

# Four Christmases

by Squibstress

Minerva attempts to teach Severus Occlumency and perhaps something more. This is not a happy Christmas story.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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**Author's Note:** Written for Kelly Chambliss for the 2012 [HoggywartyXmas](#) fest on LiveJournal.

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### 25 December 1977

Of all the unlikely things that could have happened to her, the unlikeliest was that Minerva had come to enjoy Christmas. Partly because of the after-party party Pomona and Will hosted in Pomona's rooms for select colleagues, but also for the private affair she and Matthew held in her bed to celebrate the first night of his mid-winter visit to Hogwarts.

This year's had been particularly spectacular, thanks to a rare charm Matthew had picked up at a Healers' conference in Bombay. As she drifted off to sleep, Minerva thought she'd be lucky to remember her own name by the end of the two weeks they'd spend together.

"No, stay . . ." Matthew said, groaning when the *Tempus* Charm sounded at two and Minerva made to get up.

She bent down to kiss him quickly. "I'll be back in forty-five minutes."

"*Mmm*, wake me. I'll make it worth your while."

He let go her hand, and she rose to pull on her tartan flannel nightdress and heavy green velour dressing gown, using a charm to put her hair to rights in its respectable spinster's braid.

By the time she slipped out the door to do her rounds, she could hear him snoring again.

Some of the other staff grumbled about the late-night rounds, but Minerva wasn't a grumbler, and besides, Albus had good reason to insist. The charms to detect intruders wouldn't keep out the likes of Tom Riddle...Minerva refused to call him "Voldemort...whatever guarantees Filius gave. He hadn't seen what she had of Dark magic. None of them had, save Albus.

She made her way quickly through the corridors, checking empty rooms and illuminating dark corners with her wand. The air was still and silent, redolent of smoke and evergreen even now, hours after the feast. It was comforting. It smelled of the winters of her childhood, when all seemed possible, especially on Christmas morning, with the prospect of some sweets and a new toy or book ahead of her.

She moved methodically through the east wing of the castle, meeting only the occasional Hogwarts cat along the way. They stopped whenever she approached, and

almost invariably cocked their heads at her as if trying to work out why she seemed familiar in a way the castle's other two-legged inhabitants did not. She gave each a brief nod of acknowledgement.

When she reached the top of the tower, she stopped in front of the large leaded-glass window that overlooked the east courtyard, allowing herself to be enchanted yet again by this view of Hogwarts and the few scattered lights in the village beyond, just visible from this height.

*Life, she thought. Shimmering. Fragile.*

Matthew was life, too. And love, found at this relatively late date in her life. Who would have believed it?

When she returned to her rooms, she found him not in her bed, but in her sitting room, which was almost as agreeable.

"*Baby, it's cold outside,*" he sang, holding out a cup of something steaming.

Rolling her eyes at him, she took it. There were aromatic spices that tickled her nose, and when she sipped it, she didn't recognise the flavour. But it was warm and just slightly sweet.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Mulled wine. I used a bit of the Artemnesia I brought back from the Cairo conference."

"Not too much, I hope."

"Just enough to help you sleep. Now drink up."

"Yes, Healer McKinnon," she said, and dutifully finished the wine.

They settled back in under the warm duvet, and for once, she wasn't plagued by dreams.

## **25 December 1981**

Minerva hated Christmas.

The enforced gaiety grated on her nerves, and by the time the twenty-fifth rolled around, she was nearly ready to bite the heads off anyone who dared wish her a "Happy Christmas." Albus's charmed mistletoe was a particular hazard; surely he knew that the very last thing she wanted was to kiss Hagrid or Filius or Filch, even on the cheek.

*Humbug indeed.*

She pulled the blanket more snugly around herself and scooted her chair closer to the fire. Her head ached and her muscles felt almost as bad as if she were back in the dungeons in Darmstadt. At least she could speak in a normal tone of voice again. Who ever heard of a fifty-six-year-old witch contracting Mumblemumps?

At least it was an excuse to skip Pomona and Will's bloody party this year and instead spend Christmas night in her quarters with memories for good company. Although it was harder to keep the dark ones away these days.

She sighed when she heard a knock at her door. It was Albus, no doubt, coming to fuss over her again. He could be worse than an old mother hen. She almost wished he had another war to go fight. Preferably in another hemisphere.

