

Winter of Our Discontent

by Losille

Christmas gift exchange gone awry. Or, what happens when Headmistress McGonagall can't take the bickering between two of her employees any longer.

Written for the SSHG Winter Exchange 2007, gift for Community.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Prompts used:

2. Three words: Green argyle socks.

3. An advertisement on the back page of the Daily Prophet: A blurry photo of a pair of ice skates on top of a wooden trunk and the caption "T.E.--Winter is on its way." You fill in the details.

Many thanks to my betas, Keladry and Subversa... who do great when I need hand holding and my grammar whipped into shape.

Disclaimer: I own nothing. Just trying to clean up the mess left by JKR.

The Problem

Minerva McGonagall sat quietly, watching the spirals of steam rise from her cup of tea. Intertwining and breaking apart, the steam eventually evaporated into thin air, much like the plans forming and breaking in her mind. She had spent the last two hours sitting silently in her office, trying to decide what to do about this... problem.

This very sudden...and yet not so surprising...problem.

Minerva had been in love at least a few times in her long life. She knew how things worked in the arena of the heart, but she also knew there were any number of outcomes for any one person. It had not been out of the realm of impossibility that this would happen.

To have the interest between two of her staff members unexpectedly ignite after years of working together...there had been no warning whatsoever...was a little disconcerting. There may have been a slow simmer reaching this boil, but she had failed to notice it. Even though it had always been a possibility, she had never expected it to come to fruition, for the wizard in question was unsociable and taciturn in the best of times, and the witch was headstrong to a Gryffindor fault.

Perhaps these deficiencies of character were the ultimate problem now, preventing these two people from living up to their destinies, which seemed to be indelibly

entwined. Minerva knew they were perfect for each other. The other staff members knew it. And she was pretty darn sure the entire student body knew it. The only people who were completely oblivious to this fact were the two in question.

Would Severus and Hermione ever be able to coexist peacefully? At this point, Minerva was not so certain they could, even if their feelings were laid bare.

Just this morning they had come to wands in the middle of the Great Hall, of all places, arguing about which was the better kind of tea. Earl Grey? Tisane? Tea! Could anyone imagine?

Severus favored the acidic qualities of the citrus flavor in his Earl Grey. Tisane was Hermione's favorite, for the sheer variety concocted; being decaffeinated, it was the superior tea to replace all drinks entirely. Severus pointed out that the caffeine of Earl Grey was appropriate to stay alert in class; Hermione thought it made people too jumpy and he was a prime example. She argued that the acidity, if minimal, of the Earl Grey was too damaging to the teeth. To bring this up had Severus literally fuming, thinking the jab was directly linked to his own poor dental hygiene.

Calling her an insufferable, silly girl was what had caused the wands to come out.

Now that they had involved the entire school in their overly dramatic tête-à-têtes, rather than only the amused staff at meetings in the lounge or the Order at functions at Grimmauld Place, Minerva had to intervene.

Except intervening would not be so simple with these two extremely different people. As a matter of fact, that was what had eluded her the past few hours. She wondered if she would ever come up with a plan with enough cunning to draw Severus in hook, line and sinker and convince Hermione that he was not so disagreeable.

Minerva heard the grinding of stone against stone outside the door, signaling that someone was coming up to see her. Within seconds, an arguing, exasperated individual burst into the room, followed by a smirking, unmoved wizard.

"... You had no right!"

"I had every right, Miss Granger."

"He nearly killed Teddy Lupin!"

"But he did not."

Hermione scoffed and let out a feral grumble, nearly stomping her feet like a small child.

"Calm down, both of you! Honestly!" Minerva said sternly. "Two of my staff members acting like this is reprehensible! What has set you off now?"

They both opened their mouths to start at the same time, but Minerva raised a hand.

"Hermione first."

"Flint cursed a Bludger while the Gryffindors were out practicing. Teddy took the Bludger to the head and chest," Hermione said slowly, the anger dripping from her voice.

"While I was berating Flint and banning him from Quidditch for two weeks, Snape... excuse me, *Professor* Snape... appears out of nowhere and rescinds my punishment! He had no right, Minerva!"

Minerva turned to look at the dark man, her eyes questioning. This was certainly alarming, even if he tried to remain blasé about it.

