

Vigil

by kellychambliss

On the night after the Battle of Hogwarts, Filius and Minerva sit with Severus.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 1

On the night after the Battle of Hogwarts, Filius and Minerva sit with Severus.

The challenge was to write a story with no dialogue. My thanks to Teddy Radiator for the prompt and to my excellent betas, The Real Snape and Boadicea12

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Filius watches as Minerva straightens the blankets for what must be the tenth time in the last two hours and then takes out her wand to refresh the preservation charm. The previous charm had been in no danger of running out...Filius had cast it himself...but he understands her need to be doing. Something. Anything. Minerva is a doer by nature, and the futility of their current situation must be beyond galling to her.

For not even Minerva McGonagall can "do" anything about death.

She can do nothing about the deaths of mere children like Colin Creevey or of new mothers like Nymphadora Tonks or of young men on the brink of life, like Fred Weasley and sorry, misguided Vince Crabbe.

And she particularly can do nothing about the death of the man who lies on the bed before her and whose shroud she is again meticulously arranging.

Severus Snape.

The news of Severus's death at You-Know-Who's...no, they can say his name now...at *Voldemort's* hands deeply saddens Filius, but he can't claim to have been surprised. The wonder is that Severus lived as long as he did, given the dangerous double game he'd had to play. Severus himself had fully expected to die, and though they never spoke of it, Filius is sure that Minerva expected it as well.

He hadn't been near her this morning when Voldemort gloatingly reported how he'd murdered his most trusted lieutenant, so he didn't see her reaction. But later, he was standing next to her when Severus's body was brought home to Hogwarts.

It was one of his own Ravenclaws, Miss Lovegood, who retrieved Severus from the Shrieking Shack. The late afternoon sun was slanting through the holes in the roof of the Great Hall when she and the Macmillan boy from Hufflepuff appeared in the doorway, solemnly levitating a covered body on a stretcher before them. Poppy bustled over to take charge of this latest victim, but then instead of moving towards the makeshift morgue just off the Great Hall, she turned and hurried in Minerva's direction, her expression grim.

Filius knew, then, who lay on the stretcher, and Minerva understood, too; lion-hearted Gryffindor she may be, but she has the mind of a Ravenclaw.

She said nothing, but in the few seconds it took Poppy to reach her, Minerva's entire body went still. It was like watching a transfiguration, Filius realised...he was seeing a part of a living person's heart transformed into stone. He immediately chastised himself for indulging in overwrought metaphor, but he hasn't been able to shake the image.

Since that moment, Minerva has been more like a ghost than the actual ghosts, handling the many demands placed upon her with set mouth and blank eyes that never quite focus on the people to whom she is speaking.

She quickly arranged with Poppy to take Severus's body to the infirmary before word could spread of his identity; despite Potter's description of Snape's loyalty to Dumbledore, many people, especially students' parents, still considered him a villain. Filius would have offered to escort Severus himself, but just then, he was approached by Miss Chang and her parents. From there, he was swept on to other duties, and he lost sight of Minerva and her charge.

Several hours passed before he saw her again, and by that time, things had settled down a bit. The Ministry officials had left for the night, and Mr Shacklebolt had arranged for Aurors to be left on guard against the sensation-seekers and the reporters. Filius watched as the last child was released to its proper guardian.

Only then, with their students finally safe, did Poppy order the staff to get some rest. For his part, Filius was more than ready to listen to her. He'd been awake for thirty of the most intense and dangerous and emotional hours of his life, and he was all but asleep on his feet. He'd be no good to anyone if he collapsed from exhaustion.

But he could tell from the look on her face that Minerva would not be finding rest, physical or otherwise. She nodded at Poppy and headed towards the main staircase, but Filius did not believe that she was going to her rooms. No. The ramrod-straightness of her back told him of her true destination.

She was going to Severus.

