

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Snape

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Notes: This story was my entry in the 2012 Reversathon fest. My recipient was Leni Jess, who had asked for a story that traced Severus's changing relationship with Minerva or Poppy or Hooch. But before posting could begin, we got the sad word that Leni had died unexpectedly.

I was pleased to be able to write this story in her memory. Leni Jess was a fine on-line friend and writer who brightened HP fandom with her presence and whose absence will long be felt.

My thanks to that fabulous beta, The Real Snape, who worked wonders with this story at very short notice.

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I do not know which to prefer,

The beauty of inflections

Or the beauty of innuendoes,

The blackbird whistling

Or just after

Wallace Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"

~ ~ ~

I

The first time Minerva McGonagall saw Severus Snape swoop darkly about the corridors of Hogwarts, flapping his teaching cloak like a demented bat, she thought him

absurdly affected. But she did not say so.

She merely gave him an appraising glance as he swirled into the staff room on his first day as an instructor and said, "Professor Snape."

His answering glance was sharp and suspicious, as if he believed her to be making fun of him, and probably he did. After all, the notion that Severus all of twenty-two and with no experience save that of following the orders of a madman could yet deserve the title of "professor" was ridiculous enough to destroy every boggart within miles.

But she kept her expression neutral, and after a moment he gave a stiff nod. "Professor McGonagall," he replied. Then he added, "Is that the way you wish me to continue to address you?"

It was now her turn to suspect mockery, but then it occurred to her that the enquiry might be genuine: of course he would have no idea of the proper protocol, and he would not want to offend at least not quite this soon in his tenure. That he would be offensive sooner or later, she had no doubt; Severus had always been a disdainful boy, and it was not likely that his time as a Death Eater had improved his disposition.

The temptation to respond sharply was strong; Minerva had not come close to forgiving him his sins, and so far not even Albus Dumbledore had been able to convince her that hiring Severus to mould young minds was anything other than a mad idea.

But she was rather surprised to realise that for the moment, Severus actually seemed a little ill-at-ease, even anxious. He wasn't giving her the just-short-of-insolent stare that had been habitual with him as a student; instead, he lowered his eyes and bit his lip nervously.

Minerva decided to restrain herself and answer straightforwardly. "Professor McGonagall" is appropriate in front of students, certainly," she said. "But in private, the staff uses given names."

The look of panic that this reply brought to Severus's face was priceless, and Minerva might have laughed aloud had she not recalled something that helped her preserve her countenance: the memory of a well-known voice saying, "Do call me Albus, my dear."

It had taken her a month to do so, and the first time she had, she'd felt frightfully daring, as if she had suddenly decided to utter blasphemies in front of her minister father.

She took pity on the boy and laid an impulsive hand on his arm. "Just say whatever feels most comfortable, Severus."

His muscles tensed under her fingers, but he did not move away.

"Thank you," he said. "Minerva."

II

It was a better beginning than she had expected, given that a few weeks earlier, when Albus had outlined his plan to hire Severus, Minerva had been...well, less than sanguine about the advisability of the appointment.

Albus had expected her disapproval, of course. "Is this the moment, then?" he had asked as he poured her another finger of Ogden's Gold Label. "The moment you join the rest of the world in thinking me mad, bad, and dangerous to know?"

"You *are* mad, bad, and dangerous to know," Minerva had answered, both because it was true and because she wanted time to think before venturing a more substantive remark. As much as she admired Albus, she'd learnt over the years not to rush to comment on any of his pronouncements. The more controversial his decisions, the more he liked to spring them on people without warning, before they had a chance to formulate reasoned objections.

But this time, her reactions were more complicated than outright objection. Oh, on the surface, of course, the proposal was ludicrous: hire a former Death Eater to teach children at Hogwarts? Preposterous.

Yet in some ways, the plan made sense. Minerva had savoured a sip of the Ogden's Gold as she reflected (if Albus wasn't above using good liquor as a bribe, she wasn't above enjoying the attempt). No, Severus could not possibly be an effective instructor, at least not yet, but he was intelligent and skilled if he cared to, he could learn.

As for his criminal history...

Though she might have turned her back on much of her Presbyterian upbringing (to her father's everlasting pain), Minerva still believed strongly in atonement and redemption how else was she to come to terms with her own sins? For of course she had them; everyone did, though some more than others, obviously.

So if Severus had indeed repented of his dark past, as Albus claimed, then he deserved a chance to redeem himself.

And if he had not repented, then it was probably not unwise for Albus to keep him close by. What better way to watch one's enemies than to hold them firmly at one's side?

