

# Comfort and Joy

by MMADfan

Minerva isn't feeling very much Christmas cheer when the holiday begins, and it looks only to become gloomier. Set at Christmas 1980.

## Dec-80

Chapter 1 of 1

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**Author's Notes:** This story focuses on Minerva, as so many of my fics do. We catch her at a time when she's feeling a bit worn down. The title comes from the popular Christmas carol, "God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen." Pottermore is entirely disregarded. Written for the Hoggywarty Christmas Party, 2013.

**Disclaimer:** Everyone should know that JKR created the HP universe; we all just love to play in it. Don't take this story as representative of anything but itself. It's (just) fanfic.

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*Hogwarts, December 1980*

Minerva stretched and set aside her quill, stifling a yawn with one hand. She was lovely when she stretched like that, unselfconsciously, her feline side emerging for a moment, and her feminine side very evident. Albus gazed at her affectionately.

"I do wish you had insisted Horace stay through Christmas," Minerva groused, restating an objection she'd already made several times, to no avail.

"As you know, my dear, he had travel plans. Andalusia, I believe he said. With a companion."

Minerva snorted. "The man's a linguistic chauvinist. I doubt he speaks a word of Spanish. Who is his companion this time? Another buxom widow of some means, I imagine."

"Horace spoke passable French at one time," Albus said mildly, avoiding mention of the Slytherin Potion master's current companion...who was indeed a widow of some means and of redoubtable proportions.

"Hmpf. His Latin is poor for a master of any discipline." Minerva frowned, still sore at the extra duty thrust upon her with the Head of Slytherin's absence. "At least with my figure, I never attracted his amorous attentions...although with my bank account and lack of family in high places, his interest wouldn't have lasted long in any case." She grinned crookedly. "Never thought my deficits would ever be to my advantage!"

"Do not underestimate your gifts, Professor!"

Albus's appreciative smile warmed her; Minerva had often felt a frisson of sexual tension between them...she believed it was mutual, anyway, though that could have been self-flattery on her part...but never more than that bit of thrill, and given the contradictory and very sketchy accounts of his youth, she was unsure whether he had ever been interested in romantic relationships...whether with witches or wizards, and she'd heard vague guesses of both. She'd even heard that he'd been involved with Madam

Marchbanks when he was a very young man and she was a senior Unspeakable, though Minerva didn't know whether to give that rumour any more credence than any other she'd heard over the years. At any rate, these frissons, while pleasurable, never went beyond the moment, more ephemeral than leprechaun gold, and Minerva never sought to explore them lest they vanish altogether.

"And Snape can't begin any earlier?" Minerva asked.

"His contract begins on the first of January. Since the new term doesn't begin until the twelfth, I considered that sufficiently early to allow Severus to settle in."

"What I remember of Snape, he would not be amenable to arriving a week or so early."

"Unlikely," Albus agreed.

Minerva sighed. "His birthday is sometime in early January, I noticed. Perhaps we should ... mark it in some way."

Albus's eyebrows rose. "You did not seem keen on his joining the staff. Why the change of heart?"

"Not really a change of heart. But if we are to work with the man for the next few years...or longer...I'd rather have him comfortable on staff. I'm not suggesting a full celebration of his birthday, just a welcome to Hogwarts. Perhaps fairy cakes at his first staff meeting or some such thing."

Albus chuckled. "I shall enjoy the cakes even if Severus does not. Very well! A welcome at the first staff meeting after Christmas, then."

"And in the meantime, extra duty for the Head of Gryffindor." Minerva was resigned, not bitter, but she sounded weary.

"I told you to speak with Pomona and Filius. I am sure they will pitch in, and Aurora and Clive are responsible prefects, and they'll both be staying over the holiday to prepare for NEWTs. I think that you can count on them."

"Miss Sinistra, perhaps," Minerva said with a nod, "but Clive Fitzmaurice, well, he's better than some, but that's not saying much in these times."

"Horace speaks highly of him," Albus said.

"Hmph. Wanted him Head Boy. I remember, Albus. But Quidditch talent and a full rank of Outstandings...and a talent for coaxing House points from those susceptible to his smile...aren't enough for a Head Boy, in my opinion. Since I supported Miss Sinistra for Head Girl, Horace couldn't whine about my putting forward Mr Dunhill in competition, particularly as Dunhill is not even of my own House."

"Nonetheless, rely on the House prefects who are in residence, call on Filius and Pomona, and use the portrait system."

"I always make good use of the portraits, as you know, but there are few in the dungeon corridors, nor in the dormitories, but there are some moderately sociable ones in the common room," Minerva mused. "I'll send a few portraits down for a visit now and again. And perhaps the Bloody Baron ... well, he's not highly useful, but I think he could be persuaded to show himself in the common room and dormitories and swoop about a bit. It might discourage blatant rule-flouting."

Albus nodded. "Very good, my dear. I am sorry that you are interrupting your holiday excursions to watch over Slytherin. I do believe that you could safely leave the castle for some of your visiting."