He was tempted to follow her, to share with her the charge of watching over their fallen comrade. That's how Filius had often thought of Severus during the whole long and difficult year of his headmastership: as a comrade-in-arms. When, during the Battle, Harry Potter had told Voldemort of Severus's commitment to Albus and the cause, Filius had felt a moment of quiet vindication; he'd long suspected that Severus was no traitor. Too many details hadn't made sense; too much had gone against his own observations of Severus over the years.

Oh, he'd had a few doubts, of course he had, even as recently as last night, when he had seen Severus battling Minerva in the corridor. Filius had leapt to her defense and had helped drive Snape from the castle, but on reflection, he recognised that neither Minerva nor Severus had been duelling to kill. No, Severus had been loyal to the end, and Filius wanted, in some small way, to offer his own loyalty in return.

But even as he turned in Minerva's direction, he hesitated. Many had called Severus a colleague. A few, like himself, had also called him a friend. But so far as Filius was aware, only Minerva knew him as something more.

She needed time alone with him.

So Filius went to his bed instead, where he slept heavily for over two hours. If he had dreams, he had no memory of them upon waking. From his past experience of war, he knew that in the days to come, he'd probably suffer from nightmares and insomnia, for in the aftermath of battle, there was always much with which one had to come to painful terms: losses and deaths and one's own role in causing them.

But in the short run, physical exhaustion triumphed, so Filius slept well and awoke feeling almost rested.

It was high time, then, for him to join Minerva and Severus in the infirmary, and he hastened thither.

The room in which Severus lay was a small one, tucked off to the side of the infirmary proper and mostly used as a storage closet. But someone...Poppy, probably, or Minerva herself...had turned it into a quiet and respectful sanctuary for the dead. Candles floated close to the white walls, providing soft illumination, and Severus had been placed on his back on carved oak bed, a silver-edged dark green duvet drawn up to his armpits. His arms and long-fingered hands (still poignantly marked with a few old potion stains) rested on either side of him outside the covers.

He wore an old-fashioned, high-collared white nightshirt, and he had been carefully washed, his long black hair flowing in clean waves off his face.

And it was the face (grown so gaunt this past year) that arrested Filius's attention: the imperious nose flanked by sharp cheekbones, the thin mouth, the ever-pale skin.

In life, his expression had often been tightly controlled: Severus had schooled himself in impassivity, of course, which he'd had to do given his situation as servant to several masters. Filius was as familiar with Severus's immovable granite stare as anyone.

But he'd also had plenty of opportunity to see Severus when he was more free to be himself...in the staffroom, or at the occasional drinks party when Albus managed to compel his attendance. At those times, his face was mobile and expressive, shifting quickly from eloquent disdain to wry humour to impatience to the occasional satisfaction.

Now, in death, Severus's mouth seemed to hold a touch of humour again...at least if one looked at him in the right light, which Filius was determined to do. Otherwise, it would be possible to see those pressed-together lips as simply weary and sad, and that, Filius could not yet bear.

So engrossed was he in Severus that he momentarily forgot all about Minerva. But then he saw her in the shadowy corner of the room, sitting upright on a straight-backed chair (a detail that said more about the sort of woman she was than any words he could think of).

When she saw Filius look her way, she rose and came to stand next to him. He took her hand and squeezed it; they'd been friends for so long that they didn't need spoken condolences, and in any case, there was nothing to be said.

She returned the squeeze briefly as she gazed down at Severus. Her expression was stern, almost cold, and only someone who knew her as well as Filius did would have recognised the pain in every line of her face.

That had been several hours ago. Now here they still are, waiting in silence as the minutes slide towards dawn...towards the first morning since Voldemort's defeat, the first full day of their post-war lives. Minerva paces and adjusts Severus's bedclothes; Filius sits and watches her, and together they mourn their friend.

When Minerva's steps bring her directly in front of Filius, not even the dim light can keep him from seeing how haggard she looks. She needs to get some sleep. She's been on her feet for nearly two days; she's fought and killed, healed and consoled, organised and arranged. Yes, she needs to sleep.

