

The Annual Christmas Wager

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Over the tops of bobbing student heads, Severus Snape caught Minerva McGonagall's eye. She pretended to straighten her hat (which sat, as always, jauntily perched to one side, though today festooned with mistletoe and a Christmas cracker) and motioned slightly with her head toward the stairs.

With the ease born of years of spywork, he shook his head to mean "not yet," then winked, careful to make sure that to any idle observer, he was merely glowering at yet another Gryffindor.

Without even moving his head, he cast an outstretched arm directly behind him, catching young Jamie Entwistle by the back of his cloak. He looked down, scowled, held out his hand, and seconds later found himself in possession of a poorly transfigured flask. As Entwistle and his cronies fled, he caught Minerva's eye again. With a blank expression, he slid the flask into his cloak surreptitiously, then held up three fingers.

Minerva scowled, crossed her arms, and tapped her fingers twice on her sleeve.

Severus chuckled to himself. *As usual, she underestimates them. And me,* he thought humorously to himself. *Does she not remember the Weasleys?* Carefully reaffixing his glower, he moved silently again throughout the hall.

The annual holiday feast was upon them once more. Just at the last faculty meeting the other day, the entirety of the staff was bemoaning how slowly this particular year had gone. Seems that once there's no threat of a Dark Lord uprising, one remembers to mark one's papers. And oh, what joy *that* is. But, as they had commiserated, at least it was time for the holidays, when 97% of the annoying little toads that dared call themselves students would be returning home for a week. A blissful, uneventful, peaceful, *quiet* week.

"Stuff themselves full of sugar and come back here ready to tear the castle stone from stone, they will," Filius had sighed, shaking his head in a practiced fashion.

"But the poor tykes need a bit of a break from all that hard studyin' they've been up ter," Hagrid had protested.

Minerva and Severus had somehow snorted precisely in unison.

"If any one of them had, in fact, been up to any *...studyin'*," Severus drawled, "I would agree with you. However, with this bunch, I can hardly dare to hope that they might return still possessing the knowledge I imparted to them in their first week here, let alone anything that might help them pass exams."

"Let us hope," Albus Dumbledore said from his portrait in the Headmistress's office, "that they shall surprise us all."

"Hope all you want; you don't have to teach the little blighters," Minerva griped, sotto voce.

Severus heard, twitching one corner of one eyebrow in solidarity.

Out loud, she said, "I'm quite sure our students have been working diligently. Now, let us discuss the holiday feast."

To everyone's surprise but Albus's, Severus didn't seem to mind being called upon once more to act as chaperon. All the faculty would be there, of course, but everyone expected him to put up more of a fuss.

"It is not in my job description, but I will not shirk my duty to Hogwarts," Severus stated tonelessly. "Though a raise would be quite nice."

"Thank you for your cooperation, Professor Snape," Minerva said with a slight nod.

"If I must, I must," he sighed.

And so, here they were, milling about the studentry, nodding pleasantly back at those wishing them happy holidays, frowning sternly upon those about to launch a volley of mashed potatoes at the assuredly deserving first years, and counting the seconds until the feast was done.

Out of the corner of his eye, Severus saw Minerva speaking to Jonathan Ludgely, a rather unfortunately shaped Hufflepuff. She held out her hand; he placed something in it and walked away ... Damn! They were tied.

Snape cast a practiced eye around the Great Hall. The students had already started wandering back to their respective dormitories, gluttoned on sweets and Butterbeer, anxious to commence whatever licentiousness they thought they could get away with before they left tomorrow. Quite frankly, Severus couldn't care less as to whether any of them drank themselves into a stupor or shagged their best mate silly in an alcove, as long as he had neither to watch nor clean up afterwards. But this was a matter of pride. That ... *woman!* was not going to win again this year. Not after last year.

Constant vigilance! he thought with a shudder and moved with silken ease through the room.

By the time the last students had staggered to their ... wherever they were going, and the last of the Cleansing Charms had been cast upon the tables and floors, Severus and Minerva were more than ready to retire. Both to their quarters and from teaching.

"Happy Christmas, everyone," Minerva called, "and thanks to each and every one of you for your willingness to be here. Have a splendid holiday."

The faculty mumbled back their platitudes and also headed wearily out of the Great Hall. Severus was amongst the first; with a barely perceptible wink, he bade farewell to Minerva and strode swiftly out of the entranceway.

Minerva chuckled to herself. *Still think you're going to beat me, eh, Severus?* she thought. In the blink of an eye, a grey tabby cat launched herself up the back stairs at full speed.

A minute later, Severus marched into the Headmistress's quarters.

"Looking for me?" Minerva purred, sitting in her usual chair by the fire. She had cast her robes over the back of her desk chair, and her stockings feet were tucked up beside her underneath the hem of her plaid dress.

"Blast you, woman," he said, only half astounded. "You're a pox on my soul."

"Oh, sod off," she said cheekily, motioning him to have a seat and pulling up the side table so that it rested between them. "Come on. Time to tally up. Let's see what you've got."

Severus leaned forward and cocked one eyebrow lewdly. "You can't handle what I've ... got," he said smarmily, tossing his own robes over hers and relaxing into the overstuffed chair.

"Pish tosh," Minerva scoffed. "I've handled it before, if I recall aright."