"I thought I might meet Hollister and Emmy in Hogsmeade one afternoon, perhaps the twenty-third, since I won't be able to visit on Christmas Eve day, as I'd planned..."

"I'm sure you could, though. Just leave things in others' hands for the day!"

"Filius and Pomona both have plans for the day, and for Boxing Day, as well. I could probably nip out for an hour or two, but with family gatherings, at least in my family, it's practically impossible to stop by a celebration and not stay for several hours. Better not to go at all." Minerva tried to sound brisk and matter-of-fact about it, but it was a disappointment not to attend any of the Christmas Eve or Boxing Day family gatherings, which she had managed to do for the past twenty-plus years, as she had spent every Christmas Day in all those years at Hogwarts. But it couldn't be helped. It was part and parcel of being Deputy Headmistress.

"I can..." began Albus, leaning forward slightly.

"I'm fine with the situation, Albus. You already have plenty on your plate. I wouldn't want to see you taking on any more."

And Minerva was fine with the situation, really. There was always so much to do over the winter holidays as it was, and Christmas at Hogwarts was beautiful. Hagrid had hauled in a Christmas tree twice his height, and he and Filius and a few of the students had decorated the tree and the Great Hall, and with the bright fairy lights and Charmed baubles on the tree, and the greenery and the broad red velvet ribbons festooning the windows and every nook possible, there wasn't a more cheerfully and traditionally Christmasy sight anywhere in wizarding Britain.

Slytherin didn't seem to need very much oversight, just as Albus had predicted, and with both the Head of Ravenclaw and of Hufflepuff agreeing to take it in turns with her to check on the House before curfew each night, Minerva found that she did have more time to herself, and time that she didn't have to spend grading essays. Still, she didn't feel comfortable leaving the castle for very long at a time. There were some rather unpleasant ... *rivalries* between a few of the Gryffindors staying at school over the holidays and some of the Slytherins also there. With the castle so empty and no Head of Slytherin there, she didn't trust ... well, she trusted her Gryffindors. Usually. But really, it wouldn't take much provocation for any of her students to rise to bait offered by a Slytherin, and so she kept as close an eye on the whereabouts of the Gryffindor students still in residence as was practical. She'd given very clear instructions to the portraits who were friendly with her, and to Sir Nicholas, about what sorts of things they ought to report to her, and she took to dropping by the Gryffindor common room at least once a day to keep them on their toes. It wasn't something she normally did, but between two very homesick first-years who had been unable to go home for the holiday and those older students who would think that the Christmas holiday meant a holiday from the usual school rules, she thought it prudent.

Prudence, however, didn't save Minerva from aggravation, and when, two days before Christmas, three Gryffindors and two Slytherins landed in the infirmary with various spell-damage...mostly minor, though one Gryffindor had been hit with a painfully debilitating tongue-tying hex...she was more than aggravated.

"I'm able to treat them all," Poppy said, "but McCrimmon will have to stay overnight...growing new kneecaps is a painful and rather tricky business. Had to immobilise him. And so will Rosier. His concussion was nonmagical, but rather more severe than I usually see, and best to keep an eye on him."

"Thank you, Poppy. I would not have wanted to have them transported to St Mungo's and have tongues wagging about the state of things at Hogwarts."

"Unfortunately, the war has not left Hogwarts alone," Poppy said.

Minerva shook her head. "It wouldn't be possible, I suppose, to remain untouched. Not without expelling any student with dubious relatives. Or, as some might have it, expelling those without the 'proper background'."

"That would make things worse, I think, not better," Poppy replied with a sigh. "But that brings me to our difficulty. McCrimmon and Rosier obviously do not get along. I don't know whether they cursed each other or not, but they've been shooting one another poisonous glares from either end of the infirmary. Their wands are in my office for 'safe keeping', but that wouldn't stop either of them from doing some kind of mischief to the other."

"I hardly think that McCrimmon is in any condition to hobble over to Rosier and pummel him," Minerva protested.

"Boys can be inventive," Poppy reminded her, "and that does leave Rosier, in any case, and although he has a sore head, it doesn't prevent him from getting up and

crossing the ward."

"Your house elf," Minerva began.

"She's a good little night nurse, and she'd come to me instantly if there were trouble, but it's not in her nature to intervene with quarrelling wizards herself."

"You want me to stay in the infirmary tonight," Minerva concluded with resignation.

"Heavens, no! I'd just like to put a few charms around their beds so they can't get up and wander about. I can give them the appropriate Charmed equipment so that they needn't even make a visit to the loo in the night."

"Oh, that's all right, then!" Minerva said with relief.

"I just wanted your permission first. Well, not permission, since I'd do it anyway if I thought it was necessary, but I thought I ought to tell you."

