

A Cunning Plan

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Set during OoP.

Chapter 1

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The fire crackled cheerfully in the staffroom fireplace, the air was filled with the scent of mulled wine and the sounds of talk and laughter, and Albus Dumbledore let out a small sigh of relief. The annual staff Yule party was nearing its end, and as far as he was concerned, it had been a success.

Severus had been only mildly sneering, Minerva only mildly waspish, Irma only mildly disapproving. Sybill had offered only one prediction of death--true, it was fairly sweeping; she'd said tearfully that all of them would probably be murdered by this time next year, given the Dark Lord's return--but at least she'd uttered it just once before falling into a sherry-induced doze. And Hagrid had limited himself to only ten choruses of "Deck the Hall with Elves and Fairies."

So yes, all in all, a success. It was a wonder they'd managed a party at all, really, what with last year's death of the Diggory boy, this year's arrival of Dolores Umbridge, and of course, the growing power of Tom Riddle. War was now inevitable, obviously, and though he'd never admit it in public, Albus was by no means certain that Riddle could be defeated this time. This party might be their last celebration for quite a while.

"I'll say goodnight, headmaster; lovely party indeed," said the voice of Filius Flitwick, pulling Albus out of his reverie.

"So glad you could be with us, Filius," Albus replied, shaking hands. Usually Flitwick spent Christmas Eve with his grandchildren, but they were travelling this year.

"I'm glad, too," said Filius, and leant in to whisper, "Thank you for hosting this, Albus. It's just what everyone needs after a year like this one."

He had scarcely disappeared when Poppy Pomfrey stepped up to say her goodbyes, and she was followed by Minerva and Severus, the two of them offering their thanks while barely pausing their argument over house Quidditch.

"You know perfectly well that Odious Umbridge was just looking for an excuse to ban the Gryffindor team--thank you, Albus, excellent evening as always--she wasn't even pretending to be fair," Minerva said, shaking Albus's hand absently.

"Nonetheless, even you cannot deny that your Gryffindors behaved abominably," said Severus, and added, "Well, Albus, if you must force socialisation upon your staff, you have at least done so with decent libations. And now I bid you goodnight." He stalked out the door.

"Abominably? Nonsense," Minerva called after him, but then turned back and smiled at Albus, taking his hands in both of hers. "It was a grand party, Albus, and you know we appreciate it."

"I'm happy you enjoyed it, my dear," Albus said, pleased. Minerva was sharp-tongued and opinionated, no doubt about it, but--to use a phrase she often applied to Hagrid, her heart was in the right place.

The room now emptied quickly, people finishing their drinks, thanking Albus, calling "Happy Christmas" to each other as they headed out. Soon the headmaster was left alone with the fairy-lit Christmas trees and the nearly-emptied trays of party treats.

He always enjoyed these few quiet minutes after a social event; they formed a nice transition between the crowded and the solitary. But he didn't tarry, for the elves would be anxious to clear up, and he didn't want to keep them any longer from their own Christmas Eve festivities.

So, taking up one last mince pie, Albus headed towards his quarters, musing about how, even in the midst of stress and fear, the human spirit could still be soothed by a little Yuletide jollification.

And decent libations, of course.

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The charmed owl clock had long ago hooted "Midnight!" and Albus was beginning to think about turning in, when a real owl knocked peremptorily at the office window.

The bird was a stranger to Albus, but that was no surprise; it was too dangerous to have recognisable owls now that the Death Eaters were on the rise again.

The coded message it brought was from Kingsley Shacklebolt. There was new intelligence about DE plans to extend to the Continent, possibly before the end of the year; the Order hoped Albus could provide quick information about likely locations and approaches. They'd heard rumours about France and Austria.

Clearly, the first person to consult would be Severus. As a rule, the headmaster preferred not to disturb his staff at so late an hour, but needs must during wartime. Severus would make no objection to being summoned in the wee hours, even on Christmas morning. The sooner they could thwart Tom Riddle's plans, the better.

"Gilpy," Albus said.

There was a pop as his favourite house-elf materialised.

"Master Headmaster has need of Gilpy?" the elf squeaked, adjusting the Hogwarts crest on his dress tea-towel. Albus had once tried to tell him that he didn't need to worry about formal dress except for official functions, but Gilpy had been affronted. Serving the headmaster was the highest goal to which a Hogwarts house-elf could aspire, and Gilpy was not about to be cheated out of his hard-earned badge of office.

"If you would, Gilpy, please ask Professor Snape to come to my tower. You should find him in his quarters at this hour."

