

Epithalamium

by Squibstress

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

Copyright

This work of fiction is based on characters and settings created by J. K. Rowling. All recognisable characters, settings, and plot elements are copyright © Ms. Rowling and her assignees.

The author believes this work falls within the scope of the Fair Use Doctrine as a *transformative work*. For more information, see the [Organization for Transformative Works](#).

All original characters, settings, and plot elements are copyright © Squibstress.

This work of fiction is available for use under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported \(CC-BY-NC-SA 3.0\) license](#).

Preface & Acknowledgements

This is the second, and longest, installment of my series chronicling the life of Minerva McGonagall. As in most of my Minerva stories, I have played free and easy with what I consider "extra-canon" information; anything not included in the *Harry Potter* series of books, I have felt free to use or disregard, according to my whim, most conspicuously, J. K. Rowling's Pottermore backstory for Minerva and her 2007 revelation that she conceived the character of Albus Dumbledore as homosexual.

Epithalamium takes place against the backdrop of Muggle history, and I have used it in spots throughout the novel. The dates, places, and historical events I've borrowed are real, and I have tried to remain faithful to both the facts and the flavour of these, but I beg the reader to forgive any historical inaccuracies or glaring anachronisms.

I am grateful for the assistance of the many individuals who helped in making this story, especially:

J. K. Rowling, for creating the world of Harry Potter and for allowing others to play in it;

The wonderful moderators at The Petulant Poetess archive, who helped me get my wild comma-fu under control;

Tetleythesecond, for her incisive comments on the Dresden scenes and for her help with the German;

Albalark, for her help in crafting a believable post-Hogwarts academic résumé for Minerva;

MMADfan, for her advice and commentary on the epilogue;

And finally, Fishy, for her editorial work on the later chapters and for her endless enthusiasm and cheerleading, which kept me going when my own enthusiasm and stamina were flagging.

The works quoted in the novel are in the public domain, with the following exceptions:

"Epithalamion", copyright © 1923 E. E. Cummings, © 1982 E.E. Cummings Copyright Trust, © 2001 E. E. Cummings Copyright Trust. Used under Fair Use.

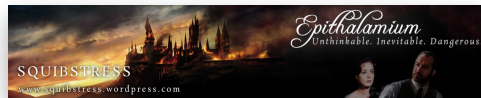
"Of the Argonauts and an Epithalamium for Peleus and Thetis", translation copyright © 2001 A. S. Kline. Used with permission.

The "Babel fish" referred to in Chapter Twenty-Five are, of course, originally the invention of the brilliant Douglas Adams for his wonderful 1978 BBC series *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and the subsequent novel of the same title.

Chapter Forty-Three contains three lines of dialogue taken directly from *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, copyright © 2005 J. K. Rowling (Bloomsbury Publishing).

The speeches of General Eisenhower and King George VI in Chapter Nineteen are in the public domain and quoted verbatim.

The image used on the book cover is Arno Brecker's "Orpheus und Eurydike", photo by Jos43 at nl.wikipedia, used under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.5 Generic license (CC-BY-SA 2.5).



PART I

1943-1944

Wake now, my love, awake! for it is time;

The Rosy Morne long since left Tithones bed,

All ready to her silver coche to clyme;

And Phoebus gins to shew his glorious hed.

Hark! how the cheerefull birds do chaunt theyr laies

And carroll of Loves praise.

~ Edmund Spenser, Epithalamion

The dark-haired girl slammed the book shut in irritation. She had hoped to finish the slim volume Professor Dumbledore had lent her before she had to go for rounds, but the incessant chattering and giggling of the other students in the Gryffindor common room had kept her from being able to concentrate on what she was reading, and Minerva McGonagall was a girl who liked to give her full attention to a text.

She rose from her chair by the fire and started toward the dormitory to stow her book and retrieve her cloak. As she passed, a petite, red-haired witch quipped to the small cadre of sixth- and seventh-years she had been regaling with tales of her romantic conquests, "Seems we've upset the *Cailleach beàrr*," referring to the Scottish hag-queen of winter.

Their giggling was aborted when Minerva said as she swept past, "I think you mean *Cailleach Bheur*. As the granddaughter of the Muggle Duke of Argyll, I should think you'd know that, Finnonula Campbell."

The group of girls started, realising that the tall witch had heard them. It wasn't wise to cross Minerva McGonagall; she was quick with a wand and could hex a person four ways to Sunday before the unfortunate subject of her wrath could blink. There was good reason she had been Hogwarts' duelling champion for the past three years.

Although she maintained an air of unconcerned aloofness, Minerva couldn't prevent two spots of colour from rising on her cheeks. She often told herself she didn't care that she was not especially popular among the other girls, but in truth, their frequent barbs about her icy mien stung a little. She was not, in fact, a cold fish, and she had a few friends who could attest to it, but her drive to excel in everything she did, coupled with her unwillingness to suffer fools gladly, had not endeared her to many of her schoolmates.

She shot the book a wistful glance as she left the dormitory to start her rounds. It was a fascinating treatise on theoretical concepts behind sentient-to-insentient Transfiguration, but she had found herself unable to read more than a few pages that evening. If she had been honest with herself, she would have admitted that the silly chatter of her noisy housemates was not the only reason for it. As she read, she hadn't been able to keep thoughts of her Transfiguration professor from intruding between her and the text. At nearly every paragraph she wondered what he might think about this or that concept, and if her analyses would please him.