A bell tolled, and Minerva looked at the watch that hung from a chain around her neck. She'd never make it into Hogsmeade to meet Hollister and Emmy now. She'd barely have time to send them an owl to let them know. They would arrive in Hogsmeade shortly, if they weren't there already. If she were quick about it, she could have an owl meet them with a message before she was obviously late, and they could enjoy their afternoon without waiting about the Three Broomsticks for her.

The rest of the day was quiet, to Minerva's relief, and after dinner, she settled in front of the fire in her sitting room, a new book in her hand. At half past eight, she went down to the infirmary to check on the two unhappy students. Poppy had even drawn curtains across the ward so that the two couldn't see each other. Aside from their mutual desire to be back in their respective dormitories, and McCrimmon's slight grumbling about the pain of regrowing kneecaps, the two boys seemed fine. They had their textbooks, and McCrimmon had a small stack of Muggle comic books, and they seemed settled-in for the night.

Minerva wound her way down to Slytherin. She never was comfortable checking on the Slytherin dormitory, though she'd never confess that to anyone. On the rare occasion that she had to pop her head into the Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw common rooms, she felt no such discomfort, but despite more than twenty years as a Hogwarts teacher, she had never quite overcome the sense from her student days that Slytherin, and even the area of the dungeons surrounding it, was very much out-of-bounds for anyone not of that House. As a student, of course, she'd never visited another House's dormitories, but that was just the way things were. But even then, the corridors outside of their House doors never felt forbidding and forbidden in the way that those surrounding Slytherin did. Minerva now suspected that the dungeons surrounding Slytherin were bespelled to discourage others from wandering too close to that House. Since Hogwarts was so very infused with magic, however, Minerva had never been able to detect any specific wards or charms on the Slytherin precincts. She could have done, of course, with a few charms of her own, but it wouldn't do to be seen standing about outside Slytherin and casting spells, and she hadn't been curious enough to do it at a time when she wouldn't be seen...during summer holidays.

Still, despite her belief that any dread she felt was likely artificially induced, Minerva's steps slowed as she approached the Slytherin common room, and she had to calm her breathing and gather herself before uttering the password that would allow her entry to the dungeon common room. She couldn't rid herself of the sense that she was entering a deep catacomb and tomb, but she ignored the feeling and stepped through the door that opened at the flick of her wand.

There were only three students in the common room. Annette Bellavia and Avrigus Shot were playing chess, and Aurora Sinistra was sitting at a large table with a star chart, making notations on it. Since there were nine students from Slytherin staying over the holiday, and Julius Rosier was gracing a bed in the Hospital Wing, there were five students not in the common room.

The three students stood when she entered the room, Aurora the moment she saw her, the other two a bit more slowly. Minerva nodded a greeting to them, but didn't come any further into the common room.

"Miss Sinistra, do you know where the others are?" It wasn't yet curfew, but she'd like to do a quick head-count now.

"Avrigus," Aurora said, "run down to the boys' dorm and haul Otto and Simon up here." She turned to Minerva. "I'll go fetch Ivy and Doreen."

A few minutes later, seven Slytherins were gathered in the common room, and Minerva frowned. Where was Clive Fitzmaurice? It wasn't yet curfew. He could be in the library...or almost anywhere in the castle...but Minerva was unsettled to see he wasn't with his fellow Slytherins. As far as she knew, he had no friends in any of the other Houses, and it would be a bit peculiar for him to be wandering about the castle on his own at this hour.

"And Mr Fitzmaurice?" Minerva asked, brow arched.

Aurora reddened, the boys exchanged glances, and the girls shrugged.

"Um ..." Aurora cleared her throat. She was usually such a self-possessed young witch, but she was clearly thinking fast about what to say. "I'm not sure."

"But you have an idea?" Minerva prodded.

Aurora swallowed and her colour heightened. "He went out this afternoon."

"Out?" It had snowed most of the afternoon. Lovely to look at, but not lovely to walk about in for hours. "Out where?"

"He had a pass, you see," Aurora said.

"A pass?" It wasn't inconceivable that a seventh-year student might be given a pass to go into Hogsmeade for an afternoon over the Christmas holidays, but as Deputy Headmistress, she had always been informed of such slightly irregular passes. "From whom? And for what purpose?"

"Professor Slughorn gave it to him before he left," Aurora said, not answering the second question.

Minerva surveyed the Slytherins. She had the idea that the boys knew where Fitzmaurice had gone even if the girls didn't...and perhaps Aurora knew, too, or guessed, but was unwilling to say. Well, it wasn't likely any of them would give away their fellow Slytherin's plans to the Gryffindor Head of House, but she asked, "Do any of you know where Mr Fitzmaurice has absconded to?"

Heads shook in the negative, more or less vehemently. Minerva didn't believe the vehement ones.

"Very well. When Mr Fitzmaurice returns from his outing, tell him to report directly to me, regardless of the hour." The prefects all knew where her rooms in Gryffindor Tower were; no need to provide specific directions.

