

'Twas the Month Before Christmas

by *PlaidPooka*

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Chapter 1 of 1

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AN: This is in response to TPPM's 'Highly Unlikely' challenge. I'll warn you right now, this fic is silly. It's quite silly and I'm enormously proud of it! The challenge asks us to pick six lines and four things to include in the story, but was I satisfied? I tell you I was not. So I crammed in the whole lot! And into a one-shot as well. I've never had such fun!

My intrepid beta, Goblynn, is busy with my Ashwinder fic, Overcome With Feeling, so she has not worked her magic on this. Any stupidity is all my own.

"You want to *what*?" Severus Snape was not shouting...yet. At the moment he was simply confused. The shouting would come soon enough.

"I've decided we need a Santa Claus for the Christmas feast, Severus. As I've explained, with so many of our Muggle-born students orphaned from the war, we will have more students than usual staying here at Hogwarts over the hols. I think it would be a nice touch to include one of their Muggle customs at this year's feast. Cheer the poor children up a bit," Albus replied calmly.

"Exactly what is a Santa Claus?" Severus growled.

Eyes twinkling with barely concealed amusement, Albus lifted a thin book from his desk. Handing *'Twas the Night Before Christmas* to the dour Professor, Albus said, "This is Santa Claus."

Taking one look at the ridiculous illustration, Severus was thoroughly disgusted. What with the twinkling eyes, the merry smile, and the abhorrent Gryffindor-red suit, Severus found the whole image appalling. "Fascinating," he sneered. "However, I fail to see what this has to do with me. If you want to charm something into one of these contemptible Santa Claus', that sounds more a job for Professor Flitwick. I suggest you ask him."

"You misunderstand me, Severus. I don't want a charmed image; I want us to do this as the Muggles do. I need one of the Professors to dress up as Santa Claus and I think you are the perfect choice, my boy."

"I beg your pardon?" Severus asked, wide eyed. Surely he had not heard Albus correctly...

"I want you to dress up as Santa Claus for the Christmas feast, Severus," Albus said with a wide grin.

The shouting began. It started with "Have you at last gone bloody insane, old man?" It ended with "Excuse me, but I believe I am the *Potions master* at this school. I am NOT the resident buffoon!" With that last bit of shouting, the wild eyed Professor left Albus' office, slamming the door.

Furious, Snape stalked through the hallways, headed for the peace of his dungeons. This year had begun well. Voldemort was at last defeated, may he rot in the ninth level of hell. The thrice damned Gryffindor trio had finally graduated and left to pursue life goals other than getting on his last nerve. Even that twit, Longbottom had graduated, and the number of exploding cauldrons in his classroom had never been lower. Severus had been enjoying a newfound peace; trust that meddling fool to not let him live without some horrendous sword of Damocles hanging over his head. There was absolutely no way Albus would EVER convince him to do such a thing. Gods! He could just imagine! Dressing up as that barbaric red-suited knave would make him the laughingstock of Hogwarts. It would be far worse than when that imbecile Creevey had gotten the brilliant notion of photographing Longbottom's Boggart and posting it all over the school. Lupin had asked him where he'd left his purse for a month.

Striding through the Dungeon hallways, Severus turned a corner and ran right into Ginny Weasley, knocking her to the floor. Unfortunately for Severus, he also ran right into the hex that Graham Pritchard had just aimed at the young Gryffindor. At first, Professor Snape noticed no change, so he assumed the hex had gone amiss. Pritchard was standing with mouth agape, wand still aimed at his head of house.

"Pritchard!" Snape bellowed. "Put that wand away at once!" Pritchard remained unmoving, wand still raised, frozen in terror. Noticing a draft, Severus made the mistake of looking down at himself. Gone were his black robes, gone his armor-like waistcoat. Severus Snape was standing in the middle of the Dungeon hallway wearing a scarlet, lacy bustier, matching women's panties, and black fishnet stockings. His fury knew no bounds. For a moment, he could not speak. His face went an interesting shade of purple and the veins in his temples grew prominent and throbbed. When he could at last find his voice, he did not shout, but instead spoke in a cold, frightening voice that few had ever heard. "Mr. Pritchard, I have never been so close to taking the life of a student. If it didn't mean a lot of tedious paperwork, your heart would be in my fist. As it is...one hundred points from my own house for your actions and detention with Filch until the end of the school year."

Pritchard never was terribly bright; he had the audacity to complain. "But sir, that's more than a term away!"

