

Dark and Deep

by kellychambliss

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Chapter 1

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A/N My thanks to my ever-helpful beta, The Real Snape. The quoted lines of poetry are from Robert Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

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The woods are lovely, dark and deep. . .

The line sticks in Severus's head; he isn't sure where he first heard it. Some Muggle poem from his grammar school? Probably. The local schools hadn't been worth much in Spinner's End, but there had been one teacher, when he was nine or ten, who had shown him something of the beauty that could live in words.

In the end, though, beautiful words hadn't counted for much against ugly life, and he'd left the lesson behind.

Yet as he looks out the castle window at the snow-edged trees of the Forbidden Forest, this line comes back to him. He is momentarily soothed by the sound of it, by the phrase "dark and deep" like a comforting blanket of sleep.

For a moment he wishes he could be there, out in the fragrant, frozen woods. Away from things.

A rabbit or a fox is moving across the snow near the trees, and Severus watches it idly. He rarely looks at the grounds from this angle high in a castle tower and as always, this vantage point makes him feel a bit removed from real life. It's only afternoon, but the light is already leeching from the sky on this winter day.

Christmas Day.

He used to actively hate Christmas, and he still would rather ignore it, but he doesn't fight it now. It's just something to be endured and got through, like most things although luckily most things, thank Merlin, do not involve pulling ridiculous crackers with Dumbledore and breaking bread at the same table as Harry Effing Potter.

At least the day hasn't been too bad. So far. The endless holiday dinner did, in fact, finally end. Severus was able to avoid wearing any foolish headgear. The few students present were mostly too intimidated to say much. And Minerva was amusing. At Sybill's expense, which was even better.

As if his thought is a summons, the door opens, and she returns. Minerva.

For it's her rooms he's in. They'd planned to spend the afternoon together, reading and sipping a glass or two of something warm and oblivion-inducing.

But then a difficulty came up with Potter of course and she'd gone off to see about it. Severus hopes it's been handled, whatever it was, and that they won't be further

disturbed. That's all he asks: a quiet evening in her company.

Minerva comes to stand beside him at the window.

"Someone sent Potter a brand-new Firebolt as a Christmas present," she says. "No card attached. Miss Granger was worried, and rightly so."

"A Trojan Horse from Sirius Black?" Severus asks. It would make sense, except that the tactic seems too clever for the git.

She nods. "That's what Miss Granger thought, and I agree. I had to confiscate the broom. Potter is not happy, of course, but there was nothing else to be done."

"No," Severus agrees. The boy must be protected, whatever one's personal feelings about the matter.

"I've put the problem into Filius's hands quite literally," Minerva continues. "He and Rolanda will check the Firebolt for jinxes."

Severus gives her a sidelong smirk. "Some of those jinx diagnostics take weeks to run. I doubt they will be finished before the Gryffindor-Slytherin match. Pity."

Minerva chuckles and leans lightly into him. "Pity, indeed," she says. "But it's Slytherin that I pity. Potter's broom will be ready in time for the match, make no mistake."

She is warm against his side, and Severus, after a pause, draws her into his arms.

Even after nearly two months, their new relationship still surprises him, and he sometimes hesitates to touch her he doesn't want to presume, in case she has changed her mind, or in case this whole sexual thing has been some sort of potions-induced delusion.

"I'm too old for you," she had said when he'd first kissed her, on that miserable Halloween night after sodding Sirius Black had managed to break into the castle.

He'd replied, "And I'm too Death Eater for you." When she didn't push him away, he'd kissed her again, and this time, she'd kissed back. He'd understood, then: they both accepted the thing the other thought would be off-putting.

The entire staff had been up all night after Black's attack in Gryffindor Tower, and Severus is sure that if he had not been light-headed with exhaustion and anxiety and rage, he never would have let Minerva know that he'd developed feelings for her. He hardly believed it himself, what with the gap of years between them, and his past, and the fact that she had known him as a child a ragged, sullen child at that.