Minerva sat with her feet propped on a stool, toasting her soles in front of her grate, as the clock over her mantle informed her it was midnight. She'd not changed out of her clothes, but had put on her slippers. She'd ceased her pretence of reading a half hour after curfew had sounded, though she'd nibbled some holiday biscuits and sipped a cup of chamomile and catnip tea while listening to Handel's Messiah on her gramophone. It had reached its final chorus and Minerva waved her hand to turn off the Charmed player. Now, impatient despite her soothing tea and holiday music, she shucked off her slippers and pulled on her shoes.

Down in Slytherin, everything was quiet and no more forbidding or foreboding than usual. When she opened the door to the Slytherin common room, she found Aurora asleep over her star chart. Minerva walked over to the Head Girl and touched her shoulder gently.

Aurora started awake, blinking in the low light of the dying fire and the one candelabrum still lit on the other side of the large round table.

"Um, Professor ... Professor McGonagall. I'm sorry, I was just..."

"No need for apologies, Miss Sinistra. Many's the time I fell asleep over my Transfiguration texts in the common room as a student." Minerva didn't hold with the "lights out" policy, and enforced it only selectively in her House...when the students were being raucous after a Quidditch win, primarily...though she knew that other Houses dealt with lights-out in different ways. Filius didn't enforce it at all, though he was strict about curfew itself; Pomona was rigorous with those under the fifth year, less so with those older, as long as they were in their dormitory rooms by midnight; and Slughorn seemed to have a haphazard policy, or none at all, seeming to go by his own mood at the time.

Aurora nodded. "I was also"...here she hesitated noticeably..."waiting up."

"For Fitzmaurice?"

Aurora nodded. "Maybe he came in and I just didn't hear him."

"Perhaps."

"I'll check his room for you," Aurora offered, pushing back from the table.

"Please."

Minerva waited while Aurora dashed down the greenly glowing corridor leading to the boys' rooms. The wait wasn't long, though Aurora returned at a more sedate pace.

"He's not there," Minerva stated.

"No, ma'am."

Minerva nodded, jaw muscles clenching. Damned boy. And Slughorn! What had he been thinking, giving Fitzmaurice a pass without mentioning it to her...if he'd even done so. She wouldn't put it past the prefect to forge the pass and assume that no one could verify its authenticity since Slughorn had left the staff...fleeing Britain, Minerva presumed. She doubted he would return from Andalusia any time soon, with or without his "companion". He'd been in a rather precarious position with the pureblood families and with the Death Eaters. He'd walked a fine line for a very long time, and his inability to choose sides was coming home to roost. Not that Minerva would have supported his joining the Death Eaters, of course, but he had tried too hard not to ruffle the wrong feathers, and to no avail. Not choosing sides, Voldemort had apparently decided, was the same as siding against him.

Minerva waited in the staff room, curled on the hearth rug in her tabby form. She hadn't waited long when a change in the air and a slight noise informed her that the great oak doors were opening. She slipped out and padded into the entry hall, staying in the shadows. Yes, there he was, holding the door with his right hand and closing it slowly, slowly, slowly, trying to keep it from making any noise. He held his left arm oddly, bent at the elbow, keeping it close to his body.

With a deliberately louder pop than usual, Minerva resumed her usual form. She stood so that her shadow loomed over the young wizard. Startled, Fitzmaurice jumped and let go of the door; it closed the last few inches with a thud.

"Pleasant evening, Mr Fitzmaurice?" Minerva's tone was icier than the air that had been coming through the open door, and Fitzmaurice seemed frozen for a moment, but then recovered himself.

"Quite, Professor," he said, mustering one of his charming smiles. "A bit later than I thought I'd be, though. Sorry if I kept you up."

Minerva seethed. *Sorry if I kept you up* as if she were a household servant charged with locking up after the master had come home.

"You were out past curfew, Mr Fitzmaurice. You were out past lights-out. You were out past midnight."

"I have a pass..." He reached into the right-hand pocket of his black woollen ulster.

"I am uninterested in your pass. You are in flagrant violation of the school rules. No matter that you are of-age, Mr Fitzmaurice. You reside at Hogwarts as a student, and as such, you are expected to abide by the rules. No pass, save one issued by me or by the Headmaster, would exempt you from the curfew." Some older students were allowed overnight passes over the holidays to visit friends or family where they were unable to stay for the entire holiday, but those always went to her in duplicate even when Dumbledore issued them. "We are responsible for you, and we expect you to be equally responsible and abide by the rules. Where were you?"

Clive Fitzmaurice swallowed and paled...though he was already rather pale, Minerva noted.

"Visiting family friends," he said.

"You Apparated on your own."

He hesitated, then nodded.

"Then you have no excuse for not returning on time." Minerva looked at his left arm, which he still held cradled against his arm. Her stomach churned and a chill went down her spine. She had a very good idea of where he had gone. Or if not *where*, to what purpose, and whom he had seen. His pale face, slight sheen of sweat on his forehead, and the odd, crooked left arm told her all she needed to know.

"Hurt yourself whilst you were away, Fitzmaurice?" she asked, nodding to his arm.