Still. Redemption and necessary surveillance were one thing; risking the well-being of children was something else again. There was no reason that Severus had to be reclaimed to righteousness by being put in contact with impressionable youth. Surely there were better alternatives, and she said as much to Albus.

"Severus will not harm the children," Albus had replied, with what Minerva thought might prove to be far too much assurance.

But seeing that he was adamant, she had said no more and instead had devised her own plans. Minerva trusted Albus's judgement most of the time but never at the expense of her own. She would watch the lad, she decided, and make up her own mind.

And she would hope for the best. She was a teacher, after all, and weren't teachers supposed to believe that even the thickest, most hopeless cases could be at least slightly improved?

III

By the start of Severus's second year of teaching, Minerva was feeling rather less charitable. She was not a patient woman at the best of times, and if her interactions with Severus Snape rarely counted as the worst of times, they often fell far short of "best."

So far, he had been no threat to the children's safety, so her fears on that score were mostly allayed. But she was frustrated by the fact that her dutiful overtures of if not friendship, then at least collegiality were rebuffed more often than they were accepted. Then, too, neither she nor Severus was good at curbing their sharp tongues, and despite regular resolutions to improve, she continued to give in to her exasperation.

"For heaven's sake, Professor Snape," she snapped one afternoon, as he billowed along a corridor and narrowly missed knocking down two first-years. "Children are not nine-pins. Try not to bowl them over."

He didn't deign to respond, merely swept past as if she and the students were under a Disillusionment charm.

Thus when she heard one child whisper "vampire" to the other, she did not rebuke him, but instead pretended not to notice, for she thought it no more than Severus deserved. He might not literally stink of blood, but the figurative stains of it, she was sure, would be forever on his soul.

IV

The stains on his hands were more prosaic: walnut juice and luna caustic, henna and sea buckthorn. Though the story they told of Severus was less dramatic than the tale

of his Death Eater past, Minerva came to realise that it was no less true.

Potion-making was more than a skill for Severus, more even than a talent; it was his way of making sense of the world, taking bits of this and pieces of that and transforming them into something new.

It was not really like Transfiguration, which replaced X with Y; Potions was a different form of alchemy. It was a process, a building the making of a thing that was both different from its components and yet the sum of them.

In her more fanciful moments, she thought of Severus himself as a potion: a complex brew of bitter experience and sharp understanding, seasoned with his errors and yet made palatable by a humanity that revealed itself gradually over the years.

She watched Severus develop into a capable teacher not a nurturing or compassionate one, true, but one with a stellar O.W.L. pass rate and a quite respectable N.E.W.T. record.

As time went on, she saw signs that he was developing into something of a decent man as well.

V

Her view of him began to warm, appropriately enough, during the summer holidays.

Minerva had never developed a taste for either hot weather or travel, so while the end of the regular term usually saw her colleagues scattering to points south or to family homes, she looked forward to several weeks of welcome solitude at Hogwarts, her summer peace broken only by a few administrative duties and by the occasional luncheon in Edinburgh with old friends or chess evenings with Albus.

Sometimes whole weeks would go by when she shared the castle only with elves, ghosts, and Mr Filch, and since all of them were adept at keeping out of each other's way, she was essentially blissfully alone.

Thus she was not best pleased, in that summer following Severus's first year of teaching, to find that he intended to pass his holidays at Hogwarts, too. Although she knew it was quite likely that he would spend most of his time hidden in his dungeons, she had been unable to conceal her disappointment in his overall presence.

"Still here, Severus?" she asked when he'd appeared the first morning in the staffroom, where the elves were in the habit of laying a light summer breakfast. "Haven't you a home to go to?"

"Haven't you?" he retorted, a flush staining his pale face, and she belatedly felt the rudeness of her question. She recalled that Severus had had an unhappy childhood somewhere in the north of England; of course he wouldn't be eager to return to any home that might remain.

So, with an attempt at better humour, she waved a hand at their surroundings and said, "Aye, I have the same home as you, and here it is. I daresay Hogwarts is big enough for the both of us."

"I'll hardly be joining you for cosy evenings around the fire, if that's what you're worried about," he said, the inevitable sneer twisting his lips. "I've got better things to do."

Minerva reminded herself that just as Hogwarts had not been built in a day, so damaged, dark young men were not to be reformed in a single term, nor redeemed solely by their own efforts and those of a white-bearded old eccentric, however brilliant the latter might be. She needed to do her bit, too.

"And you're free to do those better things, Severus, of course," she said. "But I expect you to have the courtesy of joining me for drinks at least once a week."

He opened his mouth, and she could tell he was going to refuse. But she'd had too many years of success with imperious stares to be daunted by one scrawny, scowling lad. She fixed him with a look, and it took only a moment of locked eyes before Severus dropped his.

