

A Light at Dusk

by MMADfan

Minerva needs a quiet, peaceful holiday to recuperate from a difficult term. Poppy kindly loans her the use of a small country cottage. Written for Cody ("morethanacrush") for the Charming Roots Third Annual Secret Santa Exchange. ADMM.

A Holiday Cottage

Chapter 1 of 1

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It was almost dusk when a weary Minerva finally walked up the flagstone path to the small cottage, carrying two carpet bags, one larger, one smaller, and too tired to even consider finding her wand and Levitating them behind her. From what she could see in the fading light, the cottage looked ideal for a few weeks holiday that summer. She certainly needed a holiday, too. The last few months had been hard, and this last day, not the easiest of them.

She breathed in the aroma of the flowers crowding along the path, and imagined taking her breakfast in the garden the next morning, surrounded by the scents and colours of the flowers that were now only shades of grey in the dying light. That thought cheered her, and her step quickened.

Poppy, who had borrowed the cottage from her brother for the summer but wouldn't be using it for the first few weeks of July, must have left an Automagical lamp on in the front room, Minerva thought, as a warm glow appeared in the downstairs front window. That was nice, especially as she was unfamiliar with the cottage, and she hadn't relished the prospect of rummaging through the place looking for the lamps or candles with only her wand to provide a *Lumos*.

When the front door began to open as she approached it, however, Minerva felt a sense of alarm. The cottage was empty, according to Poppy. Had she mistaken the place? Her Portkey was supposed to bring her to the cottage gate, and that had been the gate that had been closest...immediately next to her arrival point, in fact. There seemed to be a few other cottages in the lane, but down further, around a curve in the road. Perhaps it was Celyn, Poppy's brother, unaware that Poppy had loaned the cottage to her for the time she was planning to travel. It was very late, and Minerva did not want to have to find somewhere else to spend the night. She could return to Hogwarts, if necessary, of course, but she had packed up and closed her rooms the prior day in anticipation of not having to return until August. It would be depressing to

have to drag herself back there that night, or even to show up unexpectedly at her parents', though they would welcome her, of course.

When the door opened fully, however, Minerva immediately recognised the dark form framed by the warm light behind it. A tingle passed through her, and she could feel her heart beating faster at the sight.

"Albus?"

Albus stepped out of the doorway and took her bags from her. "Indeed! Your supper awaits you, unless you've already eaten."

"But . . . I don't understand." Thoroughly confused, Minerva followed Albus into the small, cosy sitting room as he sent her bags flying up the steep, narrow stairway.

"I thought that after your long day in London settling your cousin's estate, you might need a hot supper, late though it is."

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

He took her hand and led her to a table at the back of the room, which was set for two with blue willowware. "As I said, I thought you might need some supper. Poppy told me you would be here, arriving quite late, she thought." He hesitated a moment. "It was her idea that I meet you here sometime this week, drop by for a little visit and see how you were faring, but . . . I hope that you don't mind that I didn't wait until you were settled in. I thought . . . after the recent stresses in your life, it might not be a nice thing to arrive to a dark, cold, unfamiliar cottage all on your own."

Tears that Minerva had been suppressing for weeks finally escaped, and despite her efforts to blink them back, they flowed freely down her cheeks.

"Oh, my dear! You *have* had a difficult time of it, haven't you? I hope that by coming here this evening, I have made it better for you, not worse!" His hand was warm on her arm, but she turned away slightly, embarrassed by her tears and by his kindness.

She shook her head and tried to clear her voice of tears. "It's very good of you, Albus. I'd just brought some bread and cheese with me, thought . . ." She cleared her throat again. "I thought I'd just have a cold bite tonight before retiring."

"Well, I have a tureen with curried chicken in it, some steaming rice, and bowls of sultanas, cashews, and slivered almonds, and I can have a pot of hot tea ready in just a few minutes. Now does that sound good to you, or would you prefer your cold supper?" he asked with a smile, stepping around so that she had to face him again. He held out a handkerchief. "I suggest you might like to freshen up a bit whilst you make up your mind, hmm?"

Minerva nodded mutely, taking the handkerchief and wiping at her tears. She still wasn't entirely clear why Albus was there, but he seemed such a solid, reassuring presence, and the room felt warm and bright with him in it and supper waiting on the table for her.

"Good. Now, there's a bath at the top of the stairs, just on your right. I sent your bags to the large bedroom at the back of the cottage...it's north-facing, so hopefully the morning sun won't wake you too early...but there are clean towels and soap and things in the bathroom, so you shouldn't need anything but yourself."

"Thank you, Albus. You shouldn't have..."

"I'll fix the tea. You take your time, though. It will all wait for you, as will I." He raised his hand and caressed her cheek lightly. "Go on now!" he added softly. "It'll be all right. You'll see."

