

How Snape Didn't Steal Christmas

by *Dreamy_Dragon*

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One

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As the gates of Hogwarts appeared in the distance, Severus began descending towards the Apparition point in front of them, landing smoothly with both feet on the ground. He didn't even stagger. It might have been quicker to Apparate, but he was in no particular hurry. He took some time to dislodge the tiny shards of ice that had caught in his hair before he renewed his warming charm. After adding a billowing charm to his robes, he finally started to walk towards the school entrance.

The gates swung open at his approach. In the distance he saw the familiar turrets and towers of the castle, glittering in the winter sun. Snow crunched under his feet as he strode up the path. 'I must be barking to do this,' he muttered.

For the last five years, he had simply scrawled a "no" on Minerva's invitation to the Christmas dinner and subsequent staff party at Hogwarts, and everything had been fine.

Only this year, she had come to deliver the invitation in person, making it very clear that she wasn't going to take no for an answer. In the end, he had given in. Only to get her to leave of course. He had had no intention of actually going to the sodding thing. Family and friends welcome. Ha! He was certain he was neither.

To his own surprise, he found himself brewing a little something for Minerva in the weeks leading up to Christmas and checking the state of his better black robes. Neither of which had anything to do with Minerva's invitation obviously. He usually took a bath and washed his hair on Christmas day anyway, so there was nothing special about that either. Really, the only reason he was now trudging through several feet of snow in order to spend time with people who probably weren't any keener on seeing him than he was, was that he had run out of firewhisky and didn't fancy the Muggle stuff one could buy at the local off-licence.

When he arrived at the big oak doors, they swung open, welcoming him just like the gates had earlier. With a "hmp", Severus entered the castle for the first time since he'd left Poppy's care after the war.

The sconces on the wall suffused the entrance hall with a warm glow, holly was wound around the banister of the big staircase, and a large Christmas tree stood next to the door that led into the Great Hall. Severus dumped his cloak in the small room next to it that doubled as wardrobe if there were guests in the castle. He sneered at the mistletoe above the door to the Great Hall before he took a deep breath and walked in quickly.

The Great Hall looked glorious. Festoons of holly and mistletoe were strung along the walls and beneath the ceiling, and the usual dozen Christmas trees adorned the room, glittering with golden lights and tiny sparkling icicles. Magical snow was falling from the ceiling, warm, dry and soft. Severus had seen this many times before and if asked would have said that he hadn't missed it in the last years. Yet, something seemed to have got stuck in his throat. *I need a drink*. He made sure that his customary scowl was still in place.

Apparently, not many students were staying at the castle for the holidays, as the house tables had been pushed aside, and only one big table stood in the middle of the

room. Some of the other guests and a few members of the staff were milling about. They all turned around as he approached and stared at him. He stopped dead in his tracks. Pomona looked at him as if she'd just seen the Dark Lord's ghost rise from his unlamented grave.

Poppy, dressed in festive red robes, seemed to be the quickest to recover. She walked over to him, Kingsley in her wake. 'Severus, it's so good to see you. Happy Christmas.'

'That remains to be seen.'

As usual completely unfazed by his demeanour, Poppy gave him a hug. Severus stiffened, though it felt warm and genuine. Kingsley extended his hand. 'Nice to see you again, Severus.'

Severus gave a brief nod and shook hands with the Minister. Rolanda Hooch seemed to be about to walk over to him too, but they were interrupted by the arrival of Minerva. She wore dress robes in splendid forest green tailored to fit her slim figure and erect posture and her usual stern expression. When she noticed Severus, a brief surprised look crossed her face before it was replaced by a welcoming smile.

'Severus, you made it.'

An eyebrow rose. 'I believe I was invited. Rather insistently.'

'So sometimes you do as you're told.' A mischievous glint had appeared in Minerva's eye.

'Don't get used to it.'

'Hm. Time to eat.'

Everyone went to find a seat at the large table, the handful of students sticking together at one end of it. Not waiting for his approval, Minerva had taken his arm and steered Severus towards the chair next to her, making it very clear to everyone that he was her guest of honour.

