

The Unsentimental Arithmancer

by MMADfan

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Note: This story, set primarily in 1917, takes place in the same HP universe as my story *Resolving a Misunderstanding* and was written in response to the results of a poll on my LJ. The main characters here are Albus Dumbledore and two characters from *Resolving a Misunderstanding*. If you are unfamiliar with RaM, you may enjoy the story anyway, although the main character(s) will be new to you.

Deathly Hallows is disregarded in this story. It does refer to events that were either described in detail or mentioned in RaM, and those events are ~~not~~ DH-compliant. It also assumes an 1840 birth year for Dumbledore (previously considered the "correct" year).



"Reg?" Gertrude called.

"Right here, Trudie," he replied from the other side of the old stone wall.

The two were spending the last days of their honeymoon at the Gamp Estate before returning to York, where Reginald worked in a local Ministry office. He spent an equal amount of time in London, but he liked Yorkshire and the small Muggle city, and so that is where he made his home. They had discussed moving to London after they were married, but Gertrude could do her work anywhere, and she had come to enjoy Yorkshire, as well, and so she was joining Reginald there.

Gertrude picked her way around the large stones that had once constituted an internal wall of the hill fort, and joined her husband. She still thrilled at that word. As unsentimental as she normally was, and no one in her family would ever have described her as a romantic, Gertrude had been in love with her older brother's friend since she was fourteen years old and he, twenty-five, and that love had only grown over the years. When at sixteen, she had caught Reginald's hand at a holiday party and pulled him under the mistletoe, she had wilted with disappointment when he only kissed her cheek. Fortunately, one of his cousins had teased him about not knowing how to kiss

a witch, and although Gertrude normally found it difficult to bear the sight of Valerianna Yaxley, née Crouch, she was grateful to her at that moment, since Reginald shot a venomous look at his younger cousin, then pulled Gertrude to him and gave her a kiss to remember. Unfortunately, that was the last kiss he bestowed on her for another three years. Reginald carefully avoided the mistletoe each year after that, much to Gertrude's disappointment. It was worse, though, to see him with other girls. Not girls, but women, adult witches, and Reginald only seemed to see her as his friend Gareth's little sister, and a mere child.

As soon as Gertrude could Apparate, she spent as much time as possible at Gareth's London flat under the pretense of wanting to spend less time at home. When still at Hogwarts, she even Apparated to Gareth's on Hogsmeade weekends, in direct violation of school rules, and when she was caught and reprimanded by her Head of House more for being caught than for the violation of the rules, Gertrude believed she didn't care at all, because Reginald had been visiting her brother at the time and she had taken tea with them. Even though Krantzy had moved with Gareth and took care of all of his cooking, Gertrude insisted on fixing the tea herself, and although she didn't go so far as to actually make the sandwiches, she did serve them. And when she left and Reginald had said, "See you later," her young heart had soared.

It took her a bit more time to earn another kiss from the Gryffindor wizard; in the meantime, she suffered watching him escort various witches to parties and balls, taking heart from the fact that he rarely appeared with the same witch more than twice in a row. Although not at all out-going, and generally disliking the pure-blood social circuit, Gertrude made a point of never declining an invitation if there was the slightest possibility that Reginald might be attending, as well. And one night, at a party held by the Rosiers, Gertrude saw him across the dance floor. She watched him for quite a while, managing to avoid other wizards who might ask her to dance or ask her to reserve one for them. As she watched him move about the room, speaking with various guests, she wondered whom he had come with that evening. He was easy to keep under surveillance, despite the crowd, because of his height and his dark auburn hair. When she noticed that he was coming in her direction, she pretended a lack of interest that she did not feel. Instead of watching him, hoping he would come speak to her, Gertrude turned to the nearest witch and began to engage her in a conversation about the latest styles in witches' robes. She could almost sense him as he drew nearer, but that was likely just wishful thinking. But then at her elbow, she heard his voice.

"Miss Gamp, it is a pleasure to see you this evening."

Gertrude turned and looked up at his smiling face, his warm brown eyes meeting hers, and she greeted him as coolly as she was able. Despite normally addressing him by his first name she *had* known him since she was five, after all she, too, addressed him formally.

"Good evening, Mr Crouch. It is a lovely evening."

"Indeed. And it would improve if you would be able to spare me a dance," he replied. He leaned slightly closer to her and, with an impudent wink, added in a whisper, "Do, Gertrude, please! I can see Miss Hopkirk heading this way, and she always treads on my toes."

"So I'm only to be your rescue from sore toes?" Gertrude asked.

"I'd be grateful . . . quite grateful. Besides," he said, "I haven't seen you recently. I keep going by Gareth's, but it seems you're never there anymore."

"Gratitude . . . hmm. All right, then. You have your dance. But you must not forget your gratitude!" Gertrude said with a slight smile.

Reginald took her hand to lead her out to dance, and answered, "I sometimes forget that you are a Slytherin, Gertrude."

"Never forget that, Mr Crouch," she said. "It could be quite dangerous for you!"

Reginald had laughed at that, and they danced not one, but two dances together, then Reginald found her a nice glass of punch. Handing it to her, he said, "Thank you, Gertrude. That was quite enjoyable."