Pleasing her professors generally came easily to Minerva. She had an exceptional mind, which had been nurtured and honed by her remarkable father, who delighted in

his only daughter's insatiable thirst for understanding. She also possessed an intensely powerful magic...even more so than her mother's, Thorfinn McGonagall suspected, and Morrigan McGonagall had been a formidable witch. When combined with her prodigious work ethic, success in most of Minerva's endeavours was all but assured.

She had been accustomed to the easy praise of her teachers...after Thorfinn's exacting tutelage she had found most of Hogwarts' professors surprisingly unintimidating...but Albus Dumbledore was different. While he was lavish with his compliments to other students every time one or another of them mastered a difficult Transfiguration or handed in a particularly well-thought-out essay, he didn't dote and cluck over Minerva's accomplishments as the other teachers did. She knew when she had pleased him by the spark of pleasure in his eye and the almost imperceptible nod of his head as he observed her work or handed back a paper. She knew she had missed the mark when he looked at her a little too long after one of her efforts had disappointed. He gave her high marks, of course, but he seemed to know instinctively when she needed praise and when she needed to be pushed.

She was pondering this as she patrolled the corridor when she heard a voice behind her call, "Minerva!" interrupting her thoughts. She turned and was not at all pleased to see Tom Riddle striding purposefully toward her.

"Hello, Tom. Are you on duty tonight too?" she asked.

"No," he answered, "I just hoped I might bump into you before curfew."

Minerva frowned. It was more likely he had been skulking around Gryffindor Tower and followed her as she went on her rounds. He had been paying her a great deal of attention of late, and it made her uncomfortable. Most of the other girls she knew would have given their wands to have handsome, charming Tom Riddle pay them court. After he had won the Award for Special Services to the School the previous year, his popularity had soared, even among the Gryffindors, who traditionally loathed Slytherins on long-established principle.

Minerva couldn't put her finger on exactly why Tom disquieted her. He was one of the few students who could compete with her intellectually, and he was a fierce opponent in Inter-House duelling matches, although he had only bested her on three occasions. Those things appealed to her, but she couldn't bring herself to like him.

Maybe it was because she sensed insincerity behind his easy smile and pleasant words. He was always gallantly apologetic after winning a duelling contest, as if he had accidentally trodden on her toes during a waltz rather than blasted her across the duelling platform, leaving her in an untidy, panting heap on the floor. But his extravagant praise for her skills and his insistence that his victory was a matter of luck didn't erase the memory of the predatory gleam she had recognised in his eyes as he fixed his wand on her before firing his spell. He had looked on those occasions as if he wanted to *Crucio* her, or worse, rather than hitting her with a forceful, but ultimately harmless, jinx.

There were rumours that he dabbled in the Dark Arts, but that was par for the course for a Slytherin. She knew that most of the boys in that House, and a few of the girls, liked to pretend they were secretly devotees of Dark magic, but it was mostly empty boasting, much like that of the girls of her own House when they whispered and giggled at night in the dorm about their amorous adventures.

"I was wondering if you might like to accompany me to Hogsmeade for the last weekend of term. I hear Dervish and Banges have got a prototype of the Cleansweep Four on display this month...probably hoping to get a bunch of orders in before Christmas...and I thought we might go take a look, then head to the Three Broomsticks for a couple of Butterbeers."

"That sounds lovely, Tom, but I can't. I have lots of work to catch up on, what with N.E.W.T.s coming up," she answered.

He walked beside her as she continued down the corridor. "Come now, Minerva, your N.E.W.T.s are almost six months away. Besides, you could probably sail through them right now without even cracking a book, you're so smart," he said.

She was annoyed. She disliked empty flattery, and besides, she was well aware that Tom had absolutely no interest in the newest broomstick. He didn't even like being on one, as flying was one of the few activities he found difficult. He had only started attending Quidditch matches when she had become Gryffindor team captain at the beginning of this term. His attempts to woo her by assimilating her interests irritated her. It was another example of his insincerity, and it made her cross.

"I'm sorry, Tom. I'm really buried. I just don't think I can afford to shirk off just now," she said, keeping her voice pleasant and apologetic.

"Not even for one afternoon? After all, it's the last chance I'll have to see you before you push off home for the holidays," he said, fixing her with an earnest-looking smile.

Now she was really peeved. He was trying to play on her sympathies by reminding her that she had a loving home to return to for Christmas, while he, an orphan, would remain at school for the holiday.

"I really can't, Tom." She abruptly turned down another corridor, calling over her shoulder as she hurried away, "Excuse me, I think I hear Peeves in Pringle's office again."

/***/

Albus Dumbledore was sitting at his desk, marking essays, when he heard a gentle knock at his office door.

"Come in," he said, entering an "A" in his notebook for Edgar Bones's quite Acceptable essay. "Miss McGonagall! This is an unexpected pleasure. Shouldn't you be in Hogsmeade, enjoying a Butterbeer with some fortunate young man?" he asked when he saw Minerva enter.

"I didn't feel much like going this weekend, and I had some work to do," she answered, wondering for the first time how much Professor Dumbledore knew about Tom Riddle's interest in her. "I wanted to return the book you lent me, so I took a chance that you'd be here. I hope I'm not disturbing you, Professor."

"Not at all. I fear that reading all these second-year essays have made me rather anxious for an interruption," he said, indicating the pile of parchment in front of him. "Have you finished the book already?"

"Yes, sir. It was very stimulating. I thought Bonham's Theory of Reciprocal Osmosis was especially elegant in its simplicity. I really appreciate your lending the book to me."

"It's most considerate of you to return the book so promptly. I thought you might find Bonham appealing, given your fondness for the writings of William of Ockham," he teased.