Upstairs in the simple, old-fashioned bathroom of the country cottage, Minerva washed her face and hands and looked in the mirror, something she had been avoiding for the past few weeks. Never heavy to begin with, she had lost weight over the last couple months, and her face now seemed almost gaunt, and the dark circles under her eyes did nothing to improve that impression. Whilst at Hogwarts, she had begun using a light make-up Glamour to disguise her exhausted, run-down appearance, though Poppy, of course, had seen through it and had expressed her concern by leaving Vitamin Potion in her rooms for her, stopping by late at night to ask whether she needed any sleeping draught, and coming to fetch her for breakfast in the mornings, but it seemed that it was not only Poppy who had noticed.

Her first term of teaching hadn't been a disaster, but it could have gone better. She'd had very little time to prepare before she had to jump into it, and as much as Albus had tried to help her with his old lesson plans...which were organised in a rather idiosyncratic way, to put it mildly...he was busy as the new Headmaster following Armando Dippet's unexpected death: fine and fit one minute, laughing at one of Pomona Sprout's more ribald jokes, and keeled over dead, the next, and the old headmaster was gone.

On top of her new duties at Hogwarts, however, Minerva still had to finish out her contract at the Ministry for the first three months of the year. Her department reduced her commitments and allowed her to do the work on her own time...what little time she had...and they scheduled meetings so that she could Apparate to London for them during her lunch hour or some other "free" block of time when she wasn't teaching, but it was burdensome.

In April, Minerva was finally beginning to feel as though things were easing up some for her, and she was looking forward to the Easter holiday at the end of the month, when her mother's cousin James fell ill. He had gone abroad for an adventuring holiday and returned two months later with an esoteric wizarding illness that went undiagnosed until just the week before he died of it. James had been one of her favourite relatives when she was growing up, and she felt as close to him as she did to her mother and her father. He had even lived with them for a few years, just before Minerva started at Hogwarts, and he had tutored her in history and literature, making it fun and exciting, and delving into a new book with him always seemed an adventure to her.

James lingered until the second week of June, just when Minerva was administering exams and helping her NEWTs and OWLs students with their last-minute preparation. She hadn't even been able to be with him when he died, and it weighed upon her, though she knew that he had been proud of her accomplishments and had been happy knowing that she was at Hogwarts. She could never regain the time that she hadn't spent with him, and that knowledge gave her pain each time she remembered him. It had only made it worse when Albus had told her after the fact that had he been aware how ill James was, he would have taken her classes for a couple weeks himself so that she could go and be with him.

It had been foolish pride that had kept her from asking for help, or even from letting Albus know how gravely ill her cousin was. She and Albus had been friends for a number of years...since Minerva had attained her own mastery in Transfiguration and he had brought her out for a celebratory dinner after...and she didn't want him or anyone else to think that she was imposing upon their friendship for any special favours. There were already some who thought that she was too young for the job and who believed she had only been given it because of her friendship with Albus; she did not want to fuel any more speculation about her fitness for the position or about any possible favouritism shown her, so she said nothing to him beyond the fact that her mother's cousin, James Shaw, was ill.

Once James was dead, none of that mattered to Minerva, but it was too late. She realised she should have spoken to Albus and taken some additional time to visit her cousin. Numb with grief and regret, Minerva moved through the next days automatically, taking care of her Hogwarts duties as they required, and attending James's funeral and wake with her family. She was James's executrix, and she had finished her obligations in that regard on that very day, having spent two days in London chiefly for the purpose of wrapping up all of her cousin's affairs. She had ended her day by dropping copies of the last of the documents off with James's sister Muireall, who had, of course, invited Minerva in for a cup of tea. They had spent two hours going through old photographs of James, many taken in exotic locations, and although there had been some joy in remembering James that way, it had also been gruelling. Muireall had broken down in tears more than once, although by the end of the evening, she seemed much better for Minerva's visit and reminiscing about her brother. For Minerva, the experience had been enervating, and all of her suppressed tears had given her a pounding headache. She was glad she was Portkeying and not Apparating; she had no doubt she would have Splinched had she tried.

As Minerva dried her hands, she knew it was also her desire to appear strong and capable to Albus that had kept her from confiding in him about her worries. She was more than a little in love with her new employer, and had been even before she had accepted the job. Minerva had actually believed that working with Albus, with him as her superior, would temper her feelings for him, but that hadn't happened. If anything, the warmth she felt when she saw him...both his warmth and that generated within her by his presence...had increased over the months since she had started at Hogwarts. It seemed that no matter how she was feeling or what weighed upon her mind, she felt a bit better in his presence, even if it were just during a staff meeting. She didn't know what it was, but there was something . . . *sustaining* about his being.