Gertrude accepted a few others who asked her to dance, including her brother, and then did a tango with Crispin Fastnott. She thought that if she weren't already set on Reginald, Crispin would be a possibility. He was an excellent dancer, he was on the rise at St. Mungo's, and his topics of conversation varied more than the standard drivel she grew so bored of. It didn't hurt, either, that he was very good looking and quite kind, too. But after their tango, which quite scandalised some of the older guests as though they had never seen a Latin dance before that evening he bowed, she curtseyed, and he returned to the witch whom he had escorted, and Gertrude retreated from the crowd to recover.

She was observing from a corner, quite done-in from all of the social interaction that evening, when Reginald approached her again.

"Would you care to dance?" he asked.

"And what is your motivation this time? Escaping another witch with two left feet?" Gertrude asked.

"No, I simply would enjoy another dance with you."

Gertrude suppressed a sigh and nodded.

"You don't look very enthusiastic about the prospect," Reginald said, surprised.

"I am just a bit tired." She looked up at him. "Truth be told, I don't very much enjoy parties. Too many people. I do like the dancing, but when there's no dancing, it's torture," she confided.

Reginald smiled. "I never would have guessed that. You are at almost every party or dance I go to."

"I do enjoy dancing," Gertrude said evasively.

"Well, what do you say to . . . a change in venue?"

Reginald offered her his arm and led her out into the garden, the path lit at intervals with bright torches, and many couples taking advantage of the warm spring evening to enjoy the fresh air. He brought her out onto the lawn where the Rosiers would set up wizarding croquet the next afternoon for those guests who stayed for tea. He bowed.

"May I have this dance?" Music floated out to them through the open French doors.

"I can't dance on grass," Gertrude began.

"Then I shall teach you," Reginald said with a smile, taking her in his arms.

And so they danced there in the moonlight beneath a large old oak, paying no heed to the couples ambling along on the nearby paths.

When the dance ended, Gertrude said, "That is three, now, Mr Crouch. Are you three times grateful?"

Reginald looked at her with an amused smile. "I think perhaps twice grateful. This time, I did teach you how to dance on the lawn, after all. And rescued you from the crowds. So perhaps you should be grateful to me!"

"Mmm. I think we will say that you are simply grateful, then, for your rescue from Miss Hopkirk."

Reginald suppressed a chuckle. "Very well, Miss Gamp. I am grateful for your rescue."

"I believe I shall collect on that now, if I may," Gertrude said.

"Yes?"

Gertrude took his hand and pulled him to the other side of the large oak tree, out of view of the strolling couples.

She put one hand on his shoulder and the other at his waist. When he simply stood there, looking down at her, she brought her hand from his shoulder to his head, glad now for her own height, despite her occasional wish that she was more petite, like the other witches whom Reginald seemed to like.

Boldly, Gertrude said, "Kiss me, Reginald," and urged his head toward her own.

Reginald obliged her, kissing her lips softly and gently, then straightening.

Looking down into her face, he whispered, "Perhaps I am two times grateful, after all," and he kissed her again, this time lingering and bringing his hands to her waist.

When they broke the kiss, Reginald seemed surprised. He took a breath, then said, "Where did Gareth's little sister go?"

"Nowhere. She's been right here, being patient."

"Patient . . . and here." He smiled. "And I have been looking everywhere else, and letting the Misses Rosiers and Misses Hopkirks of the wizarding world chase me about and tread on my toes."

After that spring evening, Reginald had sought every possible opportunity to be grateful to Gertrude, and every opportunity to express his gratitude. Now, fourteen months later, the two were ending their two-week honeymoon with a "clamber" out on the Gamp property, and Reginald was making notes on the inscriptions he had found at the base of one of the walls. Gertrude smiled as she looked down at him, sitting cross-legged on the ground, dirt smudged on his face, dust in his hair, and his hat beside him.

"Reg, love, it's time for tea." When he looked up at her, distracted and appearing as though he had never heard the word "tea" before, she said, "Tea, Reg. Mother's expecting us. And there will be guests, so we have to change clothes, too."

"Oh, right, of course." He stood. "Well, these inscriptions have been here a very long time. They will wait for me till next time." He grinned. "I married you for your ancient ruins, you know, Trudie."

"My, if that is so . . . you must be very grateful," Gertrude said with a sly grin. "Yes, very grateful, indeed."

Reginald made a small growling sound and grabbed her, swinging her around, then holding her tightly and kissing her.

"Mmm, that was a nice start . . . but a lifetime of access to these ruins . . . I think that is more than one-kiss-grateful," Gertrude said.

They never made it to tea that afternoon.

Gertrude set up house-keeping with Reginald two days later in his small, four-hundred-fifty-year-old house in a wizarding cul-de-sac in the old city of York. Her mother sent Gluffy to her daily to do whatever tasks she had for him, and she continued with her Arithmantic research and writing, maintaining the name "Gamp" for all of her professional work. She accepted commissions from witches and wizards who wanted assistance in determining a direction to take in their lives or their business, but most of the time, she spent her hours working on problems sent to her by Albus Dumbledore. He was, Gertrude had no doubt, a genius, but it was always thrilling when, after hours of painstaking examination of pages of Arithmantic calculations, she was able to find a spot where Dumbledore had gone wrong, a variable he had neglected, a magical transmutation he had not cast on a line of calculation, or a shortcut that would bypass the calculations he had believed would be necessary to reach the solution to the problem he was posing.