She blushed, remembering the heated discussion she and Professor Dumbledore had had over the applicability of Ockham's razor to magical theory...a ten-minute discourse that had had her classmates open-mouthed with bewilderment and had ended only when the class period was over, and they all had to move on to their next lessons.

Observing her embarrassment, he added, "Your father was wise to include such a broad base of Muggle philosophy in your early education. I wish more of my students were familiar with Muggle scholarship; the prevailing bias against it does our society a great disservice, I believe."

"Yes, sir, I quite agree," she said. "It's ridiculous to think that Muggles have nothing to add to our body of knowledge simply because they lack magical genes." She stopped, the blush returning to her cheeks when she realised she was preaching to the choir. She decided to charge ahead with her real reason for seeking him out on a Saturday afternoon.

"Professor, if I'm not being too forward, have you had a chance to speak with Professor Falco about my beginning Animagus training yet?"

"Yes, Miss McGonagall, as a matter of fact, I had an owl from him this morning. I was going to talk with you about it on Monday, but seeing as you're denying yourself the opportunity to obtain a new cache of Mr Zonko's latest wares, we can discuss it now," he said.

"What did he say?" she asked anxiously. She had very much wanted to undertake the rigorous training to become an Animagus ever since she and Professor Dumbledore had first discussed the possibility during her career-advisory meeting with him at the end of her fifth year.

"Professor Falco is reluctant to take on such a young pupil for such advanced work." Seeing her crestfallen face, he quickly added, "Now, now, Miss McGonagall. As you know, Animagus training is extremely difficult and very dangerous, even for highly experienced witches and wizards. Professor Falco is simply being cautious. I doubt he has ever given serious consideration to an application from an eighteen-year-old witch before."

"I see, sir. Thank you for trying." She tried hard not to show how disappointed she was. She had rarely been thwarted in pursuing any of her ambitions, and this rejection came as a particular blow. "I'll let you get back to your essays, Professor."

She had turned to leave when he said, "Wait a moment, Miss McGonagall, I hadn't quite finished yet." She turned back, an inquisitive look on her face. "I managed to persuade Professor Falco that you were an exceptionally gifted student and very mature for your age. I assured him that he would be running no undue risks in taking you on as a pupil. He has agreed to begin working with you in June, after your graduation."

Her excitement couldn't be contained. She squealed...a most un-Minerva-like sound...threw her arms around her mentor's neck...arextremely un-Minerva-like gesture...and kissed his whiskered cheek. Immediately realising what she had done, she dropped her arms and stepped back. This time her blush began at the top of her blouse, blotching her skin all the way up to her high cheekbones.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said, "I'm just so grateful to you for your work on my behalf."

"No need to apologise, Miss McGonagall," he replied, amusement evident in his eyes. "It's all too rare that I receive such an enthusiastic thank-you from a student. However, I do have something more to tell you."

"Yes, sir?"

"Professor Falco has agreed to teach you with the stipulation that you come to him having learnt the theory and the elementary practical exercises you will need to begin your training. He said he is already too busy to take on an absolute beginner, but I suspect the real reason is that he expects you to abandon your training once you get a taste of its rigours."

She looked miserable again. "Yes, sir. But how can I meet that requirement? There are so few people who can teach even the basics of Animagus Transfiguration. I don't think there's anyone in Britain, other than Professor Falco, certainly nobody in this area, anyway."

"There is me," he said.

Her eyes grew wider than he had ever seen them. "You, Professor? But you're not an Animagus."

"True. But I am well versed in the theory, and I have undergone practical training in the basics. To tell you the truth, I didn't have the talent to continue with it. However, if I do say so myself, I am a reasonably competent teacher, and I suspect I can help you muddle through at least as much as I managed. You are, after all, far cleverer than I was at the time."

She sparkled with joy, both at the news that her Transfiguration professor would tutor her and at the very large compliment he had just paid her. "Professor Dumbledore, I don't know what to say or how to thank you."

"You can thank me by working as hard at your Animagus training as you do at everything else, Miss McGonagall."

"Oh, I will, sir."

"I know you will. Now, we need to set a timetable for your lessons. There's a great deal to accomplish before June, so I think we should plan to meet at least twice per week. I'm afraid I only have Tuesday evenings and Saturday afternoons available. Will that be agreeable to you?" he asked.

She was quiet for a moment. Saturday afternoons were when Quidditch matches were held. Meeting with her Transfiguration professor then would mean giving up not just her captaincy, but her spot on the team too.

He knew what was bothering her. "My dear, sometimes we have to make sacrifices to get what we really want in life," he said gently.

"I know, sir. I just feel bad about letting down the team. We've been doing so well, and having to find a new Chaser and a new captain would seriously jeopardise our chance at the Cup."

"That is a pity. But sometimes we have to ask others to make sacrifices as well," he said.

She made her decision. "I understand, sir. I'll speak to the team first thing tomorrow. They'll need to hold tryouts before the Christmas holidays." Suddenly, she had an idea. "Sir, we could begin my lessons over the holidays! Without classes and Quidditch and everything else, we could meet every day and get a head start!" she said.

"Won't your family miss having you at home for the holidays?" he asked, surprised at her willingness to give up her time with her beloved father.

"Yes, sir, but as you say, sometimes we have to ask others to make sacrifices," she replied with a wry smile. Then another thought occurred to her: "Oh, unless, of course, you have other plans for the holidays . . ."