"I have every right to overrule *Miss* Granger," he said, vitriol evidently simmering below his carefully constructed aloof façade. "I am her superior."

"And I am yours, Severus," Minerva said pointedly. "And if this game of one-upmanship continues to get worse or further involves students, I see no choice but to ask one of you to leave Hogwarts."

"Game of one-upmanship, Minerva? That is hardly the case," he said slowly. "Suspending a student from Quidditch long enough that he misses a game with his team has never happened."

Hermione scoffed. "Oh, really? I seem to remember a few times involving a friend..."

"Do not dare bring Boy Wonder into this," he seethed.

Hermione snapped her attention back to Minerva. "Teddy will not be able to join his own team for the game. I think it only fair Flint not be allowed to participate."

"You've been to see Madam Pomfrey to verify this?" Minerva asked, looking between the both of them.

"Teddy has a cracked skull and a concussive injury, in addition to several fractured and bruised ribs that will have him unable to participate in any Quidditch for two weeks," Hermione reported, turning to glare at Severus.

"Miss Granger," said Severus, disdain for the hysterical girl in his voice, "it was Lupin's fault he did not get out of the way quickly enough."

"DON'T CALL ME *MISS* GRANGER!" Hermione roared, her face red with anger. "We have been colleagues for nearly ten years now, Severus! I am PROFESSOR GRANGER!"

Wands had been drawn, but neither noticed Minerva draw her own and whisper, "*Accio* wands."

"Do I need to put both of *you* in detention?" she questioned, catching both wands...ebony and vine wood...and placing them on the mahogany desk in front of her.

Hermione seemed to let out some of her steam in a disgruntled sigh, deflating into a chair. "I'm sorry, Minerva."

"Severus, why do you think it necessary to void Hermione's decision?" she asked, feeling every bit as old as her eighty-eight years, far too action-packed years.

"It is clearly much too harsh," he said flatly.

Hermione nearly launched herself at him, ready to physically fight him, but controlled herself. "You are the last person to lecture on harsh punishments, you arrogant toerag!"

"Professor Granger," Minerva scolded. "He is still your superior."

If Severus had had the ability to lose control and to verbally taunt Hermione like a petulant child, he would have. Instead he looked directly at Hermione and raised his chin, smirking unpleasantly.

"You, Severus, are not to interfere with the punishments Hermione gives to students whether they are in your House or not, or whether you think you will lose the Quidditch match or not." Minerva sighed. "You have never had a problem before this year with how Professor Granger punishes students. Why now?"

He gave her a stony look.

"You will be Headmaster next year, but don't for one moment think I won't come out of retirement to knock some sense into you if I find you're being your overbearing, antisocial, sadistic self." Minerva sat down into her seat and looked at the two adults in front of her.

Hermione's face had turned smug.

"And I would expect better from my House."

The girl blushed furiously, belying her thirty-four years.

"You may both go now," Minerva instructed in a voice that brooked no opposition. She handed them their wands. "Consider this your warning that if you continue to act like this, I will have no choice but to punish."

Severus swooped to the door just as Hermione had reached her hand to lift the latch. There was a moment of tension as both glared at each other, but Severus opened the door for the younger woman. Minerva often wondered who had taught him to do this...be chivalrous in such a way...which was such an anomaly to how he usually acted.

At least he had one good quality to offer. Even to Hermione.

"Perhaps I'll owl Teddy's godfather," Hermione mumbled as she stepped past the dark man.

And they were off arguing again.

Minerva rested her head back on the chair and grumbled a long string of choice Gaelic obscenities.

"Now, Minerva, I have not heard those words from you in a long time," said the voice directly behind her.

She started for a moment, but turned her seat around to look at the painting of Dumbledore. "They've been like this since the term began, Albus. I really don't know what to do."

"I have an idea."

"I am more than willing to hear it," Minerva said. "But if Severus knew you, even in oil form, were still scheming in his life, he would have a fit."

"Then you must be the soul of discretion," Albus replied with a twinkle from behind his oil spectacles. How the artist had managed to impart that in the painting was still a mystery.