Gilpy disappeared with a nod, and Albus sat back to wait. Severus would not be long; he never was, not even when roused from sleep. His years of being at others' beck and call (not exempting Albus's own, unfortunately) had accustomed him to quick action.

But in less than a minute, the elf was back, alone, now wearing a frown along with his tea towel. Albus felt a sharp prick of anxiety.

"Where is Professor Snape?" he asked.

"Potions Master is in his bed."

"He is ill?" Albus demanded, starting to rise. "Or injured?"

"No. Headmaster is not to worry about that. Potions Master is...engaged. With someone. And when people be...doing things...in bed, Gilpy does not watch. "

"Ah, of course."

It made sense now. If Albus had been a little more alert, or if they had been discussing anyone other than Severus, he might have twigged before this. Elves prided themselves on preserving the privacy of those they served; Gilpy would no more have dreamed of intruding on sexual activity than he would have deliberately disobeyed an order. Thus his quick return was explained.

And what an explanation it was! Severus...in bed with someone. Albus could admit to being surprised...astounded, even. There was no reason the lad shouldn't share a bed, of course; he was an adult and free to make his own choices--or as free as someone could be who was in thrall to one powerful man and indebted to another. But still, he always seemed so reserved and controlled. Albus would have bet galleons that Severus was as celibate as any monk.

Apparently not.

"Thank you, Gilpy," he said, dismissing the elf. He'd handle the situation himself.

"Fawkes," he called. The phoenix circled the room with a soft flutter of wings and lit on the arm of Albus's chair. "Would you be so kind, Fawkes, as to check Professor Snape's rooms and let me know when he and his companion are...ah...fit for company?"

He didn't want to intrude on them *in flagrante*, of course. But personal privacy, sadly, was something Severus could no longer be afforded. Albus needed to know with whom he had entangled himself. Er...metaphorically speaking.

The phoenix was gone in a flash of red and gold, and about twenty minutes later, a single shimmering feather floated through the air to land on the broad expanse of the desk.

Excellent. The coast was clear.

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Albus made his way into his bedchamber, already cosily warm from Gilpy's heating charms, and stopped in the center of the thick carpet.

One of the perquisites granted the head of Hogwarts was the ability to move at will to any room in the castle, wards notwithstanding. It was a privilege that Albus rarely used, having little need for, and even less interest in, spying on staff or students. But sometimes circumstances required it. Like now.

He whispered the incantation that let him transport himself directly into Severus's quarters.

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The sitting room was dark, but enough firelight shone through the open bedroom door that Albus's eyes adjusted quickly. He was struck, as always, by the Spartan severity of Severus's living space, the almost-obsessive tidiness, the absence of any personal mementos. Nor was there a shred of ornament or decoration to denote the Yuletide season. It was as if Severus didn't want to admit even to himself that he lived here. He shared so little of himself, even with himself, that Albus was amazed anew to think that the man had taken someone to the intimacy of his bed.

It was time to give that "someone" a name, and, after casting a precautionary disillusionment charm, Albus moved purposefully towards the bedroom. With luck, he would find Severus with a stranger, a person chosen merely for physical gratification, not for the sort of emotional connection that "Voldemort" and his Death Eaters could exploit. He peered around the door, hoping that --

Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no.

Merlin save them all.

Severus was in bed with Minerva.

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They lay wrapped in each other's arms, Minerva's long hair trailing across Severus's naked chest, her shoulders bare. Severus's hand was cupped against her head, as if he had fallen asleep mid-caress.

They were not beautiful people, Albus thought, looking at his deputy and his lieutenant: too pale, too angular, Severus with too much nose, Minerva with too much permanent frown. They scowled even in their sleep. Their personalities were difficult: prickly and sarcastic and full of the sort of impatience that often came when one was smarter than almost everybody one knew.

Yet after his initial surprise, Albus had to admit that they looked right together, and as he thought about it, he realised that he didn't even have to ask himself what they saw in each other. Severus's DE past, Minerva's age, their former teacher/student relationship--none of these obstacles was insurmountable, given what they shared: their sharp minds, their quick wit, their dedication to the Light. Their passion. They both *cared* about things, deeply, however much they tried to hide it.

For a moment, Albus was almost sorry that he hadn't been witness to their love-making. He could almost see Minerva arching under Severus, the desire fierce on her face, her legs wrapped around him. He could imagine Severus, his hands wound into Minerva's hair, his eyes open, intense, watching her, missing nothing.

They would have been beautiful then.