She was mortified. She knew Professor Dumbledore didn't usually leave Hogwarts over the holidays, but she didn't know much about his private life. Was he married? She didn't think so, but she couldn't be certain. He might have a friend whom he planned to visit, or who would want to visit him at Hogwarts when there were fewer students around to gossip. She knew that if she were his lover, she wouldn't want him spending his holiday at school tutoring an eighteen-year-old witch.

"Not at all, Miss McGonagall," he said. He was quiet for a moment, as if deep in thought. He appeared to come to a decision. "If you are certain you're willing to give up your holidays, I think we could begin our work next week."

"Thank you, Professor. What time Saturday shall I come?" she asked.

"Why don't you come after lunch, around two?" he replied.

"That will be fine, sir. Shall I meet you in the Transfiguration classroom, then?"

"No, no need for that. Just come to my office. We'll need to spend the first few meetings talking. I'll provide you with a list of the books you'll need and the reading assignments."

"Thank you, sir, I'll look forward to it," she answered. After a moment's silence, she realised he was waiting for her to go. "Good afternoon, Professor Dumbledore," she said, beaming at him, then turned to go.

"Good afternoon, Miss McGonagall."

He watched her leave. When the door had closed behind her, he ran his hands over his beard thoughtfully.

What have you gotten yourself into, old man? he asked himself.

He was very much afraid he knew the answer.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

When Minerva owed her father to say that she would not be returning home for Christmas, he tried not to let her hear his disappointment in his reply. He knew how much Animagus training meant to his daughter, and Thorfinn McGonagall had never been a man to put his own feelings ahead of his children's ambitions.

Minerva's younger brother, Einar, at least, had already owed from Beauxbatons, where he was taking a year's exchange, to say he would be arriving home the following weekend. Thorfinn resigned himself to seeing just one of his children over the holidays. It was a harbinger of things to come, he thought, somewhat wistfully. Minerva was eighteen and would graduate the following June. He harboured no illusions that she would come home to Caithness to live with her long-widowed father; she was a bright, ambitious girl and had already expressed a wish to apply for an internship with the Auror office in London. He wanted her to fulfil her dreams, even at the cost of his own loneliness. Besides, it would be another four years before Einar was ready to leave the nest, and Thorfinn had an idea that his son would settle closer to home.

Einar McGonagall was bright too, but not especially ambitious. His intelligence was made manifest in quieter, less spectacular ways than his sister's. He could discuss science, philosophy, and history as well as she, but he shied away from debate, whereas she tended to leap in eagerly, loving to challenge others' ideas and have her own challenged in turn.

Einar was opal to Minerva's diamond, thought Thorfinn, no less rare and beautiful, but less sharply faceted and glittering, and consequently, less valued by some. Opals were more delicate and required gentler handling, whereas diamonds would scratch anything that came too close. This was a thought that sometimes kept Thorfinn up at night. His beautiful, brilliant daughter could sometimes be too hard for her own good. He wondered how much of it was innate and how much was his fault. He had always asked a great deal of her, and her growing up without a mother to soften the edges of his expectations had no doubt left its traces.

He wrote:

We'll miss you, of course, but I am very proud of you, as always. This is a wonderful opportunity for you, so I'll try not to begrudge Professor Dumbledore your company, seeing as the man is giving up his own holiday to help you get started on this adventure. Please thank him on my behalf.

Your loving,

Da

*/***/*

"Cross-species Transfiguration is one of the most difficult feats you will attempt in this class," Professor Dumbledore was saying.

"It requires you to focus on several complex intentions at the same time: at the cellular level, the anatomical level, and the morphological level. The more complex the organism, the more difficult the Transfiguration. I think we'll start with something simple, but not too simple. Can't have you all Transfiguring the spattergroit virus into dragon pox, now can we?" he asked, grinning.

"Mr Damocles, if you would help me distribute these beetles, I would be most obliged."

When each N.E.W.T student had a beetle, Dumbledore continued: "I trust you all read the chapter on arthropods, so you have a basic understanding of the parts. I am going to ask you each to attempt to Transfigure your beetle into a moth."

The students looked around at one another doubtfully.

"Species and colouration your choice, of course," he joked, casting a quick look at Minerva. He had an inkling she would be the only student to accomplish it by the end of the day's class.

In the event, he was wrong. She accomplished it on the first try. While several other students eventually managed to eliminate the elytra from their beetles to uncover their flight wings after several attempts, when Albus came to her desk, Minerva took up her wand, narrowed her eyes at her beetle, then flicked her wand, saying, "*Mutatio Lepidopteram*."

The next moment found her staring contentedly at a medium-sized moth, around six inches in wingspan. Albus had half expected a showy demonstration of her prowess, resulting in one of the brightly coloured species of moth—say a crimson-speckled moth or Madagascan sunset moth—but what appeared on Minerva's desk was a much more subtle display of skill and wit.

Albus could not prevent a chuckle from escaping his lips. He leant down toward Minerva, saying, "Really, my dear, *Thysania agrippina*?"

"Is it not appropriate, Professor?" she asked with a sly smile.

"Indeed, it is. But doesn't the white witch moth usually come in a slightly larger size?"

"Yes, but I didn't want to distract the other students," she said.

What she had done was infinitely more difficult than a straight Transfiguration. To change a creature's species as well as its size required skill and knowledge that was beyond many masters and mistresses of Transfiguration. The fact that she had chosen to make the moth smaller rather than larger suggested her desire to show off only for her teacher, on whom she could count to know the proper size of the species of moth she had produced.

It was utterly like her, he thought.

White witch, indeed.

