

That Good Night

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"Do not go gentle into that good night..."

--Dylan Thomas

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Minerva lies naked and still on the bed in front of him, and Severus Snape allows himself a small smile as he looks at her, at the pale legs, at the silver-threaded dark hair that spreads over her shoulders. It has been some weeks since her last visit, but that fact doesn't matter now. Once she joins him in the narrow upstairs room at Spinner's End, time fades away, and there is only the present.

They meet only infrequently, for she will rarely leave her school, and he refuses to return to it. The few hours she occasionally spends in his bed are all they offer to one another, all they ask.

Leaning forward, Severus draws a finger along the jagged white lines that cross Minerva's breasts; they are the remnants of her encounter, eight years ago this summer, with the four Stunners that could so easily have killed her.

She shivers slightly at his touch, then reaches over to trace the thick knot of scar tissue on his neck. It's the remnant of his own near-death encounter with a snake, one that should definitely have killed him.

Yet here they both are, alive, if not exactly unharmed. The touching of the scars is their ritual to acknowledge what they have endured, though whether Minerva is always thankful for their survival, Severus does not enquire. His own thoughts on that topic vary.

Still, tonight, he need consider nothing but pleasure, and so he guides Minerva's hand directly to his cock. She strokes him, gently at first, then harder, her thin fingers sure as they tighten and release and tighten again.

It feels wonderful, but he makes no sound, instead conveying his approval by stroking her in return, feeling her grow gradually wet to his touch. Arousal comes more slowly to her these days than in years past, but he is in no hurry.

Soon she is rocking against his hand, breathing heavily, her eyes drifting closed. It is the only indication she will give him of how he pleases her, for like him, she will make no sound.

It's not the way things had been in the early days of their affair, so long ago now, when Severus's world had been bound by dungeon and Dark Lord instead of the sooty brick of Spinner's End, and when sex with Minerva had been merely an enjoyable extension of their unending competition. Then, she had been quite vocal, and every gasp, every moan, every cry he'd made her utter had been a victory for him, a proof of his control and her lack of it.

Now, though, the war is over, and the world is...if not better, then at least different. Now, Minerva joins Severus in his silence, and it is where he prefers to meet her.

He is fully hard now, so he rises to his knees beside her and straddles her shoulders, nudging her lips with his cock. She knows what he wants, of course, and just for a moment she turns her head aside, teasing him as of old. Then he is sheathed in the warmth of her mouth, and he tips his head back, his own mouth opening wordlessly at the strength of the sensation.

He feels Minerva smile around him.

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It was six months after his nearly-lifeless body had been recovered from the Shrieking Shack that Severus received the healers' final word: the damage to his vocal cords from the snakebite was irreversible.

He hadn't been surprised, of course; few knew better than he that cursed wounds resisted almost all potions and healing spells. The fact that he was alive at all was something of a cosmic accident, a one-in-a-thousand chance that his hastily-cast cauterising charm just happened to actually hit its target, slowing his blood loss until Slughorn had come puffing in to find him.

After the diagnosis, Poppy and Filius had found ways to adapt *thesonorous* charm so that it would turn his raw, painful whisper into fairly audible, if mechanical-sounding, speech.

Long practice had finally taught him how to activate the spell with neither wand nor word, but speaking remained an excruciating process, and Severus had little to say to people in any case. At Spinner's End, entire weeks would go by without his talking to anyone, not even the clerks in the Muggle shops, who seemed perfectly content to conduct transactions without exchanging a word.

Yet on that July afternoon over a year after the Dark Lord's death, when his wards had registered the presence of a caller, he hadn't turned Minerva away.

He had not seen her during his months at St. Mungo's, for one of the first things he'd done when he'd regained consciousness was to mime a demand for quill and parchment so that he could make clear his wish for no visitors.

For the most part, the hospital had granted his request...with one exception. He had been forced to endure an agonizing ten minutes with Shackbolt and the unspeakable Potter as they'd presented him with an Order of Merlin, an honour he'd used to believe he wanted but that now seemed pointless. Severus had finally feigned sleep to be rid of them.

His feelings about Minerva, however, were more complicated. They had once had a relationship of sexual convenience...he'd almost have called it a friendship...but tensions over the war and disagreements over Potter had put an end to their closeness even before Albus Dumbledore's body had tumbled to the base of the Astronomy Tower. There had been no formal break, just a gradual growing-apart, until one night he realised that it had been weeks since either of them had even casually touched the other.

The relationship was over, and he told himself he was relieved. Whatever had made him think he wanted an old woman in his bed?

By the time he'd repaired to Spinner's End, he'd put Minerva firmly in his past, and the past was a place Severus tried never to revisit. Yet on that summer afternoon when she'd appeared at his door, he found himself lowering his wards to let her in.

She looked as stern as ever in a dark Muggle raincoat that could not hide the fact that she was still too thin; she had evidently not regained the weight she'd lost during his year as headmaster. He'd rarely spoken to her that year, for he'd seen the speculation in her always-too-expressive face, and he hadn't want to risk her possible deductions about his true position.

If she had eventually figured things out anyway, he hadn't been aware of it, and it hadn't mattered in the end. In the end, as she had attacked him, as she had duelled him with implacable deadliness of curse and speech, her hatred had seemed real enough.

On the day of her visit, though, she appeared more tired than angry, and Severus felt a flash of annoyance. Damn it, he thought, she'd better not have come to ask his forgiveness. He folded his arms and glared at her, holding up his hand and shaking his head before she even began to speak.

She seemed to understand; Minerva always had a quick mind.