"Um, no. Well, no, not really. Just, um, slipped on the ice, that's all. It'll be fine in the morning."

"Hmph. Perhaps we should have Madam Pomfrey take a look. I am sure she would not mind being wakened to care for your injury."

"Really, it's nothing," Fitzmaurice said, dropping his arm to his side. He was unable to completely mask the slight wince of pain that crossed his face.

"If you say it is nothing, then," Minerva said.

"Yes," he replied rapidly, stepping over her words, "really nothing."

"Off to bed, then. And twenty points from Slytherin. I will also be speaking with the Headmaster and Professor Slughorn about this, when he arrives. You can expect, at the least, a detention."

Fitzmaurice nodded, no sign of his charming smile on his face. "Yes, Professor."

"Go on!"

The Slytherin turned quickly and hastened down the hallway toward the stairs to the dungeons.

Minerva sighed. Another Death Eater. One in the school. She snorted softly to herself as she climbed the stairs. There's to be another one in the school soon, though Albus had assured her that Snape had turned over a new leaf. Minerva shook her head. There was little to celebrate this Christmas, with more allies dead...or in hiding, as the Potters soon would be. Already, they were moving from place to place until some more permanent arrangements for them could be made. Hard on the young couple with a baby.

The next morning, Minerva woke at her usual hour, long before the Scottish winter sun began to rise behind the mountains to the east of the castle. She was gloomy, and not because of the short Scottish days, which she found quite normal, and not because her holiday plans had all been upended, but because the state of the world, it seemed to her, would not permit a celebratory spirit. How much longer would this war of skirmishes and ambushes go on? And it certainly didn't feel as though the right side...her side...was winning. It was barely holding its own, and Fitzmaurice's appearance the previous night had reminded her starkly that Voldemort was able to recruit some bright and capable wizards...and a few witches, though he seemed to feel they were inferior, a mistake that the Order did not make, and one that the Ministry could no longer afford to make. Minerva sighed, remembering witches, and wizards, who had died, ones she had taught, and who had eagerly entered Auror training as soon as they left Hogwarts. And she had encouraged them.

It was in this sombre mood that she rode the stairs up to the Headmaster's office. He wasn't likely awake yet, but he'd be woken when she entered his office, and he'd come down directly, she was sure.

"Minerva?" She'd been wrong, she saw. Dumbledore was behind his desk, dressed for the day already.

"I didn't expect you'd be up yet," she said.

"An eagle owl woke me in the small hours. The Ministry had news for me. Sad news. The Pratchetts' home was burned to the ground last night. The family is safe, all but Ambrose. They haven't found him. The others, including the children, are all safe and staying with the Weasleys for the time being."

"Oh, Albus ... and it's Christmas." She looked about to weep, and Minerva was a strong witch who rarely gave in to tears, and almost never in front of another. She sank into an armchair.

Albus came over and patted her arm gently, letting it rest there for a moment, before taking the chair beside hers. "There, there, my dear! I cannot say that all will be well, because I do not know when that time may come, but it could be worse, and it is a blessing that the family escaped without harm. They believe that Ambrose was out for the evening and may have gone home with friends for the night."

Minerva nodded and let out a shaky breath. "Fitzmaurice was out of the castle yesterday and didn't return until almost one o'clock in the morning. I believe he took the Mark last night, though I did not demand to see his arm." And he *may* have fallen on the ice.

Dumbledore looked down and shook his head slightly. "I do hope this all comes to an end soon," he said softly. "We cannot lose more young people like that."

"And you are bringing Snape in as a good influence?" Minerva asked archly.

Dumbledore actually chuckled at that. "With his help, we may be able to hasten the end of war. Do not be surprised at the next meeting of the Order to see him join us."

"Snape?" Minerva's brows rose.

"Indeed. He will be invaluable in learning what Voldemort is up to." Dumbledore ignored Minerva's slight cringe at the name.

Minerva nodded. "It will be good to have more information about ... him."

"But, my dear, you look like you could use a rest. Why don't you return to your rooms, have a quiet breakfast, nap, whatever you like this morning, and then go around to your relatives in the afternoon? I know you missed meeting Hollister and Emmy yesterday."

"No, I don't think so. I'll attend breakfast. Though I do think I'll spend a quiet day. I still have a stack of essays waiting to be read. I'm afraid I've lost whatever holiday spirit I had. I *am* looking forward to tomorrow, though, with Christmas crackers and all," she added quickly, noting Albus's furrowed brow. He did love his Christmas celebrations, even in dark times, and she didn't want to disappoint him or spread a shadow over his own enjoyment of the holiday. She didn't know how he managed, but he always seemed able to put aside the troubles of the time and enjoy celebrations both small and large. She supposed it helped him cope with his daily burdens if he could put them aside occasionally.

"All right, my dear, as you wish. But I do need to speak with you this evening after dinner. There are a few matters that I'd like to discuss with you...no, no, they can wait. You go now and relax. I'll send for Filius and have him deal with Slytherin for the rest of the holiday once he's back in the castle tonight."