But she needs this, too, this private time, and Filius is not about to act like some mother hen, shooing her off to bed.

So he sits quietly and wonders if she is thinking of the first time she ever saw Severus. Filius himself is rather embarrassed to admit that he doesn't remember Severus's first year or so as a pupil at Hogwarts. It was not until the end of the boy's second year that he began to distinguish himself in Filius's mind, first for his increasing skill in Charms, then for his resolute spirit.

Filius so clearly remembers coming upon young Mr Snape in the Charms corridor one afternoon in that second year, just before the summer hols began. The crackle of unauthorized magic was what had brought him hastening to the spot...every teacher knows that lads and magic make for a potent mix, especially when said lads are on the cusp of hormonal adolescence.

Sure enough, he'd found Severus Snape with his wand drawn and his eyes blazing, facing down three Gryffindors: James Potter, Sirius Black, and a clearly nervous Peter Pettigrew. Snape would have had no chance against them, not three against one, no matter how skilled he might be. But the look on his face was one that a duelling champion like Filius recognised at once: the look of a fighter, one who knew that defeat was imminent but was determined to go down battling, no matter how high the personal cost.

The Gryffindors had been taunting the lad; the traces of ugly words had hung in the air like a hex. At the sight of their professor, Black immediately turned on the charm, smiling and apologising while somehow managing to suggest that he and Filius were colleagues, equals who understood and excused a little boyish horseplay, no?

Filius had treated this piece of audacity with the disdain it deserved and sent the Gryffindors smartly on their way, detentions littering their futures.

Mr Snape of Slytherin had lowered his wand slowly and offered no excuses; he'd merely accepted his detention with an oddly-formal little bow, squared his bony shoulders, and walked off.

Filius thinks of that moment now as he studies Severus's still face once more. The problem with a willingness to fight to the death is that one too often does just that.

In some ways, he can see little trace of the boy Severus had been, but in other ways, that boy is all he can see: his dark-eyed intensity, his passion, the board-straight aim of his unshaking wand hand. Boy into angry youth, youth into bitter man, man into. . .into. . .

Well, Filius isn't exactly sure. Into just "Severus," with all his incongruities and complexities and paradoxes and somehow, despite everything, his humanity. Filius knows he is one of the few who was privileged to see that humane side of Severus, and he feels momentarily both oppressed and buoyed by that knowledge. It's a rare gift, and like many gifts, carries with it an obligation.

Minerva received that gift, too, in ways that only she will ever know. She will never speak of the details, Filius is certain. She is a private woman at the best of times, even with her most intimate friends, of whom he is proud to call himself one. So her feelings now, as she stands next to the corpse of a man she may have loved, will remain hers alone.

She is not weeping, but her hands are clenched into fists, and she is biting hard on her bottom lip. Filius doubts that she is thinking of the boy Severus once was; given their later relationship, she clearly has not thought of him as a boy for quite some time. But he hopes she is not dwelling too much on her last sight of him, a sight Filius painfully shares: Severus fleeing the castle, his angry colleagues at his heels, heading, as they now know, to his death.

Despite himself, Filius's mind returns to that scene: the horror he felt when he saw Minerva and Severus sending fire and knives through the air at each other, his desperate need to put an end to this insanity, to blast Severus out of that hateful "Headmaster Snape" persona and return him to the man they'd used to know. He can still feel his helpless anger, can still hear Pomona half-sobbing as she ran beside him, can hear Horace's rasping breaths...

And he will never forget the sound of Minerva, the indescribable mix of rage, despair, and grief that cracked through her voice as she shouted her last-ever word to Severus.

She didn't mean it; Filius knows she didn't mean it. She does not believe Severus to be a coward. In all the years she has dealt with him, she's shown that she found him compelling, maddening, infuriating, endearing, but even in her angriest moments, she never once suggested that she thought him anything other than brave, even heroic. Filius has seen her worried sick over the danger Severus routinely endured, her relief at his eventual safe return channeled into a snappiness that Filius would have bet galleons (had he been so indelicate as to mention his thoughts publicly) translated itself into physical passion before the next morning dawned.