"Don't worry, Severus," she said. "I have not come to apologise. We both did what we needed to do, that year. If we were cruel, well. . . it was not a time for kindness. No, that's not why I'm here."

He'd raised his eyebrows in the obvious question...then *why* are you here?...and once again she answered as if he had spoken aloud.

"I want to assure myself that you are recovered."

Something about her tone made him think that this was not the only reason, but he opened his arms and spread his hands. She was free to take a look at him, if she wanted to.

He watched her closely, but for once was not able to read her expression. A quickly-controlled movement of her hand suggested that she might have something else to say, but if she did, she decided against it.

Finally she nodded briskly and turned away. She had not taken a seat, nor had he invited her to, and so she needed only a few steps to reach the door.

"I don't plan to make a nuisance of myself, Severus," she said, tightening her Muggle coat about her. "You've made it clear that you want to be left alone, and I will respect your wishes. Now that I have seen for myself that you are well, I will say good afternoon."

He had fully intended to let her leave, but as her hand touched the doorknob, he'd tapped his throat and spoken, ignoring the raging pain.

"Minerva."

If she was disturbed by the tinny blare of the word, presented without emphasis or inflection, she didn't indicate it. She merely stopped, her back to him.

"The night of the battle. Would you have killed me?"

Her shoulders tightened as she turned to face him, her eyes weary.

"I don't know," she said. "It wasn't necessary."

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Minerva's fingers hold the base of his cock as she takes him into her mouth, and he knows he could easily finish like this, thrusting into her throat and perhaps pulling out to spill onto her hair, adding the silver of his seed to the strands in her hair. It's a fantasy that has long aroused him.

But it's too soon. He wants more, wants to see her respond to him as he's been responding to her. He wants to taste her, to feel even her slightest quiver, to watch the arch of her neck that will tell him more loudly than any words how intensely she feels him.

He stops and sits back; then he moves down Minerva's body until he can kneel next to her and tap both of her thighs.

After a pause, she opens herself to him, something he knows she find difficult; she doesn't like being vulnerable or exposed any more than he does. But Severus always insists: after all, he trusts her with his cock in her mouth; it's only fair that she repay *quid pro quo*.

Such moments have become part of their ritual, too. As he settles himself between her knees and touches his tongue to her, he revels in her scent and in the sharp intake of her breath...not quite a gasp... that is the only sound in the darkened room.

He has never asked her to remain silent, never indicated that he expected it, yet not once since they have revived their relationship has she uttered so much as a whisper while he beds her.

And now only the twist of her fingers in his hair and the shift of her hips tells him how close she is to coming. It's a language he's enjoyed learning.

Just as he enjoys telling her "not yet."

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They hadn't resumed their intimacy immediately; there'd been too many ghosts for that. But the seeds of reconciliation had been sown by the answer she'd given him on her first visit.

"I don't know," she'd said when he'd asked if she would have killed him. "It wasn't necessary."

At these words, he'd felt a sudden easing in his shoulders, as of a tension he hadn't known he held. He understood: of course she would have taken his life, as he would have taken hers...but only if it had been truly necessary. They would not have acted out of hatred or vengeance or malice. It would not have been personal.

He had known it of himself; he had needed to know it of her.

That first visit had ended with his opening the door for her, and as she stepped over the threshold, he'd found voice for another two words: "Come back."

She had. It was on her fourth visit, some months hence, that they had finally climbed the stairs to the bedroom, and so far, he has not been sorry.

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He enters her easily and knows of her pleasure by the arch of her back underneath him and the brush of her breasts on his chest. He kisses her, liking the fact that she will taste herself, and he moves against her only slowly, taking his time. She will tell him, with a hand on his arse and fingernails on his back, when she wants him to take her hard.

And when she does, he obliges, thrusting fast and deep, rocking the old bed, pushing both of them towards release, towards that momentary sensation of oblivion that comes as *he* comes...a little preview, he's always thought, of the final oblivion that will eventually take us all. He wonders if Minerva feels it, too, and finds the notion as comforting as he does.

Tonight she comes first, unusual for her, but it takes only the clench of her muscles around him to send him tumbling after her, his hands digging into her shoulders, the thump of the bed against the wall the only sound made by their little deaths.

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Severus lifts himself off Minerva slowly and stretches out beside her, the air chilly against his skin. He has never been fond of caresses, but he doesn't object when she strokes his back; he knows she will not remain in bed for long.

And in just a moment, she stirs and sits up, summoning her dressing gown from a nearby chair. She's transfigured it from her robes, for she keeps no personal possessions at Spinner's End, something for which Severus is grateful. It means that each evening they spend together is just itself, nothing more, not part of a past or a future. They can make of each meeting anything they choose, with no consequences or expectations for whenever they might meet again.

Minerva leaves the bedroom, her bare feet sounding softly on the equally-bare floor. When she comes back, Severus raises himself on his elbow and turns down a corner of the duvet in a silent invitation to her to stay. He doesn't often ask, and she doesn't always accept; spending the night is intimacy of a different sort from sex, and they are both wary.

But tonight she indicates her consent with a hand on his cheek. He slides under the bedclothes and moves over to make room for her; she sends her dressing gown back to its chair and climbs in next to him.

She will be gone very early in the morning, he knows, back to the school that is never far from her thoughts, and most likely he will not wake when she leaves.

Severus turns on his side; Minerva lies close behind him, warm against his back. She wraps an arm around his middle, and after a moment, he covers her hand with his own and touches his throat.

"Goodnight," he rasps.