After opening the door with a flick of her wrist and a wordless spell, she picked up her cup of tea, warming her hands on it.

And nearly dropped it when she saw Severus Snape standing in the doorway.

"Forgive me for disturbing you."

Turning her face back to the fire, she said, "In or out, but don't just stand there in the door letting all the heat escape."

She heard the door click shut and forced herself to turn back to look at him. "What do you need?"

"I've brought you a potion. For the muscle aches."

He stepped closer, wary, as if approaching a wild animal, and held out the bottle for her inspection.

She read the label, squinting without her glasses: "Number Four? What is that?"

"It's something of my own devising. I find it works better for muscle pain than the standard elixirs and salves."

"And why would you be bringing this to me?" she asked.

"I had Mumblemumps three summers ago. I remember how painful it was."

"So you came up with a potion."

He ignored her mocking tone.

"I devised the potion to treat aches from a different cause, but I have no reason to believe it will not be equally effective for those caused by illness."

If that was supposed to make her feel sorry for him, he was slithering up the wrong tree.

She let him stand there with his arm awkwardly outstretched for another few seconds before taking the bottle.

"Thank you," she said, setting it on the tea table. Much as she loathed this young man, courtesy was so deeply ingrained in her that she could not simply drop it like a cloak that didn't fit the situation.

He said, "You should take two teaspoons every eight hours, but no more than that. I find it sits better if you have something bland to eat with it."

"I'll do that."

"Well, if there's nothing else you need, I'll leave you in peace."

She suddenly realised that this was the first time she'd ever been alone with Snape, and she had an urge to watch him to see if he would betray any discomfort sitting there with her. To see if there was anything under that damnable impassive demeanour. Anything like remorse . . .

"Sit down, Mr Snape."

He took the seat opposite her, alighting stiffly on the chair, his back straight and several inches from the cushion. He was perspiring heavily, but that was likely because of the heat of the room. And his heavy clothes didn't help. Why did he always wear a full set of heavy wool and muslin robes? Most wizards his age would be in dungarees and a jumper when off duty. Then again, his former colleagues likely had frowned on such Muggle-esque attire.

"Why are you here?"

"The Headmaster said you were still feeling ill. I thought the potion might help."

"No, I mean here at Hogwarts. I can't imagine teaching holds much appeal for a man like you."

"You mean a Death Eater?" He didn't even have the good grace to look ashamed when he said the name.

"Former Death Eater. Or so I'm told," she said.

"But you don't believe it."

"I believe what I can see."

"I thought Transfiguration was about unseen potential," he said.

Clever little cat, he was!

She said, "You're the expert on Transfiguration now, are you? And what do you think you've become?"

"Time will tell, Professor."

The fire gave a sudden crack, and he jumped.

"Not to worry, Mr Snape. No one can Apparate into or out of Hogwarts. Not even a Death Eater. You're quite safe. From your *former* colleagues, at any rate.

He was silent, but made no move to leave.

She said, "You didn't answer my first question."

"Forgive me. What was it?"

"Why you are here."

"I need a job. And I need looking after, according to the Wizengamot. The Headmaster offered both."

"You need Albus."

"Yes."

"To stay out of Azkaban."

"Yes."

She peered at him for a few moments, mostly to see if he would wilt under the heat of the fire and of her gaze, but he didn't.

Then he said, "I didn't know about it."

"What?"

"The McKinnons."

Minerva's lips pursed of their own accord, and she shivered again.

He said, "If I had heard about it ahead of time, I would have warned the Headmaster."

Her eyes narrowed. "That was in July."

"Yes."

"You were working for Albus in July?"

He said nothing, but again, his eyes didn't leave her face.

"Why should I believe you?" she asked.

"I can't think of a single reason."

Drawing the blanket around herself again and turning away from him to gaze into the fire. "I'm tired, Mr Snape."

She didn't turn back until she heard the door close.

Picking up the potion bottle, she regarded it for a moment before conjuring a teaspoon and pouring some of the viscous, green liquid into its bowl. She swallowed it quickly, grimacing at the taste, and waited. When she didn't collapse or break out in painful boils, she downed a second teaspoonful, and several minutes later, the pain in her muscles was blessedly gone.