Gertrude had only achieved an "Exceeds Expectations" in Potions, one of the components of Alchemy, and an "Acceptable" in Transfiguration, but her basis in the theory of Transfiguration was excellent, and now that she carried on this correspondence with Dumbledore, she was motivated to improve her understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of Transfiguration. She pored over texts on Transfiguration, Potions, and Alchemy, increasing the depth of her understanding so that she would be able to bring more precision to her own Arithmantic calculations and understand those that Albus sent her.

Gertrude would sometimes find a section of calculations that appeared to be complete gibberish to her, even after she cast clarifying and reducing spells to look at its separate components. Often, it could be reduced no further and was already in its simplest form, and she would be driven to her books to determine what the different symbols and their placement might mean. Occasionally Reg, with his interest in Ancient Runes and archaic languages, was able to help her decipher some of it, though his Arithmancy was weak. She knew that one owl to Dumbledore would clear up her confusion, but Gertrude viewed that as a last resort, preferring to wait until she at least had some notion of what he was driving at before she wrote to him with questions.

Assisting Albus Dumbledore with the Arithmancy he was using in his new Alchemical research excited her in a way that helping wizards determine the best time to make an investment, or a witch decide which suitor to accept, or a Quidditch team to decide which players to use in a particular game, or any of the other mundane commissions she received never could. Reginald had expressed surprise when Gertrude had told him that she didn't receive any money from her work with Dumbledore.

"Not that we need the money, Trudie, but your work, and your time, are valuable. I see how many hours you spend on these projects Dumbledore sends you. It would be good if you were appreciated for your efforts," Reginald said.

"He appreciates me. And it isn't really the sort of work one does on commission. It's more like . . . like collaboration," Gertrude explained. "He read my first article in *Arithmancy Today*, and he wrote to tell me how my article had helped him solve a problem he had struggled with for weeks. We started corresponding. He has an article coming out in *Esoteric Arcana* next month, and he gave me co-authorship, even though he wrote the entire article. He said that he couldn't have written it without my help."

Reginald had accepted her explanation, but then had asked whether she actually knew the wizard or if they had only communicated by owl.

"I know who he is, of course, and I've seen him at the Ministry's annual midsummer ball, but I've never spoken to him. I doubt he would recognise me, though," Gertrude answered. "I'm not precisely the sort that gets noticed at such events."

Reginald had laughed at that. "It would help if you emerged from the corner of the room occasionally."

"I do," Gertrude protested, "when we dance. But even so, it's not as though I'm flashy, like your cousin Val, or in the Ministry like you and Gareth, or famous like Cassandra Vablatsky. He would hardly notice me."

"Then he and all the others have no idea what they are missing. Fortunately for me, or you may not have been so patient!"

"I don't know . . . I may have simply had to ask *you* for rescue, in that case," Gertrude said with a smile.

Just a few weeks later, as they ate dinner, Gertrude said, "I got an owl from Mr Dumbledore today."

"And that's news? You often get two in a day from him," Reginald responded.

"Yes, true, but this one . . . there's a problem we have been working on that he would like to meet with me about. It has become very awkward trying to do this by owl," Gertrude explained. "He doesn't live far from here. He has a cottage in the Dales."

"You aren't thinking of visiting him at his cottage, are you, Trude?"

"No, of course not! But we could meet close by, that's all. He suggested the Dancing Unicorn in Sheffield or the Silent Fwooper here in York," Gertrude replied, naming a very posh restaurant and an equally upscale tearoom. "They both have small tearooms that we could reserve for a few hours. There would be people coming and going, waitresses and such, but we could still converse in relative quiet."

"Well, at least he didn't suggest the Jabbering Jarvey in Ripon," Reginald said with a grin. That pub was known for its "eclectic" entertainment and for renting its upstairs rooms by the hour for purposes distinctly different from academic research.

"Really, Reg! As though a gentleman such as Mr Dumbledore would frequent such an establishment!"

"Oh, ho ho, Trudie! From some of the stories I've heard, he did more than simply frequent such establishments at one time he practically kept them in business!" Reginald said with a laugh.

"Stories," Gertrude said stiffly, "no doubt related by some of the envious Gryffindors at your club, I imagine. I don't know the truth of them, and I don't care to hear any of them, either. Albus Dumbledore is a respectable scholar and a gentleman. And he helps out your Ministry, I understand."

"Mmm. The key word being 'helps.' Word has it he was once considered to be put in the Department of Mysteries in some grand-but-unspeakable capacity, but some of them there, people he'd gone to school with, didn't think he was quite sufficiently reliable. He may be steady enough now, but there was a little concern then that he could just go off on some binge without any warning. This was some years ago, of course, that his appointment was considered, before I even joined the Ministry, and his rumoured transgressions many years before that, but memories are long in some quarters."

"Yes, and in all that time, as far as I can tell, all that Mr Dumbledore has done is write his articles and do his research and help people out of messes. Usually messes of their own making. So I don't see that he's likely to suddenly go off on some binge, as you put it, and it's highly unlikely that he will decide to do so on the day that we are to meet," Gertrude said archly.

Reginald laughed at that and poured her another glass of wine. "I doubt it too, Trudie. And this was all years ago that these things supposedly happened, before either of us were born, and who knows how much exaggeration has gone into the stories, and his suggestions for places to meet certainly are respectable. Nonetheless, I'd rather you didn't see him." Reginald held up his hand, trying to stave off Gertrude's protests. "I would rather you didn't see him for the first time all on your own. Invite him here for Saturday afternoon. That's only three days from now. I'm sure that your equations can wait until then. I want to meet this chap. If you're going to be working with him in person in the future, I want to get a sense of the wizard myself, and not rely on decades-old gossip about him or the current adulation that some folk have for him. Twelve uses of dragon's blood or none, there's nothing like meeting a wizard in person to take the measure of a man."