The alabaster-coloured wings with the almost-black markings were a perfect metaphor for Minerva McGonagall's pale, Celtic skin and ebony hair. The delicacy of the moth's pattern was reflected in her fine features—the thin brows, the narrow, patrician nose, and the thin lips, all framed by high cheekbones. The only really extraordinary thing about her face was her great green eyes, ringed by a fringe of coal-black lashes.

This was part of what made Minerva so good at Transfiguration, Albus thought. She put an enormous amount of care and intention into every one, but the seemingly effortless way her mind made connections and patterns between things was unique in his experience. This was a form of magic all too rare in pure-bloods, he mused. So insular was wizarding society that it tended to crush the kind of soaring, thirsty inquisitiveness that Thorfinn McGonagall had recognised and thankfully, encouraged in his daughter. Albus hoped he would get to meet the man one day.

As was his habit, he didn't make a fuss over Minerva's achievement. He simply pointed out to the class that she had managed it, and opined that, with practice, each of them would as well. Nobody was especially surprised that that swot McGonagall had done it first.

At the end of the lesson period, he had a student gather the beetles—all in various states of transformation—into a box. When the students had gone, he set about methodically Transfiguring them back into beetles for use the next time. He did not, however, Transfigure Minerva's moth. Instead, he conjured a small glass cage containing a thin Cassia branch. He put the moth into the cage and placed it on his desk. When classes had ended for the day, he took the moth to his private quarters and placed it on the side-table next to his favourite reading chair in his sitting room. He kept it there for three days before he released it to the winds from his bedroom window in Gryffindor Tower.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"Perhaps we should begin with enumerating the hazards of Animagus transformation," Professor Dumbledore said.

He and Minerva were seated comfortably in his office, not across the large mahogany desk, but rather in two comfortable club chairs separated by a low table on which sat a china tea service.

She tried not to smile at the obvious Puffskein of a question he had lobbed at her.

"Well, the first is incomplete transformation. That would be dangerous if the subject managed to transform internal organs without any outward changes. He or she might not notice until becoming ill."

"Yes. And how would one defend against it?"

"First and foremost, Professor, would be to avoid doing it in the first place."

"Indeed," he said with a smile. "But supposing one had not followed your sage advice?"

"After any unsuccessful attempt at transformation, the subject should take a careful inventory of all organ systems."

"And I assume you can tell me what these are."

"Of course: skeletal, muscular, circulatory, integumentary, nervous, respiratory, immune, excretory, endocrine, reproductive, digestive." She rattled the names off quickly.

"Very good, Miss McGonagall. I must admit to forgetting them myself at times."

"I use a mnemonic, it makes it easier."

"Oh, and what is it?"

Her lips thinned and a blush crept up from beneath her collar. "I . . . um . . ."

"I see. Well, certain mnemonics *are* more memorable than others," he said, the blasted twinkle in his eye scintillating at her. "Perhaps you'll share it with me one day."

She dropped her eyes. *Not a chance*, thought Minerva. Einar had taught her the mnemonic, which he had learnt from an older Muggle friend who was hoping to follow in his

father's medical footsteps. The boy was well known for his crude humour, which was probably why Einar found him so fascinating. Her brother was altogether too interested in Muggle jokes and knew some really filthy ones.

She looked at her professor once more and pressed on. "Another significant hazard is the inability to change back to human form. It occurs most often when the subject is insufficiently focused and loses awareness of his or her human identity once transformed into the Animagus form. That's why it is essential to complete the first transformations under the observation of a skilled tutor, who will be able to assist the subject in re-transforming to human form. Once the subject has mastered both aspects of the transformation, the danger is much less."

"Good. Go on."

"Well, then there's the form the Animagus takes. Until the first transformation happens, nobody knows what species of animal the subject will be. There is the possibility that it will be a dangerous creature, which poses a hazard for the observer," she said. Then she added mischievously, "But as the Animagus form is thought to be a reflection of the subject's human qualities, I daresay you'll be safe enough with me."

Miss McGonagall, you are dangerous enough in your human form, he thought. He smiled at her and said aloud, "Nevertheless, I must confess I'm glad your first complete transformation will likely be Professor Falco's worry rather than mine."

She was slightly chagrined when she realised her joking comment had sounded like cockiness. Of course it was highly unlikely that she would be able to complete a transformation before she had at least several months of study with Professor Falco under her belt, by which time she would be far from Hogwarts and Professor Dumbledore. The thought gave her a momentary zing of pain in her chest.

"Of course, sir," she said.

He was still smiling at her, so she continued. "Then there are the dangers inherent to whichever form the Animagus takes. If one becomes, for example, an animal low on the food chain, one risks becoming prey every time one transforms. Or if one becomes something very small...say an insect...there is the risk of getting . . ."

"Squashed," he finished. This time it was she who smiled at him, although it was more of a grimace.

"Yes. And as a female, there is, of course, the possibility of an attack by the male of whatever species one becomes," she continued.

"Yes," he said. "This is especially a concern for those who become mammals; one would need to be very cautious about transforming during the period of oestrus."

"Yes, sir," she said, not looking quite at his face. "In that case, it would be especially important to understand the oestrus cycle of the animal in question."

"Yes, but also...please forgive me, my dear...the female subject should be aware of her period of fertility as a human. I trust you are familiar with the concept."

"Of course, sir." This time she didn't blush, he noted. Merlin, but she was an interesting girl!

"Good." There was a slightly awkward pause as he peered at her before he said, "I think you've got a good grasp of the hazards. Now let's discuss the theory. Why, in your opinion, is Animagus transformation so difficult and so rarely achieved?"