Something warm, sure, and solid. And despite her surprise at his appearance in the doorway of what was supposed to have been an empty, private holiday cottage, Minerva was not unhappy that he was there.

Before going back downstairs, Minerva stopped in the bedroom long enough to remove her parcel of bread and cheese from her smaller bag. It might make a nice breakfast in the morning.

Feeling better, Minerva entered the sitting room to find Albus casting a Cosy Charm on the teapot.

"Ah, there you are, my dear! The tea is just brewed, as you can see, but I also have a bottle of wine with me, if you would prefer that, and we could have the tea after."

"Tea would be fine. I've had a bit of a headache," she admitted, "and I think I would prefer not to drink anything alcoholic."

"I am so sorry," Albus said, pulling out her chair for her. "Did you look in the cupboard upstairs and see whether there was any Headache Potion? No? Well, we'll have to do something about that."

"No, no, Albus. Please. Let's eat now. Perhaps all I need is a good meal. It smells delicious."

"Very well. But if you still have a headache after dinner, you must tell me. I will fetch some potion from Hogwarts, if necessary."

"I'm sure it won't be," Minerva reassured him. She watched as he dished up rice and curry for her. "Where did you get this? It smells wonderful."

"Hmm? Oh, whipped it up this evening when I arrived. I wasn't sure when you would be here, and this all charms very well to keep warm. In fact, I think the chicken is the better for having rested in the curry for a while. Help yourself to the sultanas and nuts, if you would like, my dear. I like them on the curry, myself. A nice contrast of flavours and textures, I find."

"How did you . . . I mean to say, why did you, that is . . . why are you here? With dinner?" Minerva asked.

"Because I thought you might need it, and I didn't think you would ask." He looked at her quietly, suddenly very serious. "And when I am assured that you have eaten well and that your headache is gone, I'll leave you to the peace and quiet of the cottage, if you wish. But if you would like me to stay, simply say the word, Minerva. I do not wish to be an unwelcome guest, but I would be happy to remain for a while."

"I thought you were going to meet some friends in the Cotswolds," Minerva said questioningly.

"They'll be there for a few weeks, at least. Fritzi is going to be doing some painting, and Carlotta and Juno will be taking long walks, no doubt. It would be pleasant to join them at some point, but I sent them an owl yesterday and told them I might be delayed somewhat. I was not specific."

"Who are they? Won't they miss you?" Minerva asked, taking a forkful of curry. It really was wonderful, warming and satisfying. She wondered who Carlotta and Juno were, in particular, and whether either of them might be a special friend of Albus's. For all that she had known Albus for years, she had met very few of his friends outside of those mutual acquaintances who worked at the Ministry; there simply had been no occasion to do so.

"Old friends of mine. Fritzi loves to paint, and is really quite talented, so each year, they holiday somewhere he can be inspired. And, of course, a place where Carlotta and Juno will have plenty to do and plenty of room to roam. This year, it's the Cotswolds."

"I see . . . and they were expecting you today?"

"Yesterday, actually, but then I learned from Poppy that you would be coming here alone...and that her travel plans couldn't be changed...and I didn't want you to arrive alone to an empty house after having to finish dealing with your cousin's estate today, so I delayed my departure a bit."

"Thank you, Albus. This was very kind of you. And you're right. It was much better than arriving to an empty house and a cold supper of bread and cheese, as much as I might sometimes enjoy that. The curry is delicious, and your company, a comfort after a long day."

"Good." Albus smiled gently. "I hope you were not too startled...or disappointed that it was I and not someone else."

Minerva let out a short laugh. "I was startled. I thought for a moment I'd arrived at the wrong cottage somehow, or that Celyn had come to stay, unaware that Poppy had loaned it to me for a few weeks. I had a moment's thought that I'd either have to return to Hogwarts or show up on my parents' doorstep unannounced. Not that they would mind, but they aren't expecting me for a few weeks, and I'm sure it would have been a surprise. And I've been looking forward to some peace and quiet for a while, and spending time alone."

Albus nodded and poured himself more tea. "I shall leave after our supper, then."

"You needn't...unless you wish to. As you say, it is late."

"I do not wish to disturb your holiday, though, my dear. If you need your peace and quiet, I understand that."

"It wouldn't disturb my holiday, and particularly not just the one night...you did bring some things with you didn't you?"

"Yes, I have my bags here, all ready for my holiday. I can leave or stay."

"I'd be happy for the company, Albus," Minerva admitted, not wanting to urge him too strongly to delay meeting his friends, but truly hoping he wouldn't leave, at least not just that night. "It might be more convenient for you to leave in the morning, if you don't think your friends will worry."

"I am sure that Carlotta and Fritzi have already assumed that I won't be arriving tonight, and I don't think they would worry until they hadn't heard from me for a few days letting them know what my plans were."

"And . . . Juno?"