"Thank you, Mr Snape," she said just as she began to doze off in front of the fire.

## **25 December 1985**

Of all the things Albus Dumbledore could have ordered Severus Snape to do over the Christmas holiday, learning Occlumency from Minerva McGonagall would not have made the list of ten most likely.

He wasn't especially surprised that she knew Occlumency...in the years since he'd returned to Hogwarts, he'd learned some surprising things about his former professor, and not all from Dumbledore...but he was surprised that she'd agreed to teach him.

While she tolerated him and was cordial, even speaking to him of her own free will upon occasion, he doubted very much that she wanted to tiptoe through the tulips of his memories. She had to know that whatever she might find there would be disturbing.

Then again, maybe she wanted the chance to find out the truth of a few things. Like where he was on the night of 27 July 1981.

Well, let her. That was one memory he wouldn't try to hide.

Dumbledore had told him how to access the Room of Requirement, and when he got there, she was already inside, standing with her back to the door, calm and benign-seeming as the Black Lake. And like the lake, there were monsters hidden in those depths. He'd never seen them, but Severus had no doubt that they were there. She'd lived through two wars, and from what little Dumbledore had said of it, the first had been nearly as horrific as the last. He wondered if the next would be worse still and if she'd survive it, too.

She turned, and he had enough time to register that her wand was drawn before she said "*Legilimens!*" and he felt incredible pressure inside his head, helpless to stop it as she shuffled through his superficial memories as quickly and adroitly as a cardsharp with a new deck.

The memories were grainy and washed-out, and he had a fleeting vision of sitting on the Evanses' rumpus-room carpet watching old Super-8 films with a delighted Lily, laughing with her at her toddler antics and at the sour look Petunia wore, even then.

*Shit.*

He felt Minerva pause at the memory, so he concentrated on emptying his mind, but it was too late. She'd already shifted around him and moved on, sifting and discarding, sifting and discarding.

He saw himself at lunch just hours ago with the Headmaster and the other staff, Minerva like a stone goddess to his left, himself scowling as everyone else pulled Christmas crackers. The scowl deepened when Dumbledore placed the paper crown on his head, to the barely concealed laughter of the eight students at table with them. He watched himself snatch it from his head and crumple it in his fist.

It was a moment before he remembered that Minerva expected him to fight back against the intrusion into his memory, although he wasn't sure how. Before he could muster any defence, he felt her withdraw.

"It's amazing you survived for even a few months with Tom," she said.

"Until the last few, I had nothing to hide from him. By that time, he saw no point in testing me, as I had offered no resistance before. I was no threat."

"*Legilimens!*"

She was in his head again, and they were in his private quarters. It was that very morning; he knew it because there was a slim book entitled *A Christmas Carol* and a note in Dumbledore's looping hand on the table next to his tumbler of Firewhisky. The detritus of red-and-gold wrapping littered the floor at Severus' feet.

This time, he made an attempt to push her out of his mind and felt her rush around his feeble defence. The scene inside his head changed abruptly, and he knew too late that she had been lulling him into complacency by looking at the previous, relatively harmless memories that were at the forefront of his mind. But now she was deep inside him, looking at something he did not want her to see. He was standing in a snowy lane, soaked and shivering, watching Lily through the window of the cottage. She and Potter were trimming a fat Douglas fir, laughing. Potter leant over to kiss her and...

He pushed again inside his head, but she was too fast for him, and another scene replaced the one of Godric's Hollow: He was sitting at a gloriously laid table, surrounded by well-dressed wizards and witches. It still stung to see how faded and ill-fitting his own robes were then. He saw himself startle, then get control of himself, and he knew that Narcissa, seated at his right, had just run her foot up his trouser leg, although it wasn't visible in the memory. He watched her exchange an amused look with Lucius, sitting directly across from her, and the two began to laugh as Severus flushed.

Minerva withdrew again.

"That was better, Severus. You couldn't keep me out, but you allowed only superficial, unimportant memories to the fore. It's a good start."

He could still feel his cheeks burning. "Why were you looking for Christmas memories?"

"I thought it a relatively neutral place to start."

So he'd been right. She didn't want to see any memories of his activities as a Death Eater. Unless she was trying to make him drop his guard . . .