As if on cue, food had begun to appear on the table and delicious smells wafted into Severus' nose as was tradition at Hogwarts the Christmas dinner was a veritable feast. The sight of a couple of roast turkeys, stuffing, roast potatoes, pigs in a blanket, sprouts, chestnuts and parsnips, cranberry sauce and gravy made his mouth water, and for a moment he felt again like he was eleven years old and was spending his very first Christmas at Hogwarts. Severus eyed his goblet, filled with red wine, and hoped Minerva would get on with the toast. Luck was on his side, as she was just raising her own goblet. She looked around the table, and for a brief moment her expression softened before she said, 'Happy Christmas.'

Thankfully, she wasn't prone to Albus' waffling, so quicker than he had anticipated, Severus was able to take a sip from the excellent red wine. He didn't even object when Minerva held out a Christmas cracker to him. He pulled, and the cracker exploded with a bang, engulfing them in a cloud of blue smoke. Out toppled a top hat and a couple of Weasleys' Wildfire Whizbangs. Minerva put on the hat, and immediately her head vanished. Severus refrained from any jokes about headless headmistresses. Barely.

Before he knew it, he was filling his plate with turkey, roast potatoes and parsnips. He was looking around for the gravy when Wilhelmina passed him the boat with a smile. He nodded his thanks.

During the meal, he cast surreptitious looks around the table overhearing snippets of conversation. Poppy and Kingsley were obviously an item. Now, that was new. Wilhelmina and Amelia on the other hand were bickering like they had done for the last twenty years whilst throwing each other looks of deep affection. Horace had snaffled the best bits of the turkey nearest to him and was taking healthy sips from his goblet. The oddest thing, though, was that nobody seemed to mind him being there.

'Oi! Earth to Severus!'

He snapped out of his thoughts and glared at the speaker, who turned out to be Rolanda. Next to him, Minerva's cough sounded suspiciously like a snort.

'What?'

'I had asked whether you were still supporting the Arrows? But seeing where they're in the League, I can see why you'd prefer to ignore the question,' Rolanda quipped.

'Last I checked they were two up from the Harpies...' Severus replied.

'Bad luck, the Harpies will be back on top soon though neither stand a chance against the Magpies.'

'Indeed.'

For the rest of the meal, they proceeded to discuss the latest Quidditch games in great detail and were soon joined by Minerva, who was an avid supporter of Portree.

Soon, steaming Christmas puddings materialised on the table, each one looking like a little work of art. The house-elves had once more outdone themselves. It really was a Very Nice Christmas dinner. Not that he had missed it of course, but he still had a second helping of Christmas pudding to confirm its quality.

Afterwards, the students shuffled off to do whatever it was that students did in the afternoon of Christmas day nowadays, and Minerva led the Hogwarts staff and their guests over to the staff room, the usual location for the Christmas party.

It, too, was decorated for the occasion. Holly and mistletoe were adorning the walls and two more Christmas trees basked the room in soft, golden light. The sideboard usually only containing a kettle, teabags, coffee, milk and sugar sported several bottles of wine, firewhisky and soft drinks. And a small cauldron full of steaming mulled wine. Several plates with mince pies and slices of Christmas cake had been placed on the conference table in the room.

Severus briefly contemplated the mulled wine, but since he hadn't been the one to brew it, decided on a glass of Ogden's instead before he made a beeline for his favourite arm chair. He sat down gingerly, but it felt exactly as cosy as he remembered almost like it was welcoming him back. Humbug. The only reason why he preferred it was because it was strategically placed in a corner of the room so that he could keep an eye on both the door and on what was going on in the staff room itself. Plus, it was near one of the windows, so there had always been sufficient light for reading during his free periods.

He was sipping his firewhisky, pleasantly full, though maybe it would be a good idea to Accio one of the mince pies? Just to see if they tasted as good as he remembered. It was a good thing he didn't do mellow. Otherwise, people might think he was becoming soft. A hand landed on his shoulder.