"For once in your life, hold your tongue!" shouted Professor Snape. "If you do not, I may change my mind about that tedious paperwork. Now...I suggest you get...out...of my sight!" he screeched.

As Pritchard fled in terror, Severus managed to locate his wand, which was lodged somewhere in the top of the bustier, and reversed the hex. With a pained sigh he turned to Miss Weasley. If it had been any other student, he would have had to deal with their snickering. Miss Weasley, however, had not laughed since Voldemort fell. Turning to where the solemn eyed young woman still sat on the floor, Severus helped her to stand, and with a serious "You will not repeat what you saw to anybody," he left her standing there as he stalked to the security of his rooms.

Reaching his rooms without further incident, Severus grabbed an almost full bottle of firewhisky and sat on his sofa, sulking, as he drank straight from the bottle. Instead of plotting the many ways he wished Mr. Pritchard's demise, he found himself instead thinking about the youngest Weasley. She used to be such a cheerful child...bright...kind. She used to always have a smile, even for the likes of nasty Potions Professors. Now her smile was a sickly thing which never reached her eyes and the young woman never laughed. Not since the final battle. Not since Death Eaters had killed the twin Weasleys, her brothers. Ginevra Weasley had become a disconsolate wraith who wandered the halls of Hogwarts at all hours. Severus had thought the young woman had better sense than to wander into Slytherin territory, though. It seemed her melancholy ramblings had driven her further afield than usual. At first he was embarrassed that the solemn girl had seen him dressed in such a ludicrous manner. As he thought on it, he realized that he might not have minded that ridiculous display in the hallway if it had made the sorrowful young red-head laugh.

Trying to get the mournful eyes of the girl out of his head, Severus took another long pull on the bottle of firewhisky and grabbed his book of Burns off the end table. Opening the book at random, he began to read.

Oppress'd with grief, oppress'd with care,

A burden more than I can bear,

I set me down and sigh;

O life! thou art a galling load,

Along a rough, a weary road,

To wretches such as I!

Dim backward as I cast my view,

What sick'ning scenes appear!

What sorrows yet may pierce me through,

Too justly I may fear!

Still caring, despairing,

Must be my bitter doom;

My woes here shall close ne'er

But with the closing tomb!

Damn and blast! Would her eyes never stop their haunting of his thoughts? Must they even lurk in this poet's very words? Though it was Saturday, and scarcely four o'clock in the afternoon, Severus headed for his bedroom, the bottle still clutched in his hand. "I think I will go back to bed..." he muttered to the empty room, his normally crisp speech just beginning to slur from drink. His sleep was uneasy and filled with disquieting dreams where Ginny Weasley married Harry Potter and wept silently as a horde of red-headed children ran like savages around her.

Sunday found Severus Snape heading into the Restricted Section of the library where he planned to do some research on one of his potion experiments. Walking toward the back of the stacks, he was surprised and irritated to hear sobbing coming from one of the study niches. He had no patience to deal with disruptive students in a library which should be bloody silent. Stalking to the noisy niche, as he entered he snapped, "And what is all this noise about?" The tear stained face of Ginevra Weasley lifted from where it had been nestled in her crossed arms.

Blushing furiously, the normally polite young woman snapped right back at him. "Get out!" Ginny at least had the presence of mind to look shocked at how she had addressed the 'bat of the dungeons'. As soon as the phrase was uttered, her eyes widened and she slapped a hand over her mouth.

Leaning nonchalantly against the archway of the niche, Professor Snape said quite calmly, "You don't have the authority to send me anywhere." Crossing his arms, Severus regarded her seriously. "You have a habit of turning up in unexpected places, Miss Weasley. While the Restricted Section of the library is less dangerous than your recent ramblings through Slytherin territory, it is nonetheless highly inappropriate for this sort of display. Why is it, girl, that you can't seem to remain in Gryffindor tower if you are...out of sorts?"

Tears beginning to stream down her face once more, Ginny said softly, "You wouldn't understand, sir." Rising, she pushed past Professor Snape and fled the library.

Severus Snape stared after her. He continued staring at the point where she had disappeared, lost in thought, long after the young witch had gone.

Monday morning did nothing to improve Snape's mood. As soon as his first class ended, he received an owl from Albus, requesting his presence in the Headmaster's office. The damn meddling fool had better not say one word about him dressing up as any Muggle folk characters; Severus was not in the mood. To his surprise, Albus did not call him in for a chat about Santa Claus; but what he did speak to Severus about was almost as bad.