"But, Albus!" Minerva's protest was cut off.

"I insist. You are already doing more than anyone should expect of you, and I know that if you get some rest, listen to some Christmas carols, and drink some eggnog whilst puttering about in your rooms, you'll feel much the better for it."

Albus cheerfully shooed her from his office, saying he'd see her at breakfast.

Minerva tried to follow Albus's advice...minus the Christmas carols. She did listen to some holiday music, but it probably wasn't the sort that Albus had been thinking of. She selected some of the records that her father had always played around Christmastime, and charmed them to load onto her gramophone one after the other. She had a good seven hours of music, most of it choral, some of it distinctly Scottish in sound, and by the time dinner rolled around, she was feeling much more seasonally relaxed and hopeful for the future. After all, at its base, that's what Christmas was about: Hope and redemption. The future wasn't written yet, Minerva thought. The Light would not be beaten in the end, especially not with a wizard like Albus Dumbledore on their side, and an Order of strong witches and wizards. Somehow, for some reason, even Snape would be joining the Order. Even Clive wasn't lost, not yet. Not as long as he was a Hogwarts student who cringed at the thought of losing House points and getting detention. She'd give him detention herself, before Snape arrived; she could make it educational in some way, something morally redeeming. No, there was hope for all of them still.

Deciding to dress a little festively, she chose a deep pine-green gown with fanciful gold embroidery on the bell sleeves and, rather than wearing one of her usual teaching robes over it, chose a sleeveless over-robe in a green-and-gold damask with three golden clasps at the waist. She finished it off by inserting a bit of holly into the tartan band of her tall hat. She normally didn't dress up for the students, but this was a holiday, Christmas Eve, after all, and it was really for herself. And for Albus, she added, barely a fleeting whisper of a thought in her head. No point in dressing especially for the Headmaster, but ...

Albus did indeed notice her attire when she took her chair beside his at the staff table. The students all shared one long table down the centre of the Great Hall this holiday, but the staff would only join them during Christmas dinner the next day.

"You look lovely, my dear," Albus said, bright blue eyes lingering on her dress. "Feeling a bit better, then?"

Minerva nodded. "I took your advice, Albus. Christmas only comes once a year, and there are only so many Christmases in our lives. Foolish not to enjoy it whilst it is here, or rather, not to appreciate the season."

"Joy to the world!" Albus said with a twinkle.

"Yes, and deck the halls," Minerva said, looking about her. It seemed that Hagrid had gathered even more greenery, and the Great Hall looked as if it had half a forest in it, and gold and silver beaded chains were draped from each bough of fir, and sprigs of holly were scattered among the other decorations. It looked a bit haphazard to Minerva, but still very festive.

"Hagrid decided we needed more of the outdoors indoors, apparently," Albus replied, smiling.

They chatted through dinner, and Albus told her that Filius had been quite happy to take over Slytherin-minding duties for the remainder of the holiday.

"That's really not necessary...or fair," Minerva said.

"I'm sure he'll call on you to do occasional curfew checks, but it's only until the first when their new Head of House arrives. Filius honestly was pleased to help out."

"All right, but I'll be sure to tell him that I am perfectly up to doing a few curfew checks in the meantime."

"Well, last night was difficult for you," Albus said softly, and both looked over where Clive Fitzmaurice sat with the others of his House. He still seemed to be favouring his left arm.

"Perhaps I ought to have confronted him about it."

"To what point?" Albus asked sensibly. "It's not as though there would be anything you could do about it once he had it, and although your talents are considerably greater than his, Clive might feel himself backed into a tight corner, and people don't always react well when in such a situation."

"True." It wasn't as though he'd gone out and gotten himself an ordinary tattoo that could just be charmed off. And although the Ministry had begun throwing Death Eaters into Azkaban simply on the basis of the Dark Mark, they were all wizards who had been suspected of being actively involved in Dark activities beyond just taking the Mark. She doubted they would toss young Clive into that place with no evidence against him. She looked at the young man again. He was smiling at something Ivy Greengrass had said. And he was too young. Too innocent ... still. And it was Christmas. No, detention with her for breaking curfew was best for him.

"Meet me in my sitting room, my dear?" Albus asked, pushing away from the table. "In, say, half an hour?"

"Yes, of course."

Half an hour later, Minerva climbed the spiral brass staircase to Albus's rooms. She had left her hat off and redone her hair in a loose chignon rather than her usual tight bun. She'd also, after only slight hesitation, used a very light rouging charm on her cheeks and lips. Her well-shaped brows and thick lashes never needed enhancing, being dark, and she left them as they were.

She heard music as she approached the door to Albus's sitting room. Classical Christmas music...actually, orchestral versions of some popular carols, she recognised...and she smiled. The door opened to her, and the air was fragrant with all the aromas one associated with Christmas: cinnamon, nutmeg, fresh pine needles, and the faint aroma of baked apples underlying it all.