But last night, she had been frightened and angry, and also deeply hurt by Severus's coldness to her during his year as headmaster. She never complained in so many words...Minerva was as loyal as she was hot-tempered...but Filius saw her reactions in the staffroom this past year, how her head would jerk back at Severus's cutting words as though she'd been slapped, how she would clasp her arms across her chest in a classic gesture of wounded defensiveness. From a few comments she'd made, Filius knew that she shared his suspicion that Severus was only pretending to serve Voldemort. So she would have understood the need for his unkind behaviour, but it would have pained her all the same. The lack of trust, however necessary...

Filius is startled out of his reverie by Minerva's sudden movement; she has turned abruptly away from the bier and now takes her seat on her hard chair, dropping her head into her hands. Filius hesitates...he always has a horror of intruding...but it is simply not in his nature to ignore anyone's suffering, let alone a dear friend's.

He goes to her and rests a hand on her bent head, smoothing her dark hair away from her forehead. Not that it really needs smoothing: sometime between the end of the Battle and the arrival of Severus's body at the castle, she found time to repair her customary bun. It had come down during the fighting, and the sight of Minerva, her long hair wild around her shoulders as she duelled with Voldemort himself, is indelibly burned into Filius's mind.

She's neat as a pin now, though, but Filius continues to stroke her hair anyway. Finally she lifts her head to look at him (for once, their faces are nearly level), and at the sight of her pinched, pale misery, Filius takes her in his arms and rocks her gently.

They embrace for only a few moments before Minerva sits back with a brief smile...well, more of a grimace, actually. She's offering her thanks along with a sad acknowledgement of the situation that has made this comfort necessary.

Filius pats her knee before heading back to his chair, thinking...inappropriately, he knows, but thinking it all the same...of the times that she and Severus would have shared an embrace, with the all-important difference that Filius was a friend, while Severus, surprisingly enough, had been a lover.

Their relationship had been...well, it had been a shock, Filius doesn't mind admitting it. He isn't a prude by any means, and he has no judgment in him about sexual relationships freely entered by consenting adults. He isn't one to believe that sex should entail marriage or even love, and he certainly doesn't believe that age should be an obstacle, not with the sort of lifespans that wizardkind enjoy.

So his shock didn't come from the fact that Minerva was decades older than Severus, nor was he put off (well, not much) by the thought that Severus had once been her student. Filius himself can't imagine being sexually interested in a former student, someone he'd known as a child, but he doesn't expect everyone to share his view. Severus was well past the age of consent by the time he and Minerva got together, and his difficult life meant that little of the child remained in him. Filius can easily believe that for Minerva, adult Severus had borne little resemblance to student Severus.

No, what had given Filius pause was Severus's past. Albus never detailed Severus's activities with the Death Eaters, nor did Severus ever speak of them, and of course Filius wouldn't have presumed to ask. But didn't take a genius to figure out what some of those activities must have been.

So Filius had been conflicted. Yet Severus had clearly repented, had tried to make reparation, and Filius is also a firm believer in second chances. All teachers are. So of course he understood how Minerva could have forgiven Severus.

Still, forgiving him was one thing. Having sex with him was quite another.

Nonetheless, if Minerva and Severus had worked things out between them, Filius had no right to disapprove, and after his first shock, he didn't.

They'd been good for one another. Unlikely as it seemed, they softened each other in good ways. Severus became less hostile and suspicious, Minerva less brittle and sharp.

They'd been very discreet about their relationship, even among colleagues, which was only to be expected. They were both reserved people to start with, and then there was the fact that Filius had not been the only one who questioned their liaison. Poppy and Rolanda had spent more than one tea break wondering what on earth possessed Minerva. Alastor Moody had quarrelled with her outright, and even Albus had seemed surprised. So Minerva and Severus had not been demonstrative in public, but neither had they denied their connection, once it became clear that most of the staff knew.