Before he could chase these pictures from his mind, Minerva stirred and sat up. The duvet covered her breasts, for which Albus was grateful. They had been friends for decades, but there were some lines he'd prefer not to cross, and seeing Minerva naked was one of them.

"I should go," she said, reaching down to tap Severus's nose.

At first her did not respond, but then his hand darted out to grab hers. She stopped tapping, but he did not release her.

"Why?" he muttered, as sharply as he could while half-asleep. "You've forwarded your House wards. You'll know if the little blighters need you. And only a few of them are even still here, anyway."

Minerva curled her fingers around his. "All the same..."

"Ten minutes," Severus said, trying to pull her down beside him. "You can wait ten fucking minutes."

"And here I thought we'd already had our fucking minutes," Minerva replied, but she lay down and nestled against him as he gave a half-snort of laughter. "Ten minutes, then."

"Or twenty," Severus grunted, snaking his arm around her, and Albus took the opportunity to beat a silent retreat. His intelligence, he decided, could keep till morning.

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Fawkes was waiting for him, flying anxiously around the room when he appeared back in his quarters.

"All is well," Albus reassured him, finding and offering a bird treat. "For now."

Yes, for now, he thought, as he watched the phoenix circle slowly back to his perch. It could not be allowed to continue, though--this affair or liaison, or whatever Severus and Minerva called their sexual arrangement. War called for sacrifices, and among the many things none of them could now afford were personal emotional relationships.

Severus, with his dangerous double life, was already at serious risk. His Occlumency skills were legendary, but no one was one-hundred-percent infallible. Adding Minerva to the mix of his vulnerabilities would be a mistake. She'd be another source of possible suspicion against him, not to mention a target in her own right.

So the conclusion was inescapable: they would have to be separated, for their own good as well as the good of the cause.

Albus sat down heavily, feeling older than usual. Minerva and Severus were austere people, with little enough pleasure in their lives. He hated that they would lose whatever comfort they had found together.

But they would understand; he knew they would. Whatever their personal quirks and crotchets, they were at bottom rational and pragmatic.

He'd talk with them tomorrow--actually, later today--after Christmas dinner in the Great Hall. They could....

Albus paused. There was something particularly dastardly about using Christmas Day to deprive people of love and companionship. It would be ceding victory to Riddle early, to allow his moral poison to cut off all joy before the actual war even started.

No. Minerva and Severus might have to part, but he'd be damned if he'd tell them so on Christmas. He'd meet with them sometime after Boxing Day, explain his reasoning, and together they could come up with a plan. Perhaps the two of them could temporarily store their romantic memories in his office, replacing them for special occasions and then reclaiming them permanently when the war was over. (That one or both of them probably would not survive was irrelevant; they were alive now, and one couldn't live as if one were already dead.)

That was settled, then. He would wait until after Boxing Day. Meanwhile...

"Gilpy," he said, and the elf instantly materialized, bringing with him with the headmaster's nightly cup of warm brandy and water.

"Master headmaster has need of Gilpy?" the elf said as usual.

Albus took the drink and sipped gratefully. "Yes, Gilpy. I have a plan, and I hope you will assist me. In the morning, as soon as Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape have dressed, please tell them that the headmaster requests that they each pack a travelling bag--enough for three days and nights, and be sure to include dress robes. Then they are to report to me."

"Travelling bag, three days and nights, dress robes," Gilpy repeated. "It shall be done."

"Thank you; that will be all," Albus said. "And a happy Christmas to you, Gilpy. You'll find a few little tokens of my appreciation under the kitchen Christmas tree. I hope you will distribute them among your fellows."

The elf bowed. "Gilpy will be honoured, Master Headmaster. A happy Christmas to you as well."

He was gone with a pop, and Albus settled back to savour his brandy and his plan. The Order wanted information about Riddle's recruitment efforts in Europe, did they? Well, how better to find the facts than to go to the source? He would send Severus and Minerva to gather intelligence: a day or two in Paris, for starters, and then on to Vienna. Just the two of them. The Order really couldn't spare anyone else.

The more he thought about this arrangement, the more pleased he became. He was going to get his information and give his friends a little holiday at the same time. A

romantic holiday. Surely not even Severus could fail to be romantic in Paris.

Albus smiled. An excellent idea indeed. He was a clever man, there was no denying it.

He finished his brandy and tucked himself into bed, falling asleep within moments of snuffing his candles.

And if he dreamt of two dark-haired, sharp-faced people entwined in each other's arms, he had no memory of it in the morning.