She had never known Albus to have a Christmas tree in his quarters before, yet this year, a small tree, perhaps five and a half feet tall, stood in one corner, old-fashioned garlands and baubles decorating it, and tiny Charmed candles fastened to its branches. They illuminated and flickered but would not burn the tree. Other than the candles, Minerva believed that all of the decorations were Muggle, with none of the animation of the Charmed baubles and fairy lights on the large tree in the Hall below. The rest of the room was likewise decorated with garlands of spruce and red ribbon, with no discernable magic, and a fire roared in the large fireplace. It was lovely, and she told Albus so as he stepped toward her.

"I'm glad you like it, Minerva." He smiled and placed a hand on her elbow, drawing her into the room as the door closed behind her. "There are a few treats I thought you might enjoy, perhaps a bit later. And this now." His arm went around her and he brought her over to the sofa across from the fireplace. A decanter and two small balloon glasses sat on the short table in front of it.

Minerva felt warmth flow through her as Albus's arm held her in a half embrace, and he gave her a slight squeeze before they sat down. Her voice sounded normal, thankfully, as she asked, "What is it, Albus?"

"Cognac. A gift from my friends Nicolas and Perenelle." He poured out some of the deep golden liquid into each glass. It seemed to shimmer. Albus smiled as he handed her a glass. "It is good cognac, and Perenelle adds a bit of her own magic to it."

Minerva swirled the contents lightly, then brought the glass to her nose. "Mmm, smells heavenly." Her face relaxed into a happy smile. "I thought we were going to discuss work this evening."

"On Christmas Eve? Oh, no," Albus said with a chuckle. "Another matter entirely ... A toast, then?" he asked, raising his own glass.

Minerva held out hers.

"To you, Minerva, to the future, and to savouring life, every drop, the sweet and the bitter together."

Their glasses touched gently, then Albus added, "And to our sharing those moments together, hmm?"

"My grandmother always said, sorrow shared is sorrow halved, and joy shared is joy doubled."

"Certainly among genuine friends and close family, that is very true," Albus agreed. "And we are certainly friends, are we not, Minerva?"

"Of course we are." The cognac was relaxing her, and she felt a sense of peace and happiness that she didn't think was the side-effect of a few sips of a simple alcoholic drink. "What sort of charms does Perenelle use on the cognac?" Minerva asked, wondering if a glass of the stuff would send her into a silly and artificial euphoria.

"Not charms, she just infuses it with a bit of her magic. It enhances the appreciation of the flavour already in the brandy, and it can ... foster good fellowship. I suppose one might say." At Minerva's raised eyebrow, he added, "If two enemies were to share this cognac, they would not become friends, but they would achieve a detente for at least the time the drink lasted. Two friends will enjoy a convivial evening together, such as they normally would, and without allowing any of their quotidian troubles to disrupt their camaraderie and, for a time, give them some peace and joy together. Her magic only encourages the best expression of whatever relationship already exists. It's no more intoxicating than the original cognac."

"That's ... interesting." Minerva knew that the Flamels were extraordinary, and in their long lives, they had learned more about magic than anyone else living could ever hope to. Albus said they almost never used a spell of the usual kind, but that their magic was simple action wedded to intention...very *careful* intention. If the magic-infused cognac had been from anyone else, Minerva might have declined another sip, but she trusted the old witch's magic and Albus's word. Besides, he was drinking the cognac, and she was certain he wouldn't if it could have some untoward effects.

"You needn't finish it, if you don't like," Albus said with concern. "I have some perfectly ordinary sherry, gillywater, Scotch..."

"This is fine, Albus, wonderful, in fact." She took an appreciative sip, then smiled at him. "We are good friends, as you say, and if this will keep out all of that"...she waved her hand in the general direction of Hogsmeade..."well, I'm perfectly happy having a peaceful Christmas Eve with my closest friend."

Albus smiled and took another sip from his glass. "I am visiting Aberforth on Boxing Day. Would you like to join me? He usually has one or two other guests. I know that this year, Newt Scamander will be coming with his wife, as he's an old friend of both of us, and Aberforth has been muttering something about some witch whose name I can never quite catch. Lucy, I believe."

"I would love to." Minerva beamed.

"Good. Abe has always liked you. I know he will be glad I invited you...though not as glad as I am that you accepted."

"Should I bring anything?"

"Aberforth and I usually exchange gifts on Boxing Day, though with no ceremony whatsoever. He hands me whatever he has for me as I enter the door, wrapped in brown paper and string, and I generally leave his somewhere for him to find after everyone has gone home. Odd, perhaps, to others," Albus said, noting Minerva's bemused expression, "but it suits us."

"Well, I'd like to bring him something, unless you think it would make him uncomfortable," Minerva said. "Or if the other guests might be."

"Bring a bottle of Scotch, if you have one on hand. He'll enjoy that, it's something he can share around after dinner, and something to warm him during the winter evenings."