Gertrude smiled at her husband and took his hand. "Thank you, Reg! I think you'll like him, if he's anything like he is in his letters. We mostly discuss Arithmancy and such, of course, but we do occasionally touch on other topics, and he seems very nice. And he did send us that lovely wedding gift."

"He did, indeed." Reg grinned. "I suppose I shall start out well-disposed to him, then!"

On hearing that the two were marrying, Dumbledore had sent them a registered Portkey to Malta, with return, and a letter explaining that there were rooms reserved for them at a wizarding inn for three nights of their honeymoon. If they did not wish to use the reservation and Portkey at that time, they could change everything all at once by contacting a particular travel agency in Diagon Alley, which would be happy to take care of all of the arrangements for them.

Gertrude and Reginald had taken advantage of the gift for the last few days before they left for the Gamp Estate, and both wished that they could have spent a little longer, Reginald especially, as he enjoyed poking around the Stone Age sites and examining the wizarding brochures detailing the sections believed to be of magical origin and not Muggle although, of course, as the brochures hastened to add, the two, the wizarding and the Muggle, not only mingled freely during those prehistoric ages, but they all lived together in the same communities and did not make the kinds of distinctions amongst themselves that modern wizards would immediately recognise.

It was a wonderful gift coming from someone they had never met, and Reg was suspicious of it at first, until he had visited the travel agency and seen some information on their destination and confirmed that the Portkey and reservations were entirely valid and that they would be very pleased, indeed, to assist Mr Crouch in whatever way they could. Gertrude, on the other hand, had laughed at Reginald's suspicions, reminding him that she had been corresponding with Mr Dumbledore for over a year and he was a well-known person. It was hardly likely that he would play some kind of trick on them.

"I swear, Reg, sometimes I wonder which of us is the Slytherin!" Gertrude had said when Reginald told her he had looked into the reservations and confirmed their validity. "Although, of course, a Slytherin wouldn't have been as obvious about it all as you were."

Agreeing with her husband's suggestion for her initial meeting with Albus Dumbledore, Gertrude wrote and invited him to come for lunch on Saturday, suggesting that they could then work in the afternoon. To put him at ease, she mentioned that the invitation was on behalf of both her and Reginald. The next morning, the smallest Scops Owl that Gertrude had ever seen delivered Albus's reply. As Gertrude accepted the parchment from the tiny bird, she noticed that part of the owl's left foot was missing, and he tottered a bit as he tried to balance on it. Gertrude thought it was the saddest looking Post Owl she had ever seen, and she fetched it several owl treats before sending it on its way with a letter providing a specific time and directions to the house.

Dumbledore replied that he would be very pleased to accept the invitation to lunch and was looking forward to meeting Reginald, this letter, too, delivered by the same small owl. For the next two days, Gertrude and Gluffy cleaned the entire house, top to bottom, twice over, and she planned the menu with the care she would take if the Minister for Magic herself was coming for lunch. At precisely twelve o'clock, there was a knock at the door, and Gertrude answered it in person, though she had Gluffy by her side in case . . . well, she didn't know in case of what, but having Gluffy's solid presence there made her less nervous about meeting this esteemed scholar.

Much to her surprise, not only was Albus Dumbledore on her doorstep, carrying a small bouquet of flowers, but the tiny, lame owl that had delivered the letters was perched on his shoulder.

"Mr Dumbledore! Welcome! Please come in. May Gluffy take your owl? Er, I mean, your hat?" Gertrude was not a witch to stumble in her speech, nor to blush easily, but she could feel the blood warming her cheeks.

"Thank you, Madam Gamp! And your companion may take my hat, that would be lovely, but the owl is fine where he is. I hope you have no objections!" Albus said as he handed his peaked hat to Gluffy with a warm smile. "Bedivere has, however, become rather attached to me, and unless he is out on a delivery, he insists on clinging rather stubbornly to my shoulder. Some do find it off-putting, though."

"That is fine," Gertrude replied courteously as she led Dumbledore through to the sitting room where her husband sat smoking his pipe and reading the *Daily Prophet*.

Reginald stood when the two came into the room. Extending his hand, he said, "Reginald Crouch. Welcome to our home, Mr Dumbledore."

"Thank you very much. And won't you both please call me 'Albus'?" He turned to Gertrude and said, "I have wished to invite you to address me more familiarly for some time, but it seemed an awkward thing to do via post. And this," he added, gesturing to the tiny bird dozing on his shoulder, "is Sir Bedivere. Bedivere to our friends. Right, little friend?" He stroked the owl's head with one finger.

Reginald didn't know whether to laugh or not, but he saw the twinkle in the older wizard's eyes, and he smiled.

They sat and talked for a while before lunch was served, and as they rose to go in to lunch, Gertrude remarked, "'Bedivere,' an apposite name for the bird, I would say, despite his size."

"Yes, I thought so," Albus replied. The owl had tucked his head into Albus's long, slightly greying, auburn hair, and seemed to be sleeping. Albus whispered, a tear coming to his eye, "He was scheduled to become . . . *Hippogriff feed*. I couldn't let that happen to such a plucky little fellow." Albus smiled, turning his head to try to look at the bird. "And he seems quite grateful."