Severus' hand was already twitching towards his wand, and he was about to jump out of the chair when he recognised Horace, a glass of mulled wine in his hand, and not the first one, judging by the colour of his face. He relaxed a fraction, casually brushing a piece of invisible dust from his sleeve.

'All righ' hic Sheverush, m'lad?'

Severus nodded briefly. Maybe, if he didn't respond, Horace would go and pester someone else.

'Hic. Sheverush, you're the hic pride of Shly..., of Shlyshsh... of our house. Yesh. Thought you should hic know.' Horace's walrus moustache was quivering.

'Thank you, Horace.'

In fact, the whole of Slughorn was quivering, no wobbling. It looked like he was holding onto his glass for dear life.

'Horace, are you sure you don't want to sit down?'

'Yesh, you're right, m'lud.' Horace collapsed into the arm chair next to him.

Bugger. He should have been more specific. As in pointing out somewhere on the other side of the room. Severus braced himself for more drunken accolades, but none came. A glance to his side revealed a softly snoring Head of Slytherin house. Good.

Severus settled back into watching the staff party, still debating with himself about that mince pie when he was interrupted again.

'Severus, a word?' Kingsley asked, his eyes flickering briefly to the sleeping Horace.

'Of course, Minister.' Severus lazily waved his hand, sending Horace further into the land of drunken dreams.

Kingsley cast another glance at Horace before he perched on the arm rest of Severus' chair. 'Kingsley. Poppy has told me that you're supplying her with the more complicating healing potions,' he began.

Severus looked at Kingsley, not sure where this was heading. 'Is that a problem?'

'No. From what I hear, rather the opposite. No, I was wondering...!' He paused.

Severus raised an eyebrow.

'...if your potions business left you time for an additional job? Nothing permanent or too time-consuming.'

'You'd have to be a bit more specific than that before I even look at my schedule, and I'm not working for the Ministry.'

'You wouldn't. Well, not in an official capacity.'

'Meaning?' Despite his growing impatience, Severus felt a tendril of interest.

'MLE could do with...'

'MLE could do with what?' Amelia had wandered over to them; she now sat down on Severus' other arm rest.

'With a Dark Arts consultant. Free-lance and only occasionally,' Kingsley finished.

'You know, that is actually an excellent idea,' said Amelia. 'And Severus would be perfect.'

'Severus is sitting right here. And you two are lousy at plotting.' Severus scowled at them.

Kingsley had the grace to look sheepish; Amelia ploughed on. 'Well, would you be interested?'

'Perhaps. I'd need to know a bit more before I make a decision,' Severus said tentatively.

'Excellent, why don't you come and see me after the New Year and we can talk about the particulars?' Kingsley's gesture made it clear that the "we" would include Amelia.

'I haven't agreed to anything yet,' Severus warned him.

'I know. Just an informal meeting, then?'

'That is acceptable.'

After a bit more small-talk or rather Kingsley and Amelia talked whilst Severus wasn't joining the conversation they left to toddle off to their respective partners.

Severus spent a couple of pleasurable hours, watching the party proceed as usual. Some people had fun, some retired early and some were getting utterly toasted. In a corner, Amelia and Wilhelmina had rounded up a couple of other board games' enthusiasts and were very obviously and audibly having a good time.

Finally, he decided that it was time to get up to fetch another Firewhisky. He poured himself another glass and strolled over to one of the windows. Sipping from his glass, he stood, looking out over the frozen school grounds.

He sensed her presence before she spoke.

'Mince pie?'

'Thank you.' He took one of the sweets from the plate she held.

They both stood, gazing into the darkness outside, neither saying a word. It felt pleasant, almost companionable, just like it always had with her. He fumbled in his robe for the small wrapped parcel, but the time wasn't quite right. Maybe, he'd give it to her later.

After a while, Minerva asked, 'Having a good time?'

'Tolerable.' He didn't look at her, but he could see her smile. She really knew him too well. 'Hogwarts is... comfortable.'

A warm hand closed around his. 'Welcome home.'

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Many thanks to Karelia for beta reading.

Harry Potter and the Potterverse belong to JKR. I only play.