This was the part she was eager to get to.

"Well, sir, it has to do with our incomplete understanding of the concept of 'self'. There are a number of philosophical approaches to the subject, but none are completely satisfactory, in my estimation. For example, the Aristotelian tradition holds that the soul is at the centre of selfhood and being, but that it cannot be considered separate from the corporeal being. For Aristotle and his philosophical successors, soul, body, and action are, in essence, one. This works well with our understanding of Animagus transformation on one level, but the Aristotelian tenet that different and distinct souls necessarily consist in different beings because they have different functions isn't consistent with what we understand of Transfiguration of living beings. The Animagus' sense of 'self' may be altered somewhat, but it remains essentially the same as that of its human form."

Ordinarily, Albus would interject with questions when working with an advanced student, in order to lead the student to greater revelations, but Minerva's discourse was so interesting that he could not bring himself to interrupt until she had held forth on Hume, Locke, Avicenna, and the Buddha, methodically enumerating the ways in which their teachings did and did not apply to Animagus transformation.

At last, he said, "You are impressively well read on the topic, and you've obviously put a great deal of thought into this. But I'm afraid you haven't answered my original question: Why is Animagus transformation so difficult?"

She swallowed. Why did she have to be such a great, sodding git? Showing off for Professor Dumbledore again. Of course, she hadn't really meant to show off; she had just warmed to the topic and the words came tumbling out.

She took a deep breath and said, "I'm sorry, sir. I was going to get to it eventually. Successfully transforming oneself from human to animal while retaining one's human consciousness requires, in my opinion, the ability to know one's *self* and accept all the facets of it, even those one would prefer to overlook. It requires a kind of . . ." She searched for the right word.

"Courage," offered her professor.

"Yes, but it's a bit more than that, I think." She hesitated, afraid to sound swotty again.

"Go on," he urged.

"Naïveté."

"Explain."

"Courage exists when one is fully aware of the potential consequences of one's actions. Introspection, in its beginning, is an exploration. The consequences are unknown. The seeker must be willing to accept that unknown...that's where the courage comes in...but at the same time remain innocent of attempting to direct the exploration."

He was silent for a few moments, and she was almost afraid she had displeased him with her answer. But he quickly broke into a wide, beaming smile.

"Minerva, my dear, you are a wonder." He took her hand and kissed the back of it. She felt the flush start all the way at her toes. Damn her pale skin!

He looked away almost shyly, then said, "And it appears we have overshot our allotted time by forty-five minutes. I'm afraid I have some other duties I must attend to. And I hope you have something more pleasant planned for your afternoon than spending it with your elderly professor."

It was on the tip of her tongue to say, "You're not elderly," but she didn't have that kind of courage yet.

"I'm sorry I've kept you, sir."

"Not at all, it was a great pleasure. Tomorrow, then? At the same time?"

"I'll look forward to it, sir."

"As will I, my dear."

After she had gone, he realised he had been rather enjoying the view of her from behind as she left his office. She wasn't wearing her usual black scholar's robes with the Gryffindor crest, and her long, straight, tartan skirt afforded him a pleasant glimpse of her shape as she walked away.

He was beginning to understand the utility of having students wear shapeless black robes in class. They came to Hogwarts as eleven-year-olds, but they grew...some of them into quite attractive young ladies and gentlemen. It was prudent to keep distracting curves and muscles well hidden beneath yards of wool and muslin, both for the sake of the students, and, it must be said, for the staff. Albus had on occasion noticed how pretty one or the other of his charges had become over a summer, and he didn't castigate himself over it. It was a natural reaction, he reasoned, and never had he entertained any serious thoughts about acting on a momentary impulse.

The problem, my boy, he said to himself, is that this is becoming more than a momentary impulse.

He couldn't put his finger on just when he had started to notice Minerva McGonagall as more than his most gifted student. His awareness of her physical presence had grown gradually over the past year until it had intensified to what he recognised, with shock, as longing. It was not mere desire...he could put a lid on that quite effectively...but it was as if in order to function properly, he needed a certain measure of her every day: to see her, to hear her, and Merlin help him, to touch her.

The touches were always innocent, or at least, innocent-seeming: his hand resting briefly on her shoulder to attract her attention when a word alone would have sufficed, a finger lingering a second too long on her hand as he corrected her wand work, and of course, the time she had kissed his cheek in thanks for agreeing to help her with her Animagus training. That had been like a sudden burst of colour in an otherwise grey painting. The whisper of her breath on his cheek, her lips brushing his skin, the feel of her fingers clasping the back of his shoulders as she hugged him, and the unmistakable press of her breasts against his chest had nearly brought him to his knees. He was pleased to think she had noticed nothing of his predicament that day, but he had a suspicion that something had been in her mind since.

When she had mentioned beginning their lessons over the Christmas holiday, his first impulse had been to demur. Even in his reverie, he had realised that such an arrangement posed temptations and hazards he would prefer not to think about. But the fresh memory of the feel of her against him, coupled with her question about his plans, had prompted him to agree without quite meaning to. He had been irrationally concerned that she might think him attached in some way and wanted to reassure her that he was a free man. It wasn't so, of course. He was not free; he was a professor and more than forty years her senior. He should not have cared whether she believed him single, married, or gayer than a Maypole. But he did.