"I'm free tomorrow," he muttered.

"Come to my rooms after dinner. But if you want anything weaker than Ogden's ten-year, you'll have to bring your own."

VI

He brought home-made absinthe. So much for "weaker."

She'd set out the Ogden's and a bowl of nuts, but he ignored both. He ignored her heavy cut crystal tumblers as well, conjuring two small glasses and waiting until she had accepted hers before lifting his own.

He eschewed any of the usual rituals of diluting absinthe no ice water or sugar for Severus Snape and tossed back his entire glass with neither cough nor grimace.

Then he caught her eye and gave her the slightest of smirks.

Ah, so it was to be like that, was it? Well, if Severus wanted a competition, a competition was what he would get.

She kept her eyes on his as she downed her own glass, managing as little reaction as he had shown.

Nothing was said, by either of them, but over the years, their drinks evenings became a summer staple. Severus brought his absinthe as often as not, and during the long evenings, Minerva grew to understand something of both beverage and man. . . of their complexities and eventually, of their appeal.

Absinthe was a potent brew, and Minerva thought it suited Severus a Slytherin-coloured drink made of wormwood, powerful and intense.

An appropriately bitter draught for a bitter man.

VII

She wept when her father died, as much for the things she had never been or said to him as for the loss.

Albus offered a patient ear as she talked of memories she'd forgotten she had; Pomona gave her a broad shoulder to cry on; Poppy and Filius accompanied her to the burial service.

Severus said nothing, but to Minerva's immeasurable surprise, he, too, appeared in the churchyard, nodded when he met her eyes, and stayed until she threw her handful of earth into the grave.

Later that night, she was alone in the staffroom, not really looking for company, but not yet ready to face the silence of her chambers.

Severus came in, busied himself wordlessly at the tea counter, and then handed her a steaming cup: strong, black, and fragrant with the peat of a 25-year-old MacLeod: he had apparently visited the whisky distillery near her family village and had brought her the scent of her childhood.

"Thank you, Severus, for your sympathy," she said, meaning it, and again he met her eyes before shaking his head.

"Don't be ridiculous," he said. "Sympathy is for Hufflepuffs."

VIII

The summer they became lovers, Severus was twenty-nine years old; Minerva was sixty-four.

Far too old, she told herself firmly, to be taking anyone so young to her bed, let alone someone who had been both her student and a Death Eater. But somehow, sex came to seem the inevitable result of their companionable summers—those seven years' worth of long nights filled with drink and talk and increasingly-comfortable silence.

Their first coupling happened in late July, at the end of a day so warm that Minerva had opened all her casements wide and had not even considered lighting a fire. As the endless pearly gloaming had finally slipped towards darkness, she and Severus had moved with one accord from sitting room to bedroom. There was no discussion, just a brief exchange of glances before she stood up and headed towards the door, knowing he would follow.

He was not at all a bad lover, neither that first night nor afterward. If he was sometimes rough, she didn't mind, and he was scrupulous about never leaving her unsatisfied, no matter how long it took her willing but aging body to respond.

Yet he was so attentive, she thought, less because he wished to please her than because he wanted to settle his debts. She believed she understood why: Severus faced a lifetime of reparation, and too much of what he owed could never be repaid. It was not surprising that he wouldn't wish to incur further obligations, not even in bed.

What limitations he had were nothing to do with technique. He seemed experienced enough (she was fairly certain that he'd had more sexual partners than she'd had), but something seemed to get in the way of his enjoyment, rendering him reserved and tense—at his moment of climax, she could not tell whether his face reflected pleasure or pain.

Still, his touches were deft and focused, and they soon became something she craved.

Sex with Severus, she realised, was a bit like absinthe: strong, temptingly bitter, and very addictive indeed.

IX

Sometimes as they lay together in the dark, he would tell her things.

He had still been lying atop her, still pinning her wrists, on the night that he whispered, "I have never taken anyone by force."

And he'd been warm against her side, his hand cupping her breast, on the night that he said, "You know I am capable of great hatred."

"I know," she'd replied. "So am I."

He'd raised himself on an elbow and leant over her; in the darkness, she could just make out the curtain of untidy hair that served as one of his shields against the world.

"I hate your boy Potter, make no mistake," he said, and she fancied that she could feel the burn of his black gaze. "But he will come to no harm that I can save him from."

And she had said again, "I know."

X

They slept together only in summer, though she believes he once touched her during term time.

But she cannot be certain.

She had been in St Mungo's, barely alive after enduring four Stunners, adrift on a sea of pain and potions, when she had awakened to find Severus standing at her bedside, his fingers resting lightly on her hand, his eyes watching hers.