Albus laughed. "When I do arrive, I am certain that Juno's greeting will be the most enthusiastic, and no doubt she will immediately want to go on a ramble with me, but she won't worry if I am not there and she won't miss me, either."

Minerva frowned slightly. "I wouldn't count on that. Perhaps you should leave tonight, then." It certainly sounded as though Juno was special to Albus.

"Carlotta has no doubt settled her down for the night, although knowing Juno, she'll probably end up in their bed before morning. She always ends up in mine whenever I visit." Albus smiled at Minerva's expression. "Juno is their Schnauzer. She's a bit of a bed-hog, I'm afraid."

Minerva laughed, feeling herself relax. "Then stay. Please do, if you wish. It would be nice to see you for breakfast in the morning."

"Good, then I will stay. Would you like more curry?" Albus asked, noticing that she was almost finished with her plate.

"No, thank you, although it was delicious."

"You're certain...there's plenty, and it's quite good for you, the different spices, especially. I thought it might be a nice tonic, better than a potion."

Minerva smiled and nodded. "It was very good, and I enjoyed it, but I don't think I could manage any more. Thank you, though."

"And how is your headache?"

"Mmm . . ." She shrugged one shoulder. "Still there, but not as bad. A good night's sleep will help, I'm sure."

"I'll just check and see if there's any Headache Potion to be found."

Minerva heard him rummage around in the upstairs bathroom, the downstairs loo, and the kitchen, but after several minutes, he came in shaking his head. "I found a bottle of Muggle aspirin, but no Headache Potion. Would you like an aspirin?"

"I'll be fine, Albus. But thank you for looking for me."

"I can pop back to Hogwarts..."

"No need for that."

"Then at least sit here and let me rub your head for you for a bit, hmm? And your neck and shoulders. It's probably from the stress as much as anything."

Minerva made no protest, too tired and grateful was she, and she let him lead her to the couch, where he sat her down beside him and began to massage her shoulders and neck.

"Turn just a bit, yes, that's right. Just lean against the cushions. Now relax and don't think about anything, my dear."

Minerva relaxed under Albus' fingers, and when he began to massage her scalp, removing her hairpins first and putting them on the wooden chest that served as a coffee table, she sighed. He had never done anything quite like this for her before, but she needed it, and after having forced herself to trudge through the previous months showing no weakness, she simply hadn't any reserve left to protest. And she didn't want to.

Forty-five minutes later, she roused to his gentle kiss on her cheek. She looked at him sleepily.

"I would leave you to sleep, but I think you would sleep better and be more comfortable in bed, my dear."

She sat up, stretching slightly. "I didn't realise . . . how long was I asleep?"

"Not long. You drifted off as I was rubbing your head, so I took the opportunity to clean up after our supper and...do forgive me the liberty, Minerva, and it was a great liberty, I admit...to unpack a few of your things so that you could easily get ready for bed without unpacking. Just your night attire and your toothbrush and such."

"Oh! Thank you. That was kind of you." She seemed to be saying that a lot.

"Not at all. I also unpacked a few of my things. I took the third bedroom, the one at the front of the house, so you will have your privacy. Why don't you go on up and use the bathroom. I think I shall read a bit before retiring."

Minerva stood and started toward the door, then she turned. "I am very glad you're here, Albus. I don't know why you are, but I am very, very glad."

Albus smiled slightly. "You don't know why . . . Let's just say that I have worried about you. And tomorrow morning, we can talk again." He stepped toward her and kissed her cheek lightly. "Sleep well, my dear Minerva. Sweet dreams. And if you need anything in the night, I am here."

Morning came, and Minerva awoke to discover a cup of tea on her bedside table, a charm keeping it warm and fresh. Breakfast with Albus was delightful, and they did talk, though not about why he was there. And when she awoke the next day to another cup of tea on her bedside table, she decided not to question it, or ask when he might be leaving. If he wished to go, he would tell her, she thought, and although she had believed she wanted quiet and solitude, she was finding peace in his company.

After a week, Albus asked whether she would mind if he sent an owl to Fritz and Carlotta telling them not to expect him for another few days. Of course she didn't mind. And those few days turned into another week, and still, they did not discuss why Albus had come that day and made her supper and then stayed to keep her company.

At the end of that week, Minerva, only slightly apprehensive about the answer she might receive, asked, "Albus, why are you here? Why did you come and why did you stay?"

In response, Albus enfolded Minerva in his embrace and did not release her quickly. When finally he did step back from her, it was only to look down into her eyes and whisper, "Don't you know that I love you, Minerva McGonagall?"

His kiss was warm, and hers, just as warm.

When Albus did at last leave for the Cotswolds, he was not alone. And Minerva learned what he had meant when he said that Juno was a bed-hog.

~ The End ~