Her slightly insouciant banter with him was not especially new; she had been quick-witted in that way from their earliest acquaintance, once she had gotten the lay of the land, so to speak. She seemed to know that what would have seemed impertinent to another professor was simply amusing to him and served only as an unspoken acknowledgement of their nearly matched intellects...as unlikely as that was. She was not a girl to hide her intelligence, and he had a sense that she had hungered to find one that matched her own since coming to school. Her father had been her sole challenger for the early years of her youth, and she had been clearly excited to find another person who would neither patronise nor coddle her.

The blushing, though. That was a change.

You need to tread very carefully, Professor, he told himself.

He wondered if there was a way to ask her to wear her black robe to their next lesson without arousing her suspicions. He also wondered if he wanted to.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

One annoyance Minerva had not counted on when she had decided to remain at Hogwarts over the Christmas holidays was Tom Riddle.

In her happiness at the prospect of two weeks of private study with Professor Dumbledore, she had forgotten that Tom would also remain at Hogwarts over the holiday, and was only reminded of that fact when he had appeared for breakfast in the Great Hall the first Saturday. Given the small number of students who remained at school over Christmas, Headmaster Dippet had invited them all to gather at the High Table for meals rather than at the large, empty House tables. This was not an entirely welcome invitation for some of the "holiday remainders", as the group would take to calling themselves; the prospect of eating one's meals right under the eyes of one's professors would cause a few of them to lose their appetites to nerves. For Minerva, however, it was a welcome chance to listen in on, and even participate in, the adults' conversation. She eventually found that the professors' casual chatter was not much more enthralling than her schoolmates', but the opportunity to sit near Professor Dumbledore...just to be in his presence...was a lovely consolation.

When Tom spied Minerva's back...she was sitting across from Professor Dumbledore...he recognised her immediately and strode up to her. "Minerva! I didn't expect to see you here! Do you mind?" he asked as he prepared to take the empty seat to her left.

"Oh, certainly, Tom," she replied, just barely concealing her irritation as he took his seat.

"Change of plans?" he enquired.

"Yes. I decided to stay on to take on some extra lessons," she said, not wanting to be too specific, although she wasn't sure just why. Professor Dumbledore had never stipulated that their lessons should be kept secret.

"Well, I hope your extra lessons will leave a bit of time for us to spend in Hogsmeade," Tom said. "It can be really lovely at Christmastime, and I'd enjoy showing it to you."

Oh, he was annoying! As if she needed to be escorted around the village like a tourist. She had, after all, been visiting Hogsmeade for two years before he ever saw the place.

"*Mmm*," she said in answer, taking a bite of her toast and marmalade. She continued, for the remainder of the meal, to give one-word answers to Tom's questions and comments.

"So I was thinking of joining the wizard chess club," Tom was saying. "I never learned to play the Muggle version in the orphanage, of course, but since learning the wizard's version after coming to Hogwarts, I've found I really enjoy it. If I do say so, I've gotten pretty good, but now it's hard to find anyone who's . . . well . . . quite up to my level." He had the good sense to appear embarrassed by his own boast. When no comment was forthcoming from Minerva, he continued with a syrupy smile, "What do you think? Should I join? Of course, it wouldn't hurt if you'd consent to give me some tips, or practice with me . . ."

"Why don't you ask Olive Hornby? She's in the club, and as she's a Slytherin, you could practice in the evenings right in your own common room. Besides, I'm sure she has much more free time than I do," said Minerva without quite looking at him.

Professor Dumbledore, who had been quietly observing the exchange in between words with Silvanus Kettleburn, the Care of Magical Creatures professor, had to bite back a smile. Minerva could really be quite wicked at times. Olive Hornby was a singularly unattractive and waspish girl, and rather dull besides. Moreover, since the previous year, she had gained a reputation for oddness, as she claimed she was being tormented by the ghost of the girl who had died during the Chamber of Secrets trouble...trouble that Tom Riddle had put an end to, of course. The oblique suggestion that popular, handsome Tom Riddle pair up with the likes of Olive Hornby was certainly calculated to annoy him.

Dumbledore noticed a shadow pass briefly over Riddle's face, but the boy quickly recovered his charming air. "I'm sure you'd make a far better teacher, Minerva," Tom said, his voice lowered, hinting ever so slightly at something not quite proper.

"Well, Tom!" Professor Dumbledore interjected brightly. "What's the gossip in the Slytherin common room these days?"

"I'm afraid I wouldn't know, Professor," said Tom, his voice clearly implying that Dumbledore's question was insulting.

"That's a shame. I, for one, have always enjoyed a bit of gossip; it can be most illuminating. For example, only last week, I heard that young Miss Borgin was planning to slip a Love Potion into your morning pumpkin juice," said Professor Dumbledore.

"That would be highly inadvisable," Tom said coldly.

"Yes, I imagine it can be quite tiresome to have to fight off unwanted advances all the time," said Dumbledore, looking directly at him.

The sodding old codger! Was he warning Tom away from Minerva? What business was it of his if Tom wanted to court her?

"Well, I must be off. Mr Riddle," said Professor Dumbledore, standing and nodding at Tom. "Miss McGonagall, always a pleasure."

Minerva finished her pumpkin juice, dabbed at her lips with a napkin, then folded it neatly on the table. She stood, saying, "I've got to be going too. Have a pleasant day, Tom." She walked away before he could ask her if he would see her at lunch.

Tom's eyes narrowed to an almost reptilian degree as he watched her walk out of the Great Hall. Why did this girl, out of all of them, seem to be the only one uninterested in him? Had he not been charming and complimentary? Did he not make an effort to be interested in the things that interested her? Or was it, perhaps, that she thought herself too good for him? She came from a well-regarded pure-blood family, while he was an orphan of no identifiable parentage...at least as far as anyone else knew. Certainly he had proven by now that his lineage, or lack thereof, was no impediment to magical prowess. Hadn't he? Perhaps he would need to arrange a greater display of his power to show her what he was worth.