She'd floated away again, and when she returned, he'd been gone. If he'd ever really been there at all.

He never said, and she never asked.

XI

Then Albus Dumbledore died—at Severus Snape's hand.

And Severus became the headmaster.

On his first day, he summoned Minerva to his office. He stood expressionless behind Albus's...behind the *headmaster's* desk, and she could find no trace of the pale, insecure boy who had once hidden his anxieties behind a practiced sneer and an absurdly-billowing cape.

The person standing before her was a man, a stranger and yet not.

"Headmaster," she said formally, forcing herself to think nothing, feel nothing, remember nothing. There was only the here and the now, a time and place in which only three things mattered: the fact that this dark man was responsible for the welfare of hundreds of students, the fact that she was his deputy, and the fact that the children needed her.

"Professor McGonagall," he replied, with equal formality. "You have brought the staff schedules and the facilities report?"

Their conversation was professional and productive, and by its end, Minerva had thought of Albus's broken body only once. She had thought of Severus's naked one not at all.

XII

Throughout that long, dark year of Severus's headship, Minerva watched him carefully, sleeping as little as possible and patrolling the castle in cat form, trying (and too often failing) to protect the students.

It didn't take her long to realise that Severus was trying to protect them, too, and as the year dragged on, she began to believe that a suspicion she'd formed—and dismissed—on the night Albus died was in fact correct: that in killing Dumbledore, Severus had been acting, if not on Albus's actual instructions, then at least with Albus's consent.

After her students attempted to steal the Sword of Gryffindor, and Severus did not harm them, Minerva's suspicion grew to a certainty. She confronted him at the end of one of their weekly administrative meetings.

"Severus," she said, and he looked up warily; they had not used each other's given names since the school year had begun. "Did you really think you could fool me, you and Albus together, with your secret little games? I don't believe you're working for You-Know-Who at all; I think you're "

His wand was pointed at her heart before she could even think of reaching for her own, and he rattled off the words of a spell so quickly that she could identify it only when

her throat began to close in frightening warning: a gag curse.

"If you ever," Severus hissed, forcing out each word between clenched teeth, "mention this insane idea to anyone again, you will be lucky not to choke to death, and if you try to write it down, you'll paralyse your arm for the rest of your meddling life, do you understand me?"

She nodded, speech still being impossible, and waited until she'd reached the quiet of her own rooms to consider the fact that Severus had not denied her claim.

And even in his rage, he had met her eyes, for the first time since Albus's death.

So she knew she was right: Severus was not working for the Dark Lord; he was still on the right side.

But her relief didn't stop the pain she felt at his lack of trust in her, and when he fled the castle on the night of the Battle, she put all her grief and anger into the last word she spoke to him:

"Coward!"

XIII

Except that it was not her last word.

She spoke to him again, nearly two years after Voldemort's defeat.

When she'd learnt that Severus had not died in the war after all, she had found herself murmuring a prayer of thanksgiving for the first time in fifty years.

But forgiveness had not come easily. He'd played her for a fool, he and Albus both, and he'd placed the children in danger, and she had not been able to stop him.

So it was a long time before she felt willing to face Severus Snape, and truth be told, she wasn't certain that he would want to see her, either.

But as the second anniversary of the Battle approached, she felt the need to close some wounds. And in her heart of hearts, she could admit that she missed Severus.

He'd sold his grim old family home in Spinner's End and moved to a small flat just on the edge of wizarding London, though for the most part, he no longer had much to do with their world. Still, he'd not made the place Unplottable, and she took this as an encouraging sign.

So she paid a visit.

His face, when he saw her at his door, betrayed no surprise, but then, he'd been schooling himself in impassivity for years.

"Good afternoon, Severus," she said. "I've brought you this."

She held out the bottle of vintage wizard absinthe that she'd found in the private cellar set aside for the Head of Hogwarts (her job had stresses aplenty, but there were definitely some benefits). The bottle was ancient and ornate; its silver trimmings combined with its green contents to make a fitting gift for a Slytherin. Or so she hoped.

Severus's lips twitched. "A bribe, Minerva?"

"A peace offering."

"Are we still at war, then?"

She met his eyes as of old. "I'd like to think not. May I come in?"

He remained in the doorway.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "I warn you, my near-death experience has not suddenly turned me into a kind and understanding man. I told you once that I'm capable of great hatred, and that has not changed."

"And I told you that I have the same capability, which also has not changed." Minerva paused. "But I do not hate *you*, Severus."

The lip-twitch became almost a full smile, albeit a wry one.

"Nor I you," he said, stepping back into his tiny foyer and gesturing to her. "Come in."

~end