"What you need to do, Severus, is create false trails. Breadcrumbs, if you will, that will lead your opponent down the primrose path to nothing. You've already begun to do that instinctively, I think, but you need to make it seamless and much more interesting to your opponent, or he'll grow bored and try another trail you may not intend."

"And how do I create these . . . breadcrumbs?"

"Bits of memory. Make them seem important and related. For example, you might have taken the memory of the Christmas cracker and connected it to something in your childhood, a time when you felt angry and humiliated, and led me to think you associated Albus with your father...for whom I believe you had no great affection. Then to a memory of a time with Tom, when he made you feel powerful and important."

Severus said, "That wouldn't fool him. I'd need to be far more subtle than that."

"You know him. I don't. "

She let the phrase hang in the air for a few moments before continuing. "But you see what I'm getting at."

"Yes, I think so. Give me a moment, and try me again."

She did, and he led her through several dull Christmas memories, making them seem important by associating them with somewhat more dramatic memories, including one in which his father broke his mother's nose over Christmas dinner.

She pulled out again, saying, "Better. It's best, of course, if you have a sense of what your opponent is looking for so you can be prepared with appropriate memories to show him. But if you are not, the important thing will be to direct him away from anything you don't want him to see without him twigging to the fact that you're doing it. The best way to do that is to create a seamless obfuscation. Focus on simply allowing one memory to fade into another. I always imagine the ocean...the way a wave rushes to shore as another recedes."

She entered his mind again, and he felt her going deeper into his memory, probing for more about the night his father had beaten his mother over the roast turkey. He pushed against her, then felt her withdraw.

"No. I knew you were resisting," she said. "Don't push, but allow the memory you want to come like water rushing in to fill an empty container."

He let her get as far as his nine-year-old self jumping up to defend his mother and getting knocked on his bony arse for his trouble, then he opened up, imagining his mind as an ocean, and allowed another memory-wave to replace the scene. In it, he was seated at a large table in room that looked as if it had once been grand but had been stripped of its other furnishings. He and seven others were listening to Yaxley give his report to the Dark Lord, who was seated at the far end of the table.

"*Are the McKinnons disposed of?*"

"Yes, my Lord. However . . ."

"However?"

The Dark Lord leaned forward in his chair, and Severus watched himself and the other assembled Death Eaters lean back. Viewing it this way, it was almost comical.

"There was a complication. The brother was there. We had not expected it. There was a fight, and Travers and Dolohov were injured. I barely escaped without..."

"Do not presume that you have escaped, Yaxley. Not until I am satisfied that you have fulfilled your duty."

"Yes, My Lord. I . . . I killed the brother."

"Nevertheless, you assured me that McKinnon and her father would be alone tonight, did you not? That there was no undue risk?"

"Yes, my Lord. But..."

"Thanks to your incompetence, two of our number are injured and unable to complete their next assignment, is that not so?"

"Y . . . yes, my Lord," said Yaxley, sounding, as always, like a dog waiting to be kicked. "But we did manage to kill the brother."

"Do you expect a reward? Matthew McKinnon was of little interest to me, Yaxley. I do not care if he is dead or alive."

Severus felt Minerva pull out of his mind.

"That was cheating, Severus."

Her voice was calm, but her face was white as Binns' bum.

She said, "That was not a Christmas memory."

"I'm sorry," he said.

She looked at him for a few moments, as if gauging the truth of the statement. Then she said, "Please stick to the programme."

## **25 December 1991**

It was one of life's enduring mysteries that Dumbledore continued to insist Severus attend the staff Christmas party when no one wanted him there...least of all Severus himself.

Well, this year, the Headmaster could stuff it up his cheery arse. Along with this year's book, *Oliver Twist*. Was that supposed to be a joke? Albus Fagin Dumbledore strikes again.

"Keep an eye on Quirrell for me, will you, my boy?" he'd asked Severus.

*Pick your own fucking pockets, old man.*

He was contemplating tossing the book into the fire when a knock sounded.

*Bloody, buggery, bollocking bollocks.*

Stalking to the door, he threw it open, ready to strike like a Basilisk at whichever Slytherin was mad enough to disturb him on Christmas night.

He nearly recoiled physically when he saw Minerva McGonagall standing there.

She said, "I'll thank you to take that look off your face, Severus. I'm not one of your students."

