checking the identification wards and found himself facing a beaming Pomona Sprout, her arms filled with a leafy red-and-green plant in a red pot.

"Happy Christmas, Severus!" she said brightly. "I wanted to bring you this myself."

"What is it?" Snape asked, frowning at her, and Pomona laughed.

"It's your Christmas present, of course," she said. "Are you going to invite us in?"

Grudgingly, Snape stood aside, and Pomona and her plant bustled past him into the sitting room.

"This is *flora felix*," she said, depositing the pot near the fireplace; the plant's leaves immediately stretched themselves toward the warmth. "It gives off spores that have a calming effect. Now, it likes to be kept nice and cozy, but not too wet. And I . . . oh, my."

She broke off as she caught sight of the purple present on Snape's table. "I see you've got one of the Minerva specials. Isn't that the most beautiful package you've ever seen? Every gift she wraps is just gorgeous. She's old-fashioned that way . . . well, in many ways, as I'm sure you've noticed. But she won't use spello-tape or parchment or anything new-fangled. Real fabric, real ribbon, real charms, that's how Minerva wraps a present. Watch."

Pomona stepped over to the package and tugged hard on the white ribbon, which remained firmly tied. "See? It will only open for you."

Two spots of red burned on Snape's sallow cheeks. "I wasn't aware," he said stiffly, "that the staff was expected to exchange gifts."

"Well, we don't, as a rule," replied Pomona, seeming not to notice Snape's discomfort. "But it's become rather a tradition for us old-timers to welcome newcomers with a little something for their first Yule season at Hogwarts. Just a token. Has Filius been here yet?"

"No."

"Well, he will be. He'll bring you a bottle of something nice and potent. Now you be careful with whatever-it-is I guarantee it will have quite a kick. Filius may drink silly things with umbrellas in when he goes to the Broomsticks, but that's just his little joke out in public, when there are students about. Here at home, it's a different story, of course."

She smiled and patted Snape's arm. "Well, best wishes of the season, Severus. I won't be at Christmas dinner today; I'm going to a friend's in Hogsmeade, but I'll see you tonight at Minerva's, hmmm?"

And she was gone before Snape could respond.

Which was good, because he didn't know what he would have said. "Thank you," perhaps, if it had occurred to him, although he wasn't sure that he really *did* thank her. Snape was willing to tend the plants that he needed for potions ingredients, but he kept those in a controlled environment; he certainly didn't want greenery cluttering up his living space.

And he could have corrected Pomona's mistaken impression that she would see him that evening at Minerva's. Having no need of friends, Snape disliked social events, and he had already told Minerva that he would not be attending what he'd learnt was her annual Christmas-night gathering. But he was sure that if he'd mentioned his refusal to Pomona, she would only have badgered him to come. And then badgered him some more. She was not a Hufflepuff for nothing.

No, all in all, it was good that she had left when she did, although her departure meant that Snape now had no excuse not to face the purple-wrapped present.

So it was from Minerva. He still wasn't happy about this gift, but he did feel a little less anxious now that Pomona had explained about the tradition of giving something to new staff. Tokens only. With no expectation of exchange. This, he supposed he could handle.

And of course, he no longer needed to worry that the gift had come from someone with unwanted amorous designs upon him. Not only would Minerva have laughed at the idea of being romantically interested in Snape, but among the many surprising things that he had learnt since joining the Hogwarts staff was that Minerva McGonagall in his mind the very archetype of the repressed virgin spinster had in fact been happily involved for many years with Poppy Pomfrey.

His mind somewhat more at ease, Snape approached the present and reached for the brocade ribbon. As soon as his hand brushed it, the knot untied itself, the ribbon slipped off the package, and the rich purple silk unfolded.

The object that lay thus revealed almost caused Snape to stop breathing. It was a book.

And not just any book it was the *Venenum Veritas* of Quintus Appius, the definitive ancient work on truth potions, much of its lore still unsurpassed by later scholars. And, though his mind reeled at the thought, this was not just any *Venenum Veritas*, either: it was the eighteenth-century edition published by Blotts and Son.

Centuries ago, before Blotts took on Flourish as a partner, the firm had printed as well as sold books. Blottspère Magnus Blotts had been the genius of the company, while Son, on the other hand, had evidently been an oddity. Not much was known about Phineas Blotts, except that he had been a loner who cared not a whit about business.