But something had gradually grown between them in the last few years: a spark, a tension, an awareness. She'd felt it, too, he could tell. Their banter had taken on an edge, the looks they'd exchanged becoming a little longer and more pointed.

Then there'd been that night last summer, when the two of them had been the only teachers left in the castle, and she had invited him for a drink at the Three Broomsticks. It wasn't an unprecedented invitation; she'd done it several times since he'd come back to Hogwarts to teach. But the evening had felt more intimate than usual, their conversation more personal. On the walk back to Hogwarts, she'd taken his arm, and it had felt natural.

And on Valentine's Day last year, Lockhart the Odious had watched them talking in the staffroom and had nudged Filius, saying, "What do you think, eh, Flitwick? Are we seeing a couple of lovebirds over there, or what? Wink, wink." Severus had been furious, but Minerva had caught his eye, raised a brow, and smiled.

So there had been evidence, and then on Halloween, after Black had attacked the Gryffindors, Minerva had been so distraught...

Seeing her just before dawn, leaning wearily against a wall, her face drawn and pale, Severus had felt...well, he wasn't sure what he'd felt, beyond an obscure desire to show her and himself that they could beat this, that Shithead Black wasn't going to defeat them, that she wasn't alone...

And so he kissed her, and she kissed him back, and that was two months ago, and now here they are.

Spending Christmas night together in her rooms.

"Shouldn't we be on patrol?" he says, standing behind her and settling his arms around her waist.

"Patrol? Why?" He can see her puzzled frown reflected in the rapidly-darkening window.

"To get the jump on any mad axe-men."

Minerva's huff is half laughter, half exasperation. "Honestly. That Sybill Trelawney is a menace. Scaring the children with silly superstitions about thirteen at dinner. I had to make some sort of joke about it, to put the students at ease, and mad-axe men was the best I could do."

"Well, it worked," Severus replies. "Even if it wasn't your best."

She turns her head to eye him wryly. They are nearly on a level; his height tops hers by only an inch or two.

"You can do the honours next time, then, Mr Comedian. You'd better start thinking up your clever repartee now."

Severus snorts and drops a light, quick kiss to her cheek before moving away to the sofa. He is always the one to break their embraces, not because he has tired of her, but because he fears she will tire of him.

Minerva waves her wand to draw the curtains and light the candles. Her sitting room is neat, without too much annoying holiday clutter. A drape of evergreen across her mantle, a small bowl of pinecones and red glass balls on a side table. Nothing more. Severus finds it restful.

"Albus was disappointed in me," Minerva says as she heads to her small sideboard to pour two glasses of Ogdens'. "For sniping at Sybill on Christmas. I had good intentions of behaving myself, I really did, but the mere sight of her just sets me off."

"Albus will get over it," Severus answers, accepting his glass. The cut crystal is satisfyingly heavy in his hand, and he sips, letting the warm burn move through him.

"He knows," he says, after a moment.

"Excuse me?" Minerva has settled on the sofa next to him, her shoulder touching his.

"Albus. He knows about us."

"What makes you think so?" she asks.

"That chair he conjured for Trelawney at dinner today: he dropped it down directly in between us, even though there wasn't nearly room. I think he wanted to separate us in public remind us there were children present, or something. Or maybe just to let us know that he knows."

She looks at him, her expression thoughtful, though not troubled.

It's a subtle difference, but Severus is adept at reading faces, and hers, at the moment, eases him. Maybe she is not ashamed after all to have Dumbledore know that she's fucking the "Greasy Git."

"Well," she says finally. "We haven't exactly advertised our relationship, but I'm not going to be obsessive about keeping it a secret, either. Not among the staff, at least."

"But you haven't told the Peas."

That's the name they all use for Poppy Pomfrey and Pomona Sprout, as in "two peas or Ps in a pod." Poppy and Pomona have been a couple for years and are Minerva's best friends.