"Severus, my boy, I need you to do me a favor," Albus began with a mischievous smile. Severus simply sat staring at the older wizard in stony silence. "You see, Severus, I'm afraid Sybil has been called to the ministry this afternoon, and won't be able to teach her final class."

"What does the Ministry want with Sybil?" Severus asked, his curiosity momentarily overcoming his petulance.

"Oh, the Aurors want to question her about some prophesy she's made. It's the third time this fortnight. I've tried to...respectfully...let them know that Sybil's divination leaves something to be desired, but you know how those Aurors are. My personal feeling on the matter is that Sybil fancies one of the Aurors in question."

Severus snorted. "Poor sod," he muttered under his breath. Louder, he continued, "I hate to interrupt this charming bit of gossip, but if I might speak, Headmaster..."

"Of course, dear boy, go ahead," Albus said with a smirk far too wicked for a Gryffindor.

"What the devil does any of this have to do with me?" Severus snapped.

"Why Severus, I expect you to teach Sybil's class this afternoon."

"Absolutely not! I refuse to pretend to teach that ridiculous subject. The whole bloody class is a waste of time!" Severus was shouting again. Albus was unperturbed; his Potions Professor did a great deal of shouting while in the Headmaster's office.

"I'm afraid I must insist, Professor Snape," Albus said calmly. "Your contract clearly states that you must fill in for absent teachers as I see fit. Perhaps if you had been more willing to help me with my...other project, I might not feel the need to order you to take Sybil's class."

"You are quite correct, Headmaster," Severus began in dangerous tones, "that you may order me to teach any class you wish." Professor Snape approached Albus' desk and leaned over it, glaring into the eyes of the older wizard. "But I must warn you not to push me too far, old man." His voice dropped even lower as he growled, "Vengeance is very sweet, Albus. Very sweet indeed." In a flurry of black robes he turned and fled Dumbledore's office.

As Sybil's second year students straggled into the seer's tower classroom, they were appalled to find a glowering Potions Professor instead of their scarf-draped Trelawney. A Gryffindor had the audacity to ask what he was doing there.

"I am here on Dumbledore's orders," he hissed. When the student questioned him further, he snapped, "Because the Headmaster thinks it a good idea. If you wish to know more of his reasons, I suggest you ask him yourself. And that will be ten points for your cheek."

After ascertaining what the class had been studying, which turned out to be tea leaves, he set the students loose to drink tea and interpret each others' dregs. Proud of himself for dealing with the class with such little effort on his part, he sat at Trelawney's desk drinking his own cup of tea and reading. Finishing his tea, he could not stop himself from taking a glance at the leaves in the bottom. A very wicked smirk came over his features. The soggy leaves made a useful shape indeed. Calling to the student who had questioned his presence at the start of the class period, he bade the boy approach the desk.

"I would like you to look in my cup, and tell me what you see," Snape said in a disdainful voice. The boy stood, trembling, and warily approached where his frightening Professor sat. Handing the boy his cup, it took all Severus' will not to smirk at the boy. "Well?" he demanded. "What is this supposed to be?"

"It looks...it looks..." the boy's hands shook as he looked into the cup with something akin to horror.

"It looks like...what?" growled the Professor.

"It looks like a...bat, sir," the student squeaked.

"I suppose this is...relevant?" Severus prodded.

The terrified student took one look at 'the bat of the dungeons' and fainted dead away. Severus smiled; it was not a pleasant sight.

The following two weeks were something of a living hell for Severus Snape. All of a sudden it seemed every teacher in the school had some sort of emergency which kept them from teaching their classes. Every free period he normally had was now filled with covering for one Professor or another. When he had to cover Lupin's third year class, he knew that the werewolf had helped Albus set him up. The third year students were studying...conveniently enough...Boggarts. When the third student's Boggart had turned into a doppelganger of himself, and had then been changed into an exact replica of Severus in Longbottom's grandmother's apparel, Snape knew that the blasted werewolf had distributed a copy of Creevey's damned picture amongst the students. By the time the class ended he had a raging migraine.

The extra classes were not the only thing on his mind. He kept running into Miss Weasley in the oddest places. The Owlery, the Quidditch shed, the greenhouses, and when he made his rounds at night he found her wandering the halls almost nightly. He never took points from her, not even when he caught her in the kitchens after curfew. Instead Severus would send her off to her common room and grumblingly question her about why she couldn't stay put, to which she always replied "You wouldn't understand, sir," before running off to gods knew where. Severus would give a frustrated sigh as he watched her flee and wonder what the hell he was going to do about the girl. There finally came a day when he was forced to take some action.