Severus chuckled and waved his wand, a pot of tea and a plate of his favorite Christmas biscuits appearing on a small tray next to him. Unbuttoning his collar and rolling up his sleeves, he set to, politely offering to pour out for Minerva.

"Get on with it, man," she shrilled, tapping her fingers in barely concealed anticipation.

"Control yourself, or I shall have to take drastic action," he said, wagging his eyebrows at her over the rim of his tea cup.

"Severus ..." she warned.

"All right, all right," he said. "Feisty thing."

Wordlessly, he summoned a pouch from his robes. "Are you ready?" he asked, poised to open the bag.

"Like you even have to ask," she snapped, pulling her own pouch out from beside her on the chair.

"Now. Rules are the same as last year. We go one at a time. Anything alcoholic is five points. Anything sexual in nature is also five points, but love potions are only three. Prank toys and the like can have up to three points, depending on how much injury or humiliation they could inflict."

"We've only been doing this for ten years, Minnie," Severus said, rolling his eyes. "And besides, I helped create the rules, remember?"

"Don't call me Minnie, unless you want me to call you Sevvie. And yes, that was the year we found that Ravenclaw... What was her name? Susan? Sarah?"

"Tabitha," Severus corrected drolly.

"Whatever. We found her with those enchanted handcuffs," Minerva reminisced.

"I still think we should have tried them out," Severus drawled.

"Why, Severus, you naughty boy," she giggled.

"I meant we should have given them to Filch, you dirty girl," Severus rejoined. "Now, I thought you were anxious to settle this bet?"

"You first," she said, offering the table magnanimously.

Reaching inside his pouch, he blindly pulled out the first item. "Ah yes. Entwhistle. Thought I wouldn't see this strapped to his arm. I'll have to have a talk with Filius about his Charms work. Clearly not up to par." Uncapping it, he sniffed. "Rotgut brandy. Want some?"

"Absolutely," Minerva said, holding out her cup. "Merlin, that is poor. Wonder where he got it?"

"Clearly not by ransacking either of our private stashes," Severus said, wincing at the first sip.

"Well, you're right there. Okay, my turn, my turn," she said in girlish glee. Reaching into her own pouch, she pulled out a humming Christmas cracker. "Oh, dear. Bartleby, what *are* you doing instead of your Transfiguration homework?"

Pulling apart the cracker, she burst out into a fit of laughter when a vibrating Wizard's Chess piece, about seven inches long and shaped like a bishop, fell onto the table.

"Well, *that's* a new one," Minerva chortled, wiping her eyes.

"I wonder who that was intended for?" Severus mused, the corner of his mouth twitching.

"Oh, come on, Severus," Minerva gasped. "Surely you've noticed the way he's been panting after that seventh year, Brewer?"

"I didn't know she played chess," Severus deadpanned. "I wonder if she's any good?"

Minerva threw a biscuit at him.

Hours later, a half-drunk Severus and an almost entirely drunk Minerva were practically collapsing on the floor in fits of giggles.

Between them on the table stood seven largely empty flasks, three packets of enchanted Gobstones, one set of Exploding Snap cards that had definitely been tampered with, four love potions, one set of handcuffs, an anonymous invitation to meet by the lake, a bag of lollipops all shaped like penises, seventeen very explicit notes, and, of course, the *pièce de resistance*, the bishop.

"You said anything sek... sex... sexual was worth five points," Minerva said, trying to tally up the score.

"No, dear, *you* said that, and I'm sorry, but asking someone to go to the lake is not necessarily sexual," Severus slurred back.

"Weren't you young once? What... hic!... else do you think they're doing down... hic!... there?" she responded. "Quite a romantic spot, that."

"If you like squids," Severus said, pouring himself another mug of tea and adding a liberal dose of whatever was in that seventh flask.

Minerva laughed and said, "Oh, they have their purposes." Reaching for another biscuit and frowning when she saw the plate was empty, she grabbed one of the lollies instead.

"Scandalous," Severus purred. "Two points for the note."

"Fine," she mumbled around a mouthful of lollipop. "That means ... Oh, sod it all! You win by three points."

"Yes!" he exclaimed, swinging one arm up into the air in celebration and almost flinging himself out of the chair. Laughing, he righted himself and turned a raised eyebrow to Minerva. "And what, exactly, have I won?"

Sucking the lolly, she gazed into his eyes and replied, "You get to take your pick of the findings, of course. Same as every year."

Severus chuckled, low in his throat. "One of these years, Minerva, I might just do that."

As the faint light of dawn crept in the windows, Albus Dumbledore started awake in his portrait.

Looking down, he saw Severus and Minerva, fast asleep. At some point, someone had enlarged one of the chairs, and Minerva lay cheek-down on Severus's chest. His head was sprawled back, and the light glistened off the tiniest speck of drool on the corner of his mouth. Their teacups and confiscated goods were strewn about the room, and under the corner of the chair, the bishop lay alone and forgotten. She yawned and sighed in her sleep, nestling in tighter.

Without waking up, Severus wrapped his arm tighter around her, pulling her closer into his side.

One of these years, indeed, Albus thought privately to himself. *I certainly hope so.*

Smiling, he nodded back off to sleep and left the other two to their dreams.