Filius believes he is the first to have learnt that the two of them had become more than colleagues. He's an observant man in general, for one can learn a great deal simply by watching, and it always makes sense to gather as much intelligence as one can before charging into any situation. One of the many benefits of his small size is that he often goes unnoticed, so that he frequently sees and overhears a great deal. It's a habit that has gained him quite a reputation for omniscience, which is very useful when it comes to dealing with student pranks and secrets.

His colleagues' secrets, however, he keeps to himself. He is no spy, no voyeur...not in spirit, at least. In practice, though, his watchfulness means that he occasionally observes his colleagues in moments that are clearly intended to be private, and such a moment had occurred with Minerva and Severus.

It was just prior to the start of the autumn term, a year or two before Harry Potter arrived at Hogwarts. Filius had been enjoying a post-prandial stroll around the castle grounds when the late-summer warmth tempted him to linger in the flower gardens near the greenhouses.

Probably it was the combination of the full seasonal foliage and his small stature that kept him invisible to Severus and Minerva as they, too, wandered the garden paths. Filius still isn't sure why he didn't alert them to his presence as soon as he heard them, but there had been something about their quiet voices that made him think they wanted privacy. Or perhaps he was just being curious.

When they came into view, Minerva had her hand in the crook of Severus's arm, which was mildly unusual but not without some precedent; she often took Albus's arm.

But what nearly brought a startled squeak to Filius's lips was the fact that Severus reached over to cover her hand with his. And before Filius could recover his wits, Severus had slipped his arm around Minerva's waist and pulled her to him for a quick kiss.

Filius knew that his mouth was hanging open in astonishment, and for a moment he actually felt like toppling over backward in shock (a performance he often put on for students, taking comic tumbles off a stack of books or whatnot; it's his way of making himself less intimidating to first-years, who can sometimes find Hogwarts and its teachers a bit frightening).

Such a reaction seemed uncalled-for in this circumstance, however; plus, he very much wanted to see what happened next.

Minerva put her hands on her hips and fixed Severus with a mock glare. At least, *Filius* could see that that she was joking, for the corners of her lips were twitching as she tried not to smile.

Severus, on the other hand, seemed genuinely to believe that she was displeased. Mottled spots of crimson appeared on his pale cheeks, and his eyes took on that shuttered look that usually presaged a vicious remark. He'd worn that look often in his early days of teaching, when he had been mired in obvious misery and had felt threatened and judged by everyone and everything. He must have thought that Minerva was playing him for a fool or that she was ashamed of him or...

But Minerva recognised that look, too, and before Severus could spit out a biting comment or stalk away from her, she grabbed hold of him and kissed him firmly, her hand on the back of his neck and her body pressed close against his. Severus, after a moment of stiff resistance, gradually responded, sliding his arms around her and kissing her in return.

Filius had closed his eyes then, and distracted himself by casting a breeze charm, for the garden had suddenly become quite warm indeed.

He closes his eyes now as the memory assails him, and he feels anew all that they have lost in the last few days, the last few years. He thinks that he can hardly bear to open his eyes again, when it will mean looking upon a world in which his friends' vibrant passion has been replaced by death and hollow-eyed grief.

But open his eyes he must, of course; to hide would not only be impossible, but disrespectful to Severus's memory and Minerva's pain.

And so he returns to the candle-lit room and to the still figures in front of him, Minerva appearing as motionless as Severus. But as Filius watches, she rises from her chair and crosses to the bed.

He waits for her to adjust that blankets one more time, but instead, she takes Severus's hand in hers and threads her fingers through his. With her other hand, she traces one finger down his long nose and over his lips before touching his lifeless cheek.

It's an intimate gesture, far more so than that long-ago kiss. It is her goodbye, Filius realises, and not for anyone's eyes but her own. And Severus's, from wherever he's watching.

Silencing his footsteps with a wordless charm, Filius nods his own goodbye and slips out of the quiet room.