"What do you want?"

"Nothing. But the Headmaster wants something."

"What?"

"For you to come to the party."

"There's as much chance of that as there is of Longbottom receiving a passing mark in Potions."

She peered into the room. He followed her gaze and saw the bottle of Firewhisky sitting on the table. He had only gotten a quarter of the way through it.

"Were you planning on drinking that by yourself?"

"I don't see that it's any of your concern, Minerva."

She pushed past him into his sitting room, saying, "It's my concern if you're too hung over to attend breakfast in the morning. Filius and I are both off, so it's just you and Pomona."

Severus snorted and followed her into the room.

"As long as you're drinking Mr Potter away this evening, you might as well not poison yourself in the process," she said, pulling a tiny bottle from her pocket and unshrinking it with her wand.

"Talisker eighteen-year?" Severus asked when he read the label.

"I was planning to take it to the party, but I think you need it more than Filius and Albus do. And you won't sing after two glasses of it."

His eyebrows rose.

"Will you?" she asked, conjuring a second glass and opening the bottle. He didn't answer, and she looked at him expectantly.

"No," he said. "I don't believe I'll sing."

"Well, then." She poured two fingers into each glass and handed one to him. "Your good health, Professor," she said and drank.

He took a sip, his eyes still on her. What did she want here?

"Do you mind?" she asked, indicating the settee by the fire.

"Be my guest."

She removed her wrap, draping it over the back of the settee, and sat, apparently unconcerned that he remained standing there like a gormless git. He approached her cautiously, finally coming to land on the chair opposite her.

"Aren't you missing the party?" he asked after a moment.

"I was given an order. Come down to the dungeons and fetch you. I always follow orders, didn't you know that, Severus? And I always succeed. In this case, I shall just have to wait until you are ready to accompany me to the staff room. I may have to wait hours. Isn't that right?" The hint of a smile played at the corners of her mouth. Her eyes, fixed on his face, didn't hold their usual intensity. In fact, they were somewhat watery and bloodshot.

*Pissed.*

Minerva McGonagall was drunk.

He wondered if there was a way to turn the situation to his advantage. Over the years of their uneasy association, they'd developed a sort of competition that allowed them to interact without tearing one another to pieces. It worked in its own way. The students pretended to believe that the Heads of Slytherin and Gryffindor loathed one another, and the staff pretended to believe that they didn't. They were half-right, anyway. Severus didn't loathe Minerva. He was unnerved by her, and it was easy to channel that into dismissive, mocking behaviour. But she surely loathed him. He was everything she hated.

Perhaps he could make her do something foolish...make a wager she couldn't win or take points from her own House...something he could throw in her face later, when the ice of her disdain began to freeze him to the bones. The heat of argument, of battle, was far easier to bear.

But before Severus could think of anything, she spoke. "He's just a boy."

"Who is?"

She ignored his question. "He only has power over you if you let him."

Severus scoffed. "What *power* could Potter possibly have over me?"

"Well, *something* has driven you 'round the twist these few months. You've been even more reclusive than usual. You snarl at everyone, even Albus. Look at you, you've lost at least a stone or two, and no wonder, you just pick at your food. You're too busy staring at him to eat. You've been cruel to him and everyone around him."

"That's what's bothering you, isn't it? That I don't worship at the altar of Saint Potter like everyone else?"

She shook her head.

"It's you who've canonised him in your own head." Her voice softened a bit. "But he's just a boy, Severus. As you were once. And you've let his mere presence here destroy everything you've worked to accomplish these ten years."

"Rubbish."

"Is it? How much do you think your students have learned from your no-doubt amusing but ultimately education-free remarks this year? As I hear it, you spend your lecture time goading Potter and setting the students to brew without the benefit of any actual instruction beyond 'open your books to page twenty.' And how is that research paper coming along? I haven't had to fudge any budget requests to find funds for unusual ingredients this year. I won't ask about friends, as I know you haven't any, but Filius tells me you haven't been to his rooms for a chess game since term started."

She sat drinking her whisky and peering at him over the rim of the glass.

After a minute, he said, "You're very observant."

"I simply recognise the symptoms."

He stared at her for a few moments, wondering what she was playing at.

She downed the last of her drink and stood suddenly.

"Let's go."

"Where?"

"To the party."