Yet she hasn't clued them in to Severus's new status in her life.

This bothers him. It's not that he's eager to discuss his personal business with his colleagues—truth be told, he finds Pomona's chattiness rather tiring, and while he likes Poppy well enough, she's not what he'd call a confidante. He'd just as soon keep his private life private.

Except.

Even though it's not important to him that the Peas in particular know his current situation, he can't rid himself of the notion that Minerva hasn't told them because she's embarrassed by him. Embarrassed by the fact that she's settled for a scrawny, homely former criminal. Maybe she thinks her friends will assume she's sexually desperate, if she's willing to take up with the likes of him.

"No, I haven't mentioned it to them," Minerva admits, toe-ing off her shoes and tucking her feet beneath her. "Not yet. Once you share something, it's not fully yours any longer, is it? And I wanted this us to be just ours for a while."

"At least keeping quiet means less chance for others to ridicule you," Severus says, setting his firewhisky glass on the table. He tries to keep his tone cool and sardonic and detached, but Minerva isn't fooled. She puts down her own glass and leans away from him, her glance sharp.

"I do hope you're not going to turn out to be a petulant lover, Severus."

"Not at all," he snaps, stung. "Of course I'm perfectly happy to be your backstairs toy boy. Who wouldn't be?"

Her eyes flash, and he can see her readying a blistering retort. Well, fine, if she wants a fight, he'll give her one. He knows a thing or two about domestic battles. She

But Minerva's lips are twitching, and suddenly she is laughing, her head thrown back, the candlelight outlining the curve of her jaw.

Severus can feel his face flush. How dare she mock him? He's livid, especially since, despite himself, the sight of her bare, pale throat is making his cock twitch.

"Damn you," he snarls, pushing himself upward. But before he can stand, she grabs his arm, pulling him down and holding him to her, her breasts pressing against his back.

"No, Severus, no," she gasps, still fighting laughter. "I'm not making fun of you. Really. It's just the idea. I mean, the idea of me...with a 'backstairs toy boy' of any sort, let alone *you*..." And she's off into gales again.

"I'm glad I can amuse you," he says stiffly.

She sits back to gaze at him then, all trace of mirth gone from her face. "Severus," she says, taking his hand. "If you're worried that I am regretting our relationship, you needn't be. I assure you, I don't make sexual commitments lightly. Believe me when I say that I would not share a bed with anyone of whom I'd be ashamed."

He finds that he can't quite look her in the eye. "You don't understand," he mutters. "I'm a "

Her kiss silences him, which is good, he decides, since he is not sure what he wanted to say.

She moves away after a moment and straightens her spectacles before rising and carrying their glasses to the sideboard.

"A refill?" she asks.

"Please."

He assumes that by changing the subject, she's letting him know that their previous conversation is over. On reflection, Severus is not sorry. She has said all she needs to say, and he has heard what he needed to hear: she is not ashamed of being with him or having others eventually know.

Her kiss had been brief, yes, but full of promise for later, and he finds himself looking more forward to the rest of Christmas than he has in years.

The thought reminds him, suddenly, of more lines from his Muggle poem

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,

But I have promises to keep,

And miles to go before I sleep.

He thinks of the promises he's made to Albus, to others, to himself and of how long it might be before he can discharge them and find his own rest. It's daunting.

But he needn't worry about them tonight.

"Would you like your present now or later?" Minerva asks, returning with their whiskies.

"Later, I think," he says.

At the moment, he's relishing the promise of "later."

Later, he and Minerva will share a light supper and perhaps a walk in the moonlight through the walled garden behind the castle.

Later, he'll give her the book he's selected for her, an academic history of wizarding Scotland that he knows she's been wanting to read.

Later, he'll take her to bed.

Right now, though, he just wants to sit side-by-side with her, put his arm around her, maybe settle her head on his shoulder.

Right now, he wants to savour this strange and new Christmas contentment...warm, dark, and deep.