Severus was actually teaching his own class when it happened. It was seventh year double potions, Gryffindors and Slytherins. Always a difficult class, Severus was thankful it was the last class on Fridays before everyone had a free afternoon. Today would be more difficult than usual. The first half of the period passed without mishap. Keeping an eye on Ginny Weasley was taking up more and more of his class time. Normally an excellent potions student, the distracted girl was getting very careless. Trying his best to be discreet about it, Severus watched her progress like a hawk in an effort to keep something horrible from happening to her. Watching her put the third wrong ingredient into her potion, Severus decided he'd let the situation go on far too long. Striding over to stand before the young witch, Severus grabbed her ladle and made a show of examining the lumpy, brown mess.

"Miss Weasley," he snapped, "what is this rubbish?"

Ginny never got a chance to answer. As if taking Severus' query as its cue, the potion gave a small shower of sparks before melting Miss Weasley's cauldron and beginning to run across the floor. Removing it with a wave of his wand, Severus hissed, "Miss Weasley, detention...my office...now!"

After dismissing the rest of the class gruffly, Severus followed the young woman into his office.

Standing before his desk as if awaiting execution, Ginny wrung her hands and stared resolutely at the floor in front of her. Entering, Severus sat at his desk and studied the nervous red-head for a moment in silence. Conjuring a cup of chocolate, he thrust it into the young woman's hands and rather politely asked her to sit down. Ginny did so, all the while staring at her normally gruff Professor in complete and utter confusion.

"Miss Weasley," Severus began, "You have always done well in Potions, that is why I accepted you into my advanced class. However, your recent inattention is getting dangerous. I am well aware that you have had...troubles...to deal with, but if this situation does not improve soon I shall have to drop you from this class."

"Oh...no sir, please don't do that," Ginny pleaded. "Your class is very important to me, I'll do better...I swear it."

"I'm not sure you are able to do better, Miss Weasley, and I don't know if I can afford to take the chance. The potions we are going to be brewing next term are difficult and many are highly volatile. If you are as distracted then as you were in class today you could cause some serious harm, both to yourself and to the rest of the class." The heartbroken look that the girl gave him was almost more than the normally unflappable man could handle. "I'll tell you what. You do your best, and we'll discuss this after the hols. Perhaps some time at home might...help you," he finished awkwardly.

"Oh, I'm not going home for the break. Mum and Dad are going to visit Charlie...I rather think that the thought of Christmas at home was a little too much for them to face this year."

"I see." Noticing with surprise that Miss Weasley looked more relaxed sitting here with her "greasy git" of a Professor than he had seen her look all term, Severus decided it was time to at least try to get some answers. "Miss Weasley, your class work is not the only thing that concerns me. Would you mind explaining just why I seem to run into you everywhere but Gryffindor tower?" When Ginny opened her mouth to speak, Severus raised a hand to interrupt her. "Before you say that I wouldn't understand, I'd like to suggest that you try explaining it to me."

Sighing, Ginny began, "It's very uncomfortable for me in Gryffindor right now, sir. I miss...well, I miss the twins, sir. I know it will take time to...get more used to it. But it's a hundred times harder...what with having to deal with the other students."

"Are they treating you badly, Miss Weasley? For I assure you that if they are..."

"No sir! It's nothing like that. They are being very kind...that's the trouble, they're a bit too kind," she said with a sigh.

"Explain," Snape said shortly.

"Well, it's just that I never get a moments peace! Fifty times a day someone is asking me 'Are you all right, Ginny? Is there anything you need, Ginny? You know, Ginny, if you need to talk I'm always ready to listen.' I know that they are trying to be kind, but they are driving me mad! I find myself hiding from the whole tower. But as you know, if a student isn't in their House there really isn't anywhere else for them to go."

"I see," Severus said, stalling for time as he made a decision. "Miss Weasley, come here please." Rising, Severus led the girl to the door of his office which led into the hallway. Beckoning her through it, he shut and warded the door. "Watch me please," he said as he demonstrated how to take the wards down. "Have you got it?" he finally asked.

"Yes," Ginny replied, tentatively, "But why..."

"I do understand what it is like, Miss Weasley, for one to feel that one has nowhere to go. If you think you might find it...useful...you may make use of my office whenever you wish."