"Forget it, Minerva. You can tell Dumbledore to fire me, but I'm not going."

"All right."

She withdrew her wand, and for an absurd moment he thought she was going to hex him...maybe Petrify him and Levitate him to the staff room for the amusement of her colleagues. He wouldn't put it past her.

She said, "As long as you're going to play the stubborn little boy . . . detention, Mr Snape."

"Minerva, I think you've had..."

"Instead of lines this evening, I think we'll work on something more productive." She pointed her wand at him and said, *L'egilimens!*"

He wasn't prepared, and she got as far as Severus' father snapping his first wand before he threw her out.

But she was right back at him, relentlessly pounding at him, seeking a way around the memories he threw in her path.

Although he'd gotten very good at Occlumency over the years, he hadn't practiced in months, and suddenly, the violence with which she had penetrated his mind was gone, and she was like quicksilver, slipping away from him, changing direction, trickling through the nooks and crannies of his thoughts. It almost felt good to have her there inside him.

He let her see whatever she wished, which seemed random and banal...an all-Christmas-all-the-time programme again, just as they'd done when she'd first taught him Occlumency. For fun, he took her through staff Christmas parties past: Filius singing a slightly off-key rendition of "Good King Wenceslas", Poppy passing out, her head dropping suddenly into Hagrid's lap, the latter patting it gently but awkwardly, Minerva receiving a shockingly moist kiss under the mistletoe from that year's hapless

Defence master and Transfiguring him briefly into a strutting rooster . . .

He felt her slip out of his mind again.

"Did you enjoy that, Minerva? Because I certainly..."

"*Legilimens!*"

She was inside his head again, but this time she meant business. He could tell because she was more like a razor's edge than water or quicksilver...her movement through his mind was sharp and bit deep, and he was shocked. It had never felt like this, not during his early lessons, nor on the occasions they'd practiced since.

He realised with panic that he was letting her in too far, and he tried to catch up, to get ahead, rifling through his own memories at lightning speed to find something to bring forward to catch her, but he was lost. He could do nothing until she stopped to examine something more closely. They went on and on, Minerva's mind probing and darting away, Severus following vainly in her wake...

*Oh, no.*

She'd stopped. It was a Christmas memory again...one he'd never let her see, and although he was reasonably certain she'd run across it during the early days of their lessons, she'd never stopped to look at it before.

Bellatrix was on her knees, about to give him his "Christmas present" from the Dark Lord: the first and last blow job he'd ever had. She was reaching inside the placket of his trousers . . .

*No!*

Severus found Minerva and tried to force her out. It was violent and obvious...no finesse, no seamless substitution, but it did the trick.

When he came out of his head, he saw Minerva sitting on the floor, a maddening smirk on her face.

"Did you enjoy your Christmas present, Severus?" she asked, and he crossed to her.

She held out an arm, and he thought for a moment she was trying to ward off a physical attack. But she still wore a slight smirk, and finally, he reached out and took her arm, jerking her to her feet.

Before he could say anything, she was inside his head again. She'd tricked him *again*...and was speeding through his thoughts. He desperately threw up memories...his father, Albus, and finally, in desperation, the one of him with Bella, but she batted them away and burned a trail through his mind. Oh, so painful it was! And he was begging her to stop, to leave him be . . .

She stopped. And he was paralysed with dread.

In the memory, he was with the Dark Lord. It shocked him to see how like the others he looked...so frightened, so anxious for the Dark wizard's attention and approval. He'd almost forgotten, but it sickened him to see it.

*"My Lord . . . It was . . . I think . . ."*

*"Out with it, Severus, or I may have to give you an incentive to speed that infernally slow tongue of yours along."*The Dark Lord turned his wand on Severus. Even now, watching it, it made his bowels go weak.

*"A prophecy, my Lord. I believe it was about you."*

*"A prophecy about me, Severus? How very interesting. Tell me."*

The Dark Lord sounded supremely *uninterested*, but Severus knew better. It was simply his former master's way of making sure Severus knew that he was a dog fit only to lick the shit off his master's boots.

*"The . . . the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches..."*

In his head, Severus screamed, "No, no, no, no!"

Nausea gripped him, and as the bile burned and his belly threatened to heave its contents onto his sitting room rug, he gave a desperate *push* in his mind, not caring if he hurt her or himself.