Several hours later, after lunch, a productive afternoon of work, tea, more work, a light supper, and then an evening in the sitting room, the two wizards smoking their pipes, Albus's freshening charms clearing the air every now and then, Reginald closed the front door behind their departing guest. He turned to Gertrude and smiled.

"You were right: I do like him, Trudie. Very much. I will be happy to have him as a guest in our home at any time." Reginald put his arms around her and kissed her. "And, if your work requires it, feel free to meet with him here. Even if I'm off at work."

"Really? And where did suspicious, protective Reg go to?" Gertrude asked with raised eyebrows.

"Oh, I'm still protective, Trude, but I trust him." He looked off over the top of her head, thinking. "There's one story I heard about him and I know that you said you didn't want to know any of them, love, but I want to tell you this one that story, the way I first heard it, made him sound mad and rather dangerous, but after we had invited him for lunch, I talked with a few people who were in a position to know the truth, and I asked about what had actually happened. In the first version, he went off his nut and killed a wizard, then fled to the Continent. The accurate version, which I was able to verify, the truth is . . . Dumbledore found a friend's fiancée being attacked, raped, and he defended her. He was very young at the time, himself, and had just lost his own wife several weeks before. Dumbledore's control wasn't good, and he destroyed the wizard's mind. A few weeks later, he left to . . . to learn how to control his immense magical power, I suppose you could say. That was something that Hogwarts hadn't been able to teach him adequately." Reginald looked into his wife's eyes. "And now that I have met the man, and I like him, I know that you will be safe with him."

After that day, Albus was a frequent guest at the Gamp-Crouch home. He would often arrive to work with Gertrude for a few hours, then Reginald would come home from work, and Albus would be persuaded to stay for dinner.

The days grew shorter and colder, and the newlyweds began to prepare to spend their first Christmas together. They agreed that they would spend Christmas Eve at the Gamp Estate and Boxing day with Reginald's parents, who were having a party that day, but they would spend Christmas Day in their own cozy little home. The week before Christmas, Gertrude decorated with holly and mistletoe, put a tiny creche scene on the mantelpiece, and together, the couple found a small tree to put in the sitting room. They decorated the evergreen with fairy lights, shimmering Charmed garlands, and little baubles and trinkets, some magical, some not, and when they were finished, the two agreed that they had never seen a prettier tree.

A few days after they had completed their decorating, Albus came late one afternoon for a few hours of Arithmantic work with Gertrude. Reginald was home when Albus arrived, and welcomed the older wizard, offering him a warming drink. Albus hesitated, then accepted.

"Gertrude will be down in a few minutes," Reginald said as he handed him a steaming cup of mulled wine.

Albus smiled and relaxed into his chair. "You have decorated for the holidays, I see. Very nice. Very nice, indeed."

"Yes, it's our first Christmas, and we rather went all out." Reg grinned. "Or at least, our version of all out. We'll be spending Christmas Eve with her family, then going to my parents' Boxing Day party, but we'll be here in our own home for Christmas Day. Her mother protested that slightly, but not very vehemently. We may have a few guests dropping by later in the day, but for now, we plan to just enjoy the day together."

"Lovely." Albus said with a warm smile. "I wondered what your plans were, and had thought to drop by on Christmas Eve day with your gift, but now I know to bring it by on the twenty-third. I'd send it with Bedivere on Christmas Day, but I'd rather not shrink it sufficiently for him to be able to carry it. Would you or Gertrude be at home on Sunday?"

"I'm sure that one or the other of us will be home most of the afternoon why don't you come for tea?" Reginald suggested.

"I am sure you have a lot to do, so soon before Christmas, I wouldn't want to interfere with your plans."

"Not at all, we usually do a big tea on Sundays, as you know. Please, do come," Reginald urged with a smile.

"I would like that, then! Thank you very much," Albus agreed.

"What are your plans for Christmas?" Reginald asked conversationally.

"My usual quiet day. Sometimes, my brother Aberforth and I spend the day together, but he will be in Greece for a goat-lovers gathering of some sort. He'll be leaving tomorrow, in fact. It ends on the twenty-fourth, but he'll be staying on until the New Year, visiting friends."

"Odd time of year for such a thing well, an odd thing at all, if I may say," Reginald answered.

"Capricorn, you see they believe that it's appropriate to meet at the beginning of the month of Capricorn," Albus said with a chuckle. "And it is a bit odd, I suppose, but it's one of my brother's few hobbies, and he gets pleasure from it. Not to mention that he produces a very nice cheese and some nice wool, as well."

"So your plans . . ."

Albus shrugged. "I believe that the Dancing Unicorn will be open for the afternoon. I may make a reservation there, but more than likely, I'll just spend it at home with Bedivere and Fawkes, nicely cozy, eating shepherd's pie and some little holiday treats."

"You aren't going to other family?" Reg asked.

"Other than a cousin in Canada, whom I haven't seen in decades, although we do exchange cards, Aberforth is my only family since my Aunt Beatrice died several years ago."

"You must come here, then," Reg said impulsively. "You can't spend Christmas all on your own."

Albus chuckled. "I have done so before, and it hasn't harmed me yet. I cannot intrude on your first Christmas with your bride."

"You wouldn't be really, Albus! We would be happy to have you here," Reg said.

"I doubt that Gertrude would be pleased to have you inviting random folk into your home for Christmas," Albus said, smiling, "though I do thank you for your kind offer."