The Plan

Severus sat sulking in a dark corner of the faculty staffroom, watching his colleagues...and Miss Granger...titter good-naturedly about the secret gift exchange Minerva had devised. As far as he was concerned, it was a completely infernal idea; the others apparently disagreed. He gave his obligatory bottles of Firewhisky to them each year for Christmas. Why did he have to start doing something special now? He did not like this whole idea of getting a list of suggestions from a recipient and having to come up with a gift based on those suggestions.

It required him to be thoughtful, sensitive to what the recipient might want.

And there was certainly nothing that he wanted to receive from the people he worked with, besides their own obligatory consolation gifts of fruitcakes or Firewhisky.

"You aren't writing anything, Professor Snape," said a voice as a shadow fell over him.

"As though you care," he said, looking up to find that the light Miss Granger blocked outlined her body as though she were some ethereal being standing before him.

The girl shrugged her shoulders and left him, shaking her head.

"I haven't got all day, Severus."

He glanced at Minerva.

"What if I do not wish to participate?"

"I'm requiring it as your superior," she said. "It's a team-building experience."

"You've charmed these parchments," he said flatly. "I refuse to write anything upon this and sign my name to it."

Minerva's lips tightened. "Aye, you will, or you will no longer work at Hogwarts. Why must this be so hard for you, Severus? It's in the spirit of the season we're doing this."

"When in history have I ever gotten into the spirit of the season?" He glared at the twinkling fire across the room. The fact that Miss Granger was there and laughing loudly at something Hooch had said had nothing to do with it.

Minerva followed his glance and then turned back to him with a confused look.

"You have five minutes, Severus. I suggest you write *something* down, or I will choose for you."

"Fine," he mumbled to himself, withdrawing the self-inking quill he kept within the folds of his robes. He looked at the numbered spots for the requests to be placed. Three. He'd wanted many things. A life free of dunderheads. A life... in general. Despite the popular consensus and *Daily Prophet*, he had *not* gotten a life since the end of the last war. Maybe a witch capable of interacting sufficiently in sexual congress, beauty not important, nor was the sense of hearing, for his tongue would seek to injure. Neither was the sense of sight, for he was not an Adonis, himself. He wanted recognition. He wanted friendship from someone who was not Lucius Malfoy. No one in this room could do any of these things for him.

Using an old Dumbledore standby, he hastily scribbled "socks."

Two more to go.

He glanced at the paper he had discarded, espying the one page ad with ice-skates resting on a trunk, the words, "T.E.-Winter is on its way." Fine then, he would add... ice-skates. He smirked. Hopefully the person who received his requests would not think it wise to purchase such a gift for him.

It occurred to him for a fleeting second that he might receive Granger's requests, and she, his. And finally, he wrote "A Gryffindor suffering a medieval torture. Preferably in a Scold's Bridle."

Just as he was signing his name to it, Minerva plucked the parchment from his fingers, announcing to the room, "You will receive your recipient's requests by owl tomorrow. All gifts are to be given by the end of the year. Don't put it off, because you do not want to know what will happen if you do not participate. If you have any questions regarding your recipient, please speak with me, and I will speak with the recipient and relay the information back to you. And finally, have fun."

Severus scowled, picking his newspaper up and blocking the world out once more.

The Owl

Hermione sat staring at the spiky handwriting on the parchment in front of her the following evening.

"You've got to be kidding me," Hermione muttered to herself, rereading the requests on the page. Had Snape finally fallen completely off the metaphorical rocker? "Fine, if you want ice skates, you'll get ice skates. But I'm going to have the satisfaction of seeing you falling on your arse, whether you like it or not."

Maybe she was the one who had gone mad... after all, she was talking to herself...at length, and answering her own questions. Not that she had much of a choice anyway. Her good, if sometimes nasty, companion of nine years would not speak with her. She *had* to discuss her thoughts with someone able to understand them, and most others in the castle...even her oldest and best friends outside Hogwarts...could not offer her that intellectual stimulation she so craved.

The grey and white kitten nudged her hand, requiring a scratch behind an ear. Even little Toby could not help her. He was not at all like Crookshanks, who would look at her as though he completely understood everything she told him.