Then the scene changed abruptly, and he realised that he didn't recognise it.

He was in a large, bright room. Portraits lined the stone walls, and there was a sumptuous-looking rug in front of the largest fireplace he'd ever seen. A Christmas tree of at least ten or twelve feet stood near the centre, and a very young, slender woman with dark hair was opening a small package while an older man with short blonde hair smiled indulgently at her. She withdrew a gold ring from the package, and Severus was shocked to see how attractive she looked with a wide smile on her face. Minerva threw her arms around the man and kissed him. She released him, and he said, in an accent Severus couldn't quite place, *"Is this a yes?"*

*"Yes."*

Severus had no time to contemplate this surprising scene because it changed again.

It was winter, and it took Severus a moment to figure out that they were in a graveyard; both the ground and the stones were covered with snow, but he was looking at a dark patch like a slash of black blood marring the white of the scene. It was a grave, and there were two black-clad figures standing over it. It was Minerva and the man from the previous memory. He had his arm around her, and as Severus watched, the man took the lilies Minerva held and tossed them into the open grave. Just before the memory began to fade, Severus glimpsed the writing on the headstone: *Marcus McGonagall, 1892-1944.*

Then he was in the bright room again. Minerva was there, her hands over her face, and Severus was somehow unsurprised to see Dumbledore there, although his hair was shorter and less grey.

*"I can't,"* Minerva said.

Dumbledore said, *"I'll teach you. We have at least two or three months until you will be expected to join him in Geneva."*

She removed her hands from her face. *"You don't understand. Stefan is my husband. I love him."*

*"Even now? After what I've told you?"*

She rounded on him, her face as fierce as Severus had ever seen it during one of their confrontations. *You expect me to stop loving him after an hour's conversation? Have you ever loved anyone, Professor?*"

Dumbledore smiled that infuriatingly knowing smile. *"Yes. And I know exactly how you feel, Minerva."*

Severus wanted to hex him.

When Albus said, *"Let me help you,"* Severus knew she would do whatever he asked.

He felt himself propelled forward, and now he was in a stark, spare room that was suffused with blindingly white light. There was a large table, behind which sat a small group of wizards wearing red robes and high, red hats, each embossed in gold with a wand crossed with a hammer.

In the centre of the room was a chair, and Severus was shocked to see Minerva seated in it, chains binding her arms. Dumbledore stood beside her, and he was speaking to the wizards in what Severus thought was German. His heart began to thud in his chest when he saw several of the high-hatted wizards shake their heads in disbelief. One pounded the table with his fist and barked something at Minerva, who said nothing.

A moment later, he was in the Great Hall, and as his eyes moved over the High Table, he found her seated to the left of Professor Slughorn, her hair hidden under her pointed witch's hat. Dumbledore was at the front of the dais, saying, *"Lastly, I would like to introduce our newest staff member. Professor Minerva McGonagall will be teaching Transfiguration. She will also take the post of Head of Gryffindor House, and I'm sure you will all join me in welcoming her back to Hogwarts."*

Severus felt himself being pushed out of her mind and found himself on the floor, staring at Minerva's boots. When he looked up, her face was inscrutable, but her eyes looked clearer than they had earlier in the evening, and he wondered for the first time if he'd been wrong about her sobriety.

"Well done, Severus," she said.

He got to his feet, ostentatiously brushing non-existent dust from his trousers and frock coat, stalling for time. He had no idea what to say to her.

"The spell rebounded," he said.

"Obviously. You were quite forceful in . . . escorting me out of your mind."

"And we ended up in yours."

After a moment, he added, "And you're not drunk at all, are you?"

She shook her head.

He was suddenly angry. "So you planned this little show for my benefit? Did Dumbledore put you up to it?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, Severus. I didn't plan it, and Albus certainly didn't put me up to it, but he may have had ulterior motives in sending me down to you. No, scratch that; I'm *sure* he had ulterior motives. He always does."

"And you always obey, isn't that what you told me?"

"Quite," she said, a flicker of amusement crinkling the corners of her eyes. "But I hadn't planned to show you my memories. It simply seemed to be the thing to do at the time."

"Why?"

Her brows came together as she regarded him. "You're not as extraordinary as you think. It's incredibly egotistical, isn't it Severus? Thinking that you're singular in your misery?"