"You aren't 'random folk,' Albus. I'm sure Gertrude would be happy to have you here, too."

"Nonetheless, your Gryffindor impetuosity might strain Gertrude's patience, and I wouldn't want to do anything that might cause you two to have any stress at this time of year. So, no, I must decline, though I am very touched by your invitation," Albus said with a smile.

"Hmmp. All right . . . then I suppose we'll just have a pre-Christmas celebration when you come on Sunday," Reg said, though he didn't sound very happy about that.

The conversation turned to who, exactly, Fawkes was Reg thought perhaps he was Albus's dog, cat, or Kneazle, and was amazed to learn that Albus had a phoenix as a companion and then Gertrude entered the room. She touched Reginald's shoulder and gave it a squeeze, and he patted her hand.

Gertrude smiled at Albus. "I'm glad to see that Reginald has been taking care of you, Albus. I am sorry, but I needed to finish a letter. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all, Gertrude, although you may have to cast any spells for a while," Albus said with a twinkle, "as your husband has warned me up with a very nice mulled wine!"

Gertrude smiled at her husband. "He does make a nice mulled wine, doesn't he?"

"Did you know, Trudie, that Albus is spending the holiday alone? Christmas Day, in fact?" Reg asked, looking up at his wife.

Gertrude's eyebrows rose. "Really? And you didn't invite him to come to us?"

"I wouldn't want to intrude," Albus began.

"I did invite him, Trude, but he declined," Reg said, interrupting. "He claims that he wants to spend it with Bedivere and his phoenix, eating shepherd's pie and Christmas sweets."

Gertrude shook her head. "Bring Bedivere and Fawkes with you, Albus. You will have your Christmas dinner here, at least. Shepherd's pie! Whoever heard of such a thing! No protests and no excuses. As long as you don't arrive before ten o'clock, eleven," she said, looking down at her husband with a warm smile in her eyes, "you are welcome to spend the entire day with us! Indeed, you must not arrive any later than noon."

Her tone was firm, and Albus chuckled. "Very well, noon, then. I'll bring the Christmas crackers!"

Albus was urged to still come for Sunday tea, even though he would now be spending Christmas Day with them, but he couldn't be persuaded.

At noon on Christmas day, Gertrude opened the door to Albus and Bedivere. A very large, colourfully wrapped package floated beside him; he had one hand on that and a large basket in the other.

"Happy Christmas, Gertrude!" Bedivere gave a low, warbly hoot as Albus stepped into the warm house.

"Happy Christmas, Albus! My, what is that?" she asked, astounded by the size of the large, wrapped package.

Albus chuckled. "You will see, my dear! It is something for you and Reginald."

Gluffy took Albus's hat and cloak, and Gertrude led him into the sitting room, where Reginald waited.

Reginald held up a hand. "Hup! Stop right there, Albus! Look up!"

Albus looked up. He and Gertrude were standing under the mistletoe.

"Give her a kiss, quick! Before you bring our entire household a year's bad luck!" Reginald said with a grin.

Albus blushed. "Ah, well, can't have that . . ."

He turned and bent his head, giving Gertrude a quick peck on her lips, then he stepped even more quickly into the room as Reginald laughed. Gertrude shook her head at her husband, but gave him a fond smile.

"I'm sorry, Albus," she said. "My husband didn't think I had put up enough mistletoe, and it's all over the house now." She turned to Reginald. "Could you please make sure that we have a clear path to the dining room, Reg?"

He laughed again and winked at her cheekily. "You'll just have to make certain you're passing under it with your husband and not other wizards, that's all!"

"Reginald!" Gertrude said in a warning tone, although there was humour in her eye.

"Mmm, all right," Reg said in mock resignation.

He drew his wand and got up. He came over to move the mistletoe, but then he grabbed Gertrude and pulled her under it with him.

"Now this, Albus, is how you kiss a girl under the mistletoe," he said, then he kissed his wife. When he broke away, he smiled down at Gertrude. "Just like our first kiss. The one I pretended to forget."

Reginald waved his wand, moving the mistletoe to hang near the wall in the hallway, out of anyone's direct path. He turned back to Albus.

"Happy, Christmas, Albus! Be right back after my mission to clear us a path to the dining room," he said with a laugh. "In the meantime, have a seat, help yourself to some nibbles."

Albus sat down and dutifully helped himself to a handful of nuts.

"So, where is Fawkes?" Gertrude asked. "I had been looking forward to seeing a phoenix on Christmas Day."

"He'll be along shortly! He very kindly consented to bring Aberforth his Christmas present and to deliver a few other special gifts for me, as well. He may have made a little detour to his original hatching grounds."

"Where's that?"

"Egypt," Albus responded between an almond and a walnut.

"Egypt . . ." Gertrude sighed. "I've always wanted to visit Egypt. Have you been there, then?"

"Oh, yes," Albus said matter-of-factly. "That is where Fawkes found me."

Reginald reentered the room with a tray of drinks.

"I thought we would eat at two, and then just have a light supper tonight. Does that suit you?" Gertrude asked.

"I would hardly presume to dictate Christmas dinner, my dear, but that sounds wonderful," Albus answered. "Do I smell a turkey roasting?"

"Yes, Reg isn't partial to goose, so we are having turkey."

Suddenly, there was a fiery explosion in the centre of the room, and Reginald leapt back, startled. Gertrude raised an eyebrow. Albus popped another nut in his mouth. Fawkes, somewhat constrained in the small room, glided over and perched on the back of Albus's chair.