Minerva always had an unopened bottle or two of Scotch, so that simplified things. "Very well, I have a rather good one, as it happens."

"Speaking of gifts, I have a little something for you ..." Albus stood.

"Oh! I have something for you, as well, but I didn't bring it with me. I thought we were going to discuss something to do with the Houses."

"That's all right, but I hope you won't mind if I give you your little present tonight. I've been looking forward to it. It's small, and, well, I'll let you just see it."

Albus led her over to the small tree and plucked a little package from among its branches. It was wrapped in shiny, bright red paper and tied with a green bow. He bowed slightly as he presented it to her. "A happy Christmas, my dear."

Minerva pulled on the bow, and as the ribbon loosened, so did the paper, and she removed it quickly. It was a small, dark wooden box, carved with a rose on the lid and with vines along the sides. "It's lovely, Albus."

"Open it."

Minerva lifted the lid, and inside was an old brooch, a brilliant black opal, full of colour, in the centre of an ornate gold filigree setting. "Ohhh," Minerva gasped, speechless.

"I hope you like it ... I know it's a bit old-fashioned, not exactly the height of current fashion, but I thought of you."

"Oh, I do like it, Albus, very much." She touched the smooth surface of the fiery stone. "It's beautiful."

"You know that our Aunt Charlotte died earlier this year. Aberforth and I are her only heirs, other than her poodles, and so we spent quite a bit of time going through her cottage, getting it ready to sell, and selling anything that we didn't want to keep ourselves. I saw this brooch, thought of you, and told Aberforth he could have anything else if only I could have this. Of course, he had no interest in it. I remember my aunt...great-aunt, actually...wearing this when I was a boy. We'd visit her twice a year, once in summer and once at Christmas. Your birthday is in October, just as hers was. I thought it might suit you, if you liked it."

"Thank you, Albus. It is perfect. Would you help me put it on?" she asked, working the clasp on the back.

He took the pin from her and held it to the bodice of her over-robe. "Here, do you think?"

"Just so." Minerva nodded.

"Yes, quite nice...a bit overwhelmed by the brocade in this particular robe, I think," Albus said, "but it will look very fine against an unpatterned fabric."

"Shall I run down for your present now, or would you like to wait until tomorrow?"

"Oh, wait, please. I'd much rather spend the time with you now."

"All right. Come by my rooms after breakfast, then? It's nothing so fine as this," she said, looking down at the brooch and fingering it, "but I think you will like it."

They stepped away from the tree, and Minerva felt a slight tingle of magic. Albus looked up. A ball of mistletoe hung overhead. "Ah, yes, I hung a bit of mistletoe ... tradition, you know." He smiled at her and touched her cheek.

Minerva didn't remember him hanging mistletoe before, and he had Filch on standing orders to remove from the public areas any that students might have hung...some of their mistletoe came from Zonko's and wasn't particularly suited for a school environment. Filch had to enlist Flitwick's help; he'd been badly afflicted by a hanging sprig one year, with no one to kiss him and release him, and he was very wary of any Charmed mistletoe ever since.

This felt like a very lightly Charmed decoration, however, one to make those passing under it aware of its presence, but not compel a kiss in any way.

"Well," Minerva said lightly, her skin tingling beneath the touch of his fingers. "We don't wish to flout tradition, do we?" And she tilted her face towards his.

Albus's lips touched hers briefly, lightly and experimentally, but then he kissed her softly and put an arm around her. When she embraced him in return, his kiss became more sensual and his other arm encircled her, pulling her towards him. She didn't seem in any hurry to pull away, and one of her hands was threading through his hair, so Albus continued the kiss, his pulse racing.

Minerva was unsurprised by the kiss itself, neither the tentative one nor the gentle one, but she was a bit surprised to find herself responding by putting her arms around him. He didn't seem to mind, and his kiss grew more heated. Her body responded with a tingling and a warmth, and she tilted her head slightly further to one side and let her lips move with his. Her brain roared with passion, and she had no thought but to press herself against him, hold him more tightly, not let go ...

Albus's lips gentled, and he raised his head only to return with one more soft kiss to her lips and another to her cheek. He didn't let go, though, and cradled her head against his chest. Minerva let out a long breath, somewhere between a sigh and a moan, and relaxed in his arms, her eyes closed. She licked her lips, which still tingled, and whispered, "Is this our new tradition?"

"If you like ..." Albus let her go then, stepping back, but resting his hands on her arms. He was flushed, Minerva noticed.

"I would. That was the best part of my Christmas present."

Albus grinned. "I would concur." He hesitated. "There are biscuits, fairy cakes, and fruitcake waiting, if you'd like some now. Or ..."

"Or?"

"We are still beneath the mistletoe, and I don't believe that kisses are rationed."

Minerva smiled up at him, put her arms about his neck, and pulled him down into a kiss. The kisses were not rationed, nor counted, that Christmas Eve, and not all took place traditionally beneath the mistletoe.

~ The End ~