"I don't think I'm singular."

"Oh? Then why behave as if Potter was sent here as a personal affront to you?"

"He's not an affront. He's a reminder."

"Of your mistakes, or of what was taken from you?"

"That's a foolish question."

"Perhaps, but then, I'm a foolish woman."

She was mocking him. He turned and strode away from her.

She said to his back, "Let me show you one more memory. It might help elucidate for you what I'm obviously failing to convey."

He turned back to face her, and she said, "The spell, Severus. Do it. Let me show you."

Almost against his will, he withdrew his wand and pointed it at her head. He heard himself say, *"Legilimens!"*

He was in Dumbledore's office. Minerva and the Headmaster were standing across the enormous desk, and even by the low light of the candelabra, Severus could see the colour that had risen in her cheeks as she spoke.

*"My letter of resignation will be on your desk in the morning, Headmaster"*

*"I see."*

*"That's all? That's all you have to say to me?"*

*"What would you have me say, Minerva? That I do not wish you to go? That should be clear"*

*"You don't expect me to work side-by-side with a Death Eater?"*

*"No. I do not. However, Severus is no longer a Death Eater"*

She snorted. *"Neither is Lucius Malfoy, or Walden Macnair, or Tenebrus Yaxley, or any of the other upstanding citizens found to have been 'acting under the Imperius' when they killed and tortured for that madman."*



*"Severus defected in the summer, months before Voldemort's fall"*

*"So you told the Wizengamot. Well, forgive me, Albus, but I've known you to stretch the truth for the benefit of that august body before..."*

*"But not this time."*

*"How do you know he's not a loyal Death Eater trying to escape justice? Legilimency?"*

*"Among other things."*

*"Will you tell me what those things are?"*

*"No. They are between Severus and myself. You will simply need to trust me when I say I am certain of his loyalties. And if you'll forgive me, my dear, it is your loyalty and where you decide to direct it that is the topic under discussion at the moment."*

She was silent for a moment.

*"Then I'm afraid I have no choice"*

*"There is always a choice, Minerva."*

*"Is there?"* she asked, her voice sharp.

*"Always,"* he repeated.

*"As you say."*

She turned to go, and he said after her, *"I trust Severus as I trust you. But I will not offer you any guarantees. We are none of us an infallible judge of character. As you no doubt recall."*

Severus felt a pull, and then he was standing in front of Minerva again, his wand arm still outstretched.

He lowered it, and she said, "When Albus brought you here just two months after Matthew was murdered, I was beside myself. But I stayed because, as Albus reminded me, I had responsibilities. To others and to myself. But I hated you. Oh, how I hated you! Even if you yourself hadn't murdered him, you'd been part of it, part of taking away from me the one thing I'd managed to have for myself after all this time. And I thought it was my hatred that made it bearable. It replaced Matthew as the thing I saved for myself. It was mine, and I tended it carefully. As you do."

He scoffed. "I don't..."

"Yes, you do. Hating Potter makes it easier for you. It's an attitude you strike because it allows you to push aside the more unsettling fact that he reminds you of your mistakes."

"He reminds me of his bastard of a father!"

"Yes, that's what you tell yourself and everyone else. And it's good, it's very good. He certainly resembles his father, and Merlin knows you have every reason to hate James. But you know as well as I do that Harry is nothing like him. He's like..."

"Enough!" His breath was coming entirely too quickly and his heart was pounding in a way that hadn't happened since he'd left the Dark Lord's service. This was intolerable. What right did Minerva have to come here and interfere, to invade his private memories? His misery?

She surprised him again.

"All right," she said quietly. "I believe it is enough."

She took her wrap from the back of the chair where she'd left it. "I'll tell the Headmaster that you're indisposed."

She picked up the glass she'd drunk out of and Vanished it. Nodding at the bottle of Talisker, she said, "I'll just leave this with you, then. I don't need it."

Without thinking, he called after her, "But you still hate me, don't you, Minerva?"

She turned and smiled at him. "Of course."

The lock clicked behind her.

Severus went back to the fire and knelt, poking at it savagely.

He stood, staring into it for a few moments, then turned and snatched up the bottle of whisky and took it to bed along with his rage.

~FIN~