"Reginald, Gertrude, this is Fawkes," Albus said. "Fawkes, these are my friends, Reginald and Gertrude. Apologise to Reginald for startling him."

Fawkes looked at the other wizard and began to sing, and Reginald and Gertrude both smiled in delight.

"That's beautiful, Albus!" Gertrude exclaimed. "I have always read of the phoenix's song, but no description of it equals the experience."

Fawkes puffed out proudly and preened. Albus laughed.

"He does bring joy to my life, or he helps me to see the joy in life, anyway, when it sometimes becomes difficult to do so," the older wizard replied. "But now, I have a few

little things for you both." Albus reached into his basket and pulled out two small gifts wrapped in green paper with gold ribbons tied around them in large bows. He handed one to Gertrude and one to Reginald. "Open them at the same time," he instructed.

Reginald had the paper off of his first, then lifted the lid on the box. He looked inside and blinked. He looked up at Albus. "A hand mirror . . . how thoughtful."

Gertrude had her present open, now, too. She removed the gift from its box. Another small hand mirror, this one silver with a silver handle, the back of which was decorated with flowers, bees, and butterflies.

Albus looked on, amused. "Your mirror, Reginald, is just one that I found in a Muggle shop, but I thought it was nice," he said. Reginald had removed the mirror from its box; it was set in smooth, dark wood, and had a short, rounded handle. "Your mirror, Gertrude, was something of my mother's. I thought you might like it."

"It is very pretty, Albus, thank you," Gertrude said.

"And this one is for both of you," Albus said as he levitated the large, flat package into the centre of the room. "Open it!" he instructed with a grin.

Together, Reg and Gertrude unwrapped the large present, quickly revealing yet another mirror, this one set in an arched frame of dark mahogany.

"I thought for over your fireplace here, although you may wish to hang it elsewhere perhaps the bedroom " Albus blushed and added hastily, "or wherever it might be most useful. It isn't new, either. It was something from my Aunt Beatrice's house after she died. Neither my brother nor I had a very good place for it, but I had always liked it, so I kept it. It reminds me of . . . of my childhood. Now I know it will have a good home."

"Thank you, Albus," Gertrude said, knowing that her husband was finding the gift of three mirrors peculiar, and fearing he would begin to laugh if he spoke. "They are all very nice. I am sure they will see many years' use."

Albus grinned. "I hope they do, but you are missing the most significant part of the gift. Reginald, would you step into the other room, please? Or Gertrude whichever of you would like to and one of you stay here."

Reginald stood, and, after shooting his wife a look that said, "the wizard's as daft as the day is long," he began to leave, but Albus stopped him.

"Don't forget your present, Reginald!" Albus called after him.

Reg came back and picked up his mirror and left the room. Albus closed the door with a wave of his hand.

"Now, my dear, we have a little surprise for your husband . . ."

Three minutes later, Reg burst into the room. "That was fantastic, Dumbledore! Just . . . amazing! I've heard of such things, but . . . words fail me! How does it work?"

Albus laughed and showed Reginald how to activate his mirror to speak to his wife, then he explained, "Both of your mirrors are connected with each other and with the large mirror, so if Gertrude is at home and she doesn't have her mirror with her, you can speak to her through this mirror, wherever you decide to place it. If you leave the doors open between rooms, she should at least be able to hear you call her while she is in an adjacent room. Or, of course, if she is away from home and you are here, she can speak with you in the same manner."

The couple tried out the mirrors again, and Albus spoke with them both from the mirror in the sitting room while Gertrude was in the dining room and Reg was upstairs.

When Reginald came back downstairs, he asked, impressed, "Did you do the charms on these yourself?"

Albus nodded. "But you aren't finished opening gifts yet," he said, reaching into his basket and extracting two more packages.

They opened them to find a box of pipe tobacco for Reginald and a pretty wool scarf in Slytherin green, with silver snowflakes drifting slowly across it, for Gertrude.

"The wool is from my brother's goats. A friend of his turns it into yarn, then knits it and weaves it into various articles. She designed this one for me to give you," Albus explained. He grinned. "I did add a little charm to the snowflakes, though."

"It's beautiful, Albus, thank you." She looked at Reginald. "I'm afraid that our gifts to you will seem paltry by comparison."

"Oh, my dear! Having dinner with you and Reginald is in itself a lovely Christmas present, and your friendship, with both of you, has been a wonderful gift!" Albus said sincerely.

Reginald waved his wand and Levitated a present from beneath the small tree, directing it over to Albus, who caught it with both hands.

"This one is from both of us," Reginald said.

Albus carefully unwrapped the dark blue paper, stars twinkling in gold and silver on it, to reveal a large book.

"It was either something very new or very old, since we don't know what books you may have," explained Reg. "The antiquarian who sold us this assured us that it was fairly rare, but that if, by some chance, you already have it "

"No, no, I don't," Albus said as he passed his hand over the old leather-bound volume, then opened it. "I have some that reproduce parts of Osthane's work, but not all of it. Thank you very much!"

"I couldn't read it at all," Gertrude said, "and Reg is only slightly familiar with medieval Persian and Arabic, but we thought the bookseller seemed honest and to know what he was talking about. I hope that it is what it was purported to be. And that, um, you can read it."

Albus chuckled. "Yes, my dear, I can read it. The Persian not with great ease, but now I shall have something to practice on!"