But legend said that he did care about books, about giving them magic. Phineas, so the story went, used to tip hand-inscribed magical pages into selected volumes. Supposedly he was best at potions, supposedly he had devised foolproof formulae, supposedly he had spelled infallibility charms into the very fibres of the parchment on which he wrote his receipts, so that a potions-maker who followed the instructions exactly should be incapable of failure.

Snape had never had occasion to test the truth of these stories, since books produced by Phineas Blotts cost far beyond any price Snape was ever likely to afford. And in any case, they were rare. Irma Pince had already sadly informed him that not even the Hogwarts library boasted a Phineas.

Snape lifted the volume with trembling hands, unable to remember the last time he had wanted a material object so badly. Damn Minerva, for tempting him with something she must have known he couldn't keep. It was too valuable, too scarce a thing for him to accept. Why would she even try to give it to him?

His lips tightened. McGonagall must be playing a prank.

That was it she was laughing at him. She had to be. Probably the book wasn't a book at all; probably it was a heap of transfigured trash. No doubt she'd charmed it so that at midnight, it would transfigure back into in a Gryffindor muffler or something equally inane, and she would congratulate herself on pulling off such a fucking great joke.

Damn her. Damn Gryffindors, damn every last one of them.

Convinced though he was that the "gift" was a nasty trick, Snape nonetheless couldn't stop himself from opening the leather cover. Inside, tucked between the front endpapers, lay a square of parchment addressed to him in Minerva's distinctive emerald ink.

His first thought was to tear the note to pieces without even reading it why subject himself to her gloating? but for all he knew, the damned thing was hexed and would

burst into flame like a Howler if he didn't open it.

So he tapped the seal with his wand.

Severus Snape, Minerva had written in her precise hand, don't you dare consider refusing this. Oh, I know what you're thinking that it is too rare a prize to receive from someone whom you know only formally and whom I doubt you much like. And perhaps you are also afraid that by accepting this book, you'll be putting yourself in some sort of debt to me.

But you may set that fear aside; what you are holding is not a present. It's an obligation. Mine. When I took possession of this Venenum Veritas, many years ago now, it was with the understanding that I was a custodian only. I promised to pass these pages on as soon as I met a scholar capable of appreciating their powers.

I've seen your potions work, Severus, and I believe you are that scholar. So I am pleased to be able to hand this treasure to someone who can use it. (The book will not reveal its secrets to me, you see; Mr. Blotts charmed his parchments to respond only to those gifted with the mastery of potions.)

In short, you will be doing me a favour by accepting stewardship of this volume. If someday you care to hear its history, I'll be happy to explain.

In the meantime, I wish you a restful Christmas

There was no signature; Minerva didn't believe in belabouring the obvious.

Snape twisted his lips in a half-smile as he read the closing: she apparently knew him too well to wish him a "happy" Christmas. Well, to a teacher, a restful holiday was preferable, anyway.

He wasn't sure how long he stood there, holding the priceless gift in one hand and Minerva's note in the other, reluctant to move. What if he opened the book to Phineas's tipped-in pages, and they remained blank? Potions or no potions, if a witch as powerful as McGonagall couldn't read Phineas's secrets, what made Snape think that he, Severus Snape of Spinner's End, was worthy of them?

But finally the suspense grew too great, and Snape lay the book carefully on the table. Slowly, it opened of its own accord to a page of thick, creamy parchment that looked as fresh as if it had been newly-made.

It was blank.

And then, after a heart-stopping moment, old-fashioned handwriting began to scroll across the page, ingredient after ingredient appearing in a carefully-aligned list. Snape's initial excitement increased: though he wasn't sure exactly what potion these items would make, he could tell by their rarity and combination that the result would probably have something to do with healing perhaps something that would be a great boon to the wizarding world.

Eventually the list ended, though after several minutes, no instructions had yet appeared. Confused at first, Snape suddenly understood: only after he located all the materials would he be told what to do with them.

Severus smiled in earnest then, anticipating the blissful ingredient-gathering days to come. He'd start tomorrow, first thing Boxing Day. It seemed fitting, even if the box he'd be preparing was for himself.

As for tonight . . . tonight, perhaps he would stop in at Minerva's party after all. Just for a moment. Now that he gave the matter some thought, he realised that it might not be unpleasant, on Christmas, to drink one glass of firewhisky with . . . friends.

He might even take a bottle of whisky with him. Not as a present, of course, because Snape didn't do presents. It would be a repayment. Yes, that sounded better. A repayment.

On which he would tie a ribbon of white brocade.

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