The kitten sat down and nudged at her hand again. Hermione gathered the bundle of fur up and cuddled him in her arms, listening to him purr loudly. She smiled to herself and got up from her seat, shuffling over to the settee in front of the blazing fire.

If only Snape were not so difficult, life would have been a lot easier for both of them. It had taken her ten years to cultivate a friendly relationship with him, eight years and 364 days to figure out that what she was feeling was love, and one day to completely muck it all up. How was she supposed to know that he had been trying to tell her that he felt the same way all these past years, in his own incredibly roundabout, vague and Slytherin ways? How was she supposed to know that he had given up trying a year or so before she told him?

And why could they not entertain these notions now? Most people would be glad when two people were in sync with each other, but not the impossibly confused and misguided Severus Snape. She did not know if he saw it as a mark of idiocy that she had not noticed his advances before and, therefore, could not have a relationship with someone so unintelligent.

Now she could not have him, and their friendly relationship had crumbled considerably. All they did was argue about insipid, brainless things that two intellectual people should not argue about. They acted no better than the children they taught in schoolyard rivalry, not like the adults they had been only a short time ago. Though Hermione knew...rationally, at least...his actions were from trying to quell his own strong feelings, it did not make things any better. She *needed* his attention... and *soon*.

It hurt her heart, physically hurt her, to know that he was falling farther and farther away from her grasp, but it seemed that was what Severus wanted.

Perhaps it alarmed him that the woman he loved loved him back? Could that have been why he acted in such a way? Had he wanted the closeness with her, but never intended upon her falling in love, too? Did he think that all he was destined to after Lily was one-sided love affairs?

Oh, what a dilemma.

Hermione looked down at the kitten in her arms again and smiled fondly. Severus would not like it when he found out the kitten had been named after him; however, it was not an adequate replacement for the man and the masculine touch she craved with every fiber of her being.

The Gifting

Severus has been surprised to find that he had not received Hermione's gift requests, as he would not put it past the old cat to give it to him to make him suffer. The gifts for Professor Bulfinch had been simple enough...a new book on transformational magic that had gone out a week ago. Yet, he was still unsettled by the possibility that Hermione might have received his, and he wondered what infernal thing she might do with it.

Whoever had him, though, had the good sense to keep his "requests" quiet.

He expected his gift to arrive Christmas morning, and on that day he was surprised to find that he was excited...only slightly, mind you...to see if his gift had arrived and who his gifter was, even if he knew his requests had been specious.

Sitting upon the living room table was a large box wrapped in glittering gold paper, a crimson bow on top. He knew it spelled disaster, but he sat down and opened it anyway. On top of a layer of tissue paper was a note inscribed in her delicate handwriting.

Severus-

I couldn't imagine that you really wanted those things on your list, but I purchased a few just in case, and I imagine you could do with a little fun.

He pushed back the tissue paper to find a pair of black skates accompanied by a pair of green argyle socks.

The skates must be worn to skate within six hours of your receiving this. If you do not wear them, then you will probably regret it. Do not try to remove the charm; it can only be removed with my wand.

Happy Christmas,

H.

Dreadful woman! He would be damned if he would go out to the lake and attempt to ice skate, but he did not know if he cared to find out how she had booby-trapped the skates.

Two hours later, this was how Severus Snape found himself outside the castle, trudging through driving snow, freezing to his bones, and struggling to pull on the evil ice skates. After he finished with this task, he would hunt her down and make her pay for the indignities she had foisted upon him.

People would see the black dot in the white countryside, flailing about on the ice. What if the students came out?

She had not said how long he would have to skate. Perhaps once around the lake would do it. As he was completing the revolution, wobbling precariously, his ankles already aching, he heard a crunch in the snow.

Followed by a soft laugh.

Appearing out of a copse of frozen trees was a heavily bundled Hermione Granger. Her cheeks and nose were red from the cold. He liked her best when she laughed, the way the corner of her eyes crinkled.

Of course she would come out to see his torture. Had he not asked for a Gryffindor to be tortured instead?

He stopped on the ice, watching her walk, his mind warring over steeling himself from Granger or softening. He had so wanted to hurt her for making him do this, but seeing her now had somehow changed his mind.

Had he not decided to forget about his feelings months ago? Why were they cropping back up?