"And this one is from me, Albus," Gertrude said, Levitating another gift from beneath the tree, this one wrapped in plain red paper, a gold ribbon tied neatly around it. She lowered it gently into his lap. "I saw it and immediately thought of you," she said shyly. "I hope you like it."

Albus unwrapped this gift with equal care, and a slight smile reached his lips as his efforts revealed a dark wooden box inlaid with lighter woods in patterns of climbing ivy vines.

"Lift the lid, Albus," she instructed.

He did so, and a beautiful instrumental rendition of "The Holly and the Ivy" issued from the box. Albus smiled in delight.

"It's wonderful, my dear, thank you very much!" he exclaimed.

"I'm glad you like it. It's nothing compared with Fawkes, of course "

"Nonsense! Fawkes enjoys listening to music as much as he enjoys making it and I think that Sir Bedivere likes it, as well!" The small bird had hopped down from Albus's shoulder and now perched on his wrist, somewhat precariously, turning his head as he looked at the box as if to determine where the little musicians were. "And for all Fawkes talent, he's never managed 'The Holly and the Ivy'!"

Gertrude smiled. "I'm glad you like it. It's charmed with several different pieces of music, and more can be added to it. There's a card there that tells you how to select which music it plays. The shop can add more; their address is on the reverse side. Or perhaps you could do it yourself."

"I wouldn't want to risk damaging the charms on the box. No, if I decide I'd like more music added to it, I'll take it to the shop," Albus said.

Dinner was perfect, and afterward as they ate their pudding, Albus drew a box of Christmas crackers from his basket and insisted that they pull them. In the end, they pulled six crackers, the final one letting off a flurry of indoor-safe fireworks, terrifying poor Bedivere, who hid beneath Albus's beard and couldn't be coaxed out with anything.

Albus chuckled. "I always feared my beard becoming a bird's nest! It's not such a bad thing, after all," he said as he tried to calm the quivering little owl.

They returned to the sitting room, Bedivere still nestled in Albus's beard, Albus holding one hand protectively over the bird to keep him from tumbling out and frightening himself even more. The three drank some of Reginald's mulled wine and talked until supper, pausing only once to open the door to some carollers, giving the youngest child a shiny Sickle when they were through. Gertrude invited them to come in for cocoa and mulled wine, but they declined, saying they were Apparating to Ripon to meet up with other carollers there.

"That was quite lovely," Albus said with a sigh as they closed the door. "Living in isolation as I do has its many advantages, but no carollers would ever find my cottage, or even be able to pass through the wards."

"Have you thought about moving to town?" Reginald asked. "We could keep our eyes open, let you know if anything comes up nearby for sale or let. We would enjoy having you for a closer neighbour, Albus."

Albus shook his head. "No, I am quite settled where I am, and it is as I prefer it . . . but it is wonderful to be here visiting you and enjoying something different."

They had a relaxing supper, followed by more drinks in front of the fireplace, the wizards with their pipes out. Bedivere had peeked out from Albus's beard when the carollers arrived, and by supper, he had settled himself back on Albus's shoulder, looking for all the world as though nothing could frighten him. While the three talked, Bedivere began a game of harassing a very patient Fawkes, flittering about his head, then flying up to the ceiling and diving back down toward him. Finally, Albus said that it was time for them all to go and leave their host and hostess in peace, and Bedivere landed on Fawkes's back, looking the perfect picture of innocence.

"We're still leaving, Bedivere," Albus said with a fond smile to the owl.

"You can stay, if you like, Dumbledore," Reginald said with a smile. "We have a guest room."

"Yes, do, please," Gertrude urged him. "I would hate to see you Splinched trying to get home."

Albus laughed. "Thank you very much. You are both very kind, but I believe that Fawkes will consent to bring us all safely home, won't you, old fellow?"

Fawkes trilled a polite reply, apparently in assent.

Albus shook Reginald's hand, and the younger man said, "Thank you again for the gifts, Albus. The mirrors are absolutely grand. I don't know of anyone else with anything at all like them."

"Yes, and they were also very personal. I appreciate that you used your mother's mirror for my gift. I will treasure it for that alone," Gertrude said, and she kissed the older wizard's cheek.

Albus blushed. "Not at all, my dear. I am merely glad that you like it."

After Reginald and Gertrude had watched with interest as Fawkes Disapparated with a flash, bringing Albus with him, and Bedivere still perched on the larger bird's back, Reginald said, "I do believe our Albus has a bit of a crush on you, Gertrude."

"He never!" Gertrude said, taken aback.

Reginald laughed heartily. "I told you it was a very good thing that you prefer to stand in the corner at parties, or I would have had a great deal of competition, I am sure!"

"Pah!" Gertrude said, smiling. "You are the only wizard I ever had eyes for, so there would never have been any competition."

"But perhaps I would have grown discouraged as I saw all the most eligible wizards flocking about you," Reg said.

Gertrude did laugh at that image. "You say so much nonsense!"

Reginald waved his wand in a circle over his head. Mistletoe flew from all corners of the house and gathered to float above them.

"A kiss, love?" he asked.

"I think that this much mistletoe calls for a good deal more than just a kiss," Gertrude answered with a straight face, though her eyes sparkled.

Ten minutes later, neither noticed when the mistletoe gently rained down upon them.

~Fin~

Note: A bit of trivia to ponder: why did Albus name the little owl "Bedivere," and why did Gertrude think that was an appropriate name for him?