Ginny stared at her Professor for a moment, then she did something which startled the hell out of him. With a soft "Thank you, sir." the young woman threw her arms around his waist in a brief hug before fleeing in embarrassment. Once again, Severus Snape was left staring after her.

The next two weeks passed quickly and Christmas was fast approaching. Severus found that he didn't mind his extra teaching duties all that much anymore; the time he spent conversing with Miss Weasley in his office more than made up for it. The first time he had entered his office to find the red-headed student there, he had politely offered to leave. Miss Weasley wouldn't hear of it. Saying that she liked his company because he didn't "fuss" over her, she insisted he not let her drive him from his own office. The first couple times this had happened there had been many awkward silences; now the two of them conversed easily. Severus opened up to the young witch a bit, trying to cheer her, and he used every opportunity he could manage to try and ply a smile from her with his sarcastic wit. While it was evident that Miss Weasley enjoyed his barbed humor, he could not get her to laugh. Getting the forlorn young woman to laugh became rather a mission to him. Said mission was the sole reason that the disgruntled Potions master found himself voluntarily in the office of the Headmaster.

"Give me the damned book." Severus demanded gruffly.

"Have I finally worn you down, Severus?" Albus said with a chuckle. "Good timing, Christmas is only a few days off."

"Let me make myself perfectly clear, Albus. I am not doing this for you." On that note, Severus Snape snatched *'Twas the Night Before Christmas* and stormed out of Dumbledore's office.

One half hour previous to the start of the Christmas feast found Severus, standing before the mirror in his bedroom, dressed in the most hateful of outfits. It was red, to start with and it had fur. It had a ridiculous hat with a damned bell on the end. Albus had suggested padding, but Severus flatly refused. He was the skinniest Santa ever. He had charmed his face to include a nasty white beard and changed the color of his raven's hair as well. Standing sneering at the mirror, he could only hope that this humiliation would be worth it.

"Why don't you look fetching!" said the mirror brightly.

"Get stuffed." growled Severus.

"I must say that red is definitely your color!" the mirror went on.

"If I indeed have a color, it's black." hissed the irritated Professor.

"Oh no," argued the mirror, "black makes you look so sallow, now this red on the other hand..."

Severus never heard what red did to his skin, with one well placed hex, the mirror was reduced to kindling and shards of glass. It was the fourth mirror he had destroyed that year.

Striding into the Great Hall, he found the Professors and students still milling around, waiting for the feast to begin. An enormous sack of Christmas crackers over his shoulder, Severus scanned the room as the titters began to echo through the hall. At last spotting Miss Weasley, who gaped at him in shock, he strode up to address her.

"Ho. Ho. Ho." Severus sneered, in a voice both deep and deadpan. Miss Weasley's lips began to twitch. Leaning close to her face, he gave her his most wicked grin and growled "Merry bloody Christmas, Miss Weasley."

Ginny could not help herself; she laughed right in his face. Ginny laughed loud and long. Severus thought it was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard. Eventually, Ginny grew embarrassed and slapping a hand over her still giggling mouth, she fled the Great Hall. Unconcerned, Severus had but one thing to do before he followed her and he thought he had a pretty good idea where she would go.

Turning towards where Albus sat chuckling at the Head Table, Severus drew his wand and said clearly, "Santus Mutatius." Albus was instantly transformed into a Santa Claus, twinkling eyes and all. Severus gravely handed him the bag of Christmas crackers with an amused snort, and quickly left the hall.

When Severus entered his office, it was to find a smiling Miss Weasley. This time, the smile reached her eyes, which sparkled in the torch light. Taking one look at the unlikely Santa, she rushed across the room to hug him tightly around the waist. Finding his arms going around the young witch as if of their own accord, Severus said, "I take it, Miss Weasley, that you enjoyed my little stunt?"

"I did indeed," Ginny said with a giggle. She leaned back far enough to look into his eyes. "But I was wondering..."

"Yes?" Severus said, his voice a bit husky.

"Well...I was wondering...if I was too old to sit on Santa's lap," she said with a hesitant grin.

"I believe, Miss Weasley, that you are 17, are you not?" Severus asked.

"Yes, I am."

"In that case, Ginevra, you are just old*enough* to sit on this Santa's lap." Severus said with a rather wicked smile.

Ginny's only answer was a slightly wicked smile of her own. She raised an eyebrow in question when Severus broke the embrace to raise the locking wards on his office door. Seeing her expression, Severus chuckled and said "Oh, I thought we'd keep this...*private*." There were no more words spoken in that office for quite a long time.