"I can't believe you actually came out here," she said quietly, carefully walking out onto the ice.

"You said in the letter..." he started.

She smiled. "I lied."

"There's no spell?"

"No." She shook her head and laughed again. "I wouldn't do that to you unless I was *particularly* angry."

He raised a brow in question. "Aren't you particularly angry with me? It certainly seems like it these days."

"I'm not angry...just upset," she replied. "Even though you try to alienate me, it's not working. I'm not an idiot, Severus. You're doing it to push me away. You don't want me to love you."

"Not this again," he muttered, skating a few steps. He stopped to catch his balance.

Hermione sighed. "I love you, Severus, and I am sick and tired of this fighting. I think everyone is tired of it. Why can't you just accept my apologies for not realizing earlier?"

He was silent, watching her carefully.

"You are my best friend," she said. "I can't lose that."

He had heard this all before, and though he still held a candle for the unbearable Gryffindor woman, he was not sure he was ready to let her have his heart again.

Or, to be more correct, he was not sure if he wanted somebody to love him in return. He had been certain Lily was the only one who ever would. What if it did not work between them? He would be broken again. He could not be broken again... he would surely die from the pain. All this time he had wanted Hermione to *know* that he loved her, but he did not want her to love him in return.

He was incapable of *accepting* it in return.

She reached out to touch his arm just as a gale wind blew through, disturbing the shaky equilibrium he had found standing still. The resulting catastrophe probably only lasted a millisecond, but it felt like he was out of his body and watching the experience in slow motion.

Hermione grabbed tightly on his arm to hold him steady, but it was not enough. His legs slid apart and back together as he attempted to correct himself. He reached out to get a better grip on her arm, but was too late.

He landed fully on his back, and to compound his injuries, Hermione landed on top of him with a pointy elbow in his gut, injuring his kidneys.

She laughed at him.

And he could not help but let out his own bark of laughter.

"Thanks for breaking the fall," she said, placing her hands on the ice to get up.

His long fingers circling around her upper arm stopped her. "Don't go."

She looked at him questioningly.

In a wholly illogical response, he grabbed her head, entwining his fingers in her soft hair. He was kissing her before he realized it, and he was surprised to find that he enjoyed this immensely. Perhaps her loving in return was not as horrible as he had imagined?

Hermione pulled away from him. "What are you doing?"

"Acting on an impulse," he said, deflated. The glimmer of hope was fading. "We can stop."

She nodded and stood up carefully and glanced down at him when he made no move to follow. Dejection was what he felt; when she smiled warmly, he was certain it was evident in his expression, as well.

"I'm not going to do this out in the middle of the lake. I don't want to catch a cold," she said. "Besides, the ice will melt."

He raised a curious brow, the meaning of her statements taking a long time to filter through his addled brain.

She smirked. "Your real gift, Severus, was the tender loving care if you needed it after your escapades ice skating. I think you've earned it, and please don't turn me down again."

He sat up slowly, looking at his hands then up at Hermione. "I'm not."

The End

Sitting in her office, Minerva McGonagall watched the interactions of her friends on the icy lake. As they started walking back toward the castle, she noticed Severus reach an arm around Hermione to pull her close to his side as they walked...entirely too close for bickering colleagues-just-turned-friends.

At least she *hoped* they were friends now.

Perhaps there was more to their arguments than she had accounted for in the past.

As Hermione stood on her toes to place a quick kiss on Severus' cheek, Minerva had no doubt that they had finally called a truce. And she was glad she could have helped.

Even if it was a miniscule amount.

Severus smiled at Hermione.

Hermione giggled at something and playfully smacked his shoulder.

"If the smile on your face is any indication, I take it that the plan worked," said the voice from the oil painting across the room.

"They're in love."

Albus Dumbledore's painting nodded his head, his oil eyes twinkling. "My job is done here. Have a sherbet lemon for me to celebrate."

Minerva looked at him incredulously. "Oh, no, after this ordeal I need something stronger. I'm going to my rooms, having a double and relaxing with a book. Happy Christmas, Albus."

"Happy Christmas, Minerva."

A/N: Info and picture on a Scold's Bridle <http://www.shanmonster.com/witch/torture/brank.html>