As Tom Riddle left the Great Hall, his thoughts were on what sort of feats might be required to ensnare a girl like Minerva McGonagall.

/***/

Minerva didn't turn up for lunch in the Great Hall. She had decided to use her prerogative as Head Girl to request a sandwich in the Gryffindor common room so she again could go through the texts Professor Dumbledore had assigned her in preparation for the next day's tutorial. She had felt a slight pang when she realised she might be missing an opportunity to dine with her professor again, but it was counterbalanced by the thought of not having to listen to Tom Riddle's smarmy drivel.

She had been a bit nervous when she arrived for her first tutorial that Saturday, but Professor Dumbledore had put her at ease by arranging for them to sit in comfortable chairs across a tea table, just like colleagues, instead of across the large, intimidating desk that dominated the room.

She thought it had gone rather well, despite her bout of swottiness. Professor Dumbledore had seemed pleased with her and allowed their session to run overtime. Despite the nearly three hours she had just spent in his company, she found she was looking forward to seeing him at dinner. In fact, "looking forward" was something of an understatement. "Couldn't wait" would be a more accurate description of her feelings on the subject. Even the prospect of Tom Riddle's presence wasn't dampening her enthusiasm.

It had been odd at breakfast, though. She had felt more than usually irritated by Tom's false courtliness, and she had had the sense that Professor Dumbledore was watching them more closely than he had let on. His remark about unwanted attention had certainly been pointed enough. She wasn't sure how she felt about his witnessing Tom's attentions to her. On the one hand, she didn't want him to think she would ever consider taking up with the likes of Tom Riddle, but on the other? She had to admit that having Professor Dumbledore see that the handsomest, most popular boy at Hogwarts was interested in her was . . . titillating. She didn't expect her professor to be jealous...how could he be?...but part of her liked the idea that he would see that another man found her enticing as a female. She could admit that much to herself, couldn't she? It wasn't as though she wanted Professor Dumbledore to find her so...of course not...but she would like him to find her . . . interesting . . . as a person as well as a student.

She tried to keep herself from being disappointed when, at dinner, Professor Dumbledore seated himself several spaces down from her. Tom sat next to her again, but he seemed more subdued than he had at breakfast. In any event, she had a hard time concentrating on whatever he was prattling on about. Her attention kept floating to the end of the large table, where Professor Dumbledore was talking animatedly with Professor Merrythought. When she said something that made him laugh uproariously, and he put his hand on hers, Minerva suddenly lost her appetite.

"Minerva?"

"*Hmm*?"

"I asked if your extra lessons had started yet," said Tom.

"Oh, yes. Yesterday afternoon," she answered.

"What's the topic?" he enquired.

"Um, Transfiguration."

"I seriously doubt you need any extra help in *that* subject," Tom said, smiling, but there was something else behind his grin that made Minerva shiver internally.

"It's an advanced project," she said.

"Oh. You're helping Professor Dumbledore with his research?"

"Not exactly. He's helping me with something. I don't really want to go into it, though, Tom," she said, trying to sound more off-hand than she felt.

"I see. Top secret, eh?" said Tom, joking, but not.

"No, just complicated," she replied. "Will you excuse me, Tom? I had a late tea this afternoon and find I'm already full," she said, pushing her chair back and rising.

Once again, Riddle found himself watching her leave the Great Hall. So her project with Dumbledore was "too complicated" for him to understand? Now that was clearly a challenge. And Tom Riddle never shied away from a challenge.

As he accepted a second helping of trifle from Professor Merrythought, Albus watched Tom watch Minerva.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"I think we've covered the theory enough for the present," said Professor Dumbledore. Over the course of the week, their lessons had progressed through discussions of how Animagus transformation occurred, what determined the form it would take, and the various rules and regulations governing those who undertook it. "I think perhaps it's time to begin some practical exercises," he told her.

"Really? That would be wonderful!" exclaimed Minerva. As much as she had loved discussing...and occasionally debating...Transfiguration theory with Professor Dumbledore, she was anxious to move on to the next phase of her studies.

He chuckled at her enthusiasm. "Don't be too excited, my dear. The first exercises are very basic, although I expect you might find them somewhat challenging," he said.

She frowned. "Why do you think they will be particularly difficult for me?" she asked. Was he losing faith in her abilities?

"Forgive me, Minerva. No insult was intended. I only think you may find them difficult because they require that you first empty your mind of conscious thought. And I suspect you are unaccustomed to the feeling of an empty head, as it were," he said.

She smiled at the indirect compliment. "I see. Well, I shall endeavour to do my best, Professor," she said. "Will we begin with one of the exercises from Professor Falco's book?"

"No. I thought we could start with something of my own devising," he answered. "That is, if it is all right with you, my dear," he added.

"Of course, sir. What should I do?"

"First, I would like you to make sure you are completely comfortable and at ease. Any physical tension will inhibit your ability to focus. You need to release it. Can you do that?"

"I think so."

"Good. Are you comfortable sitting where you are?" She nodded. "All right. You may leave your hands in your lap. Now, close your eyes and try to empty your mind. Concentrate on nothing but the sound of my voice."

He began to hum quietly. After a few minutes, he stopped and said, "You may open your eyes now, Minerva. So, how did that feel? Were you able to empty your mind?"

"A bit," she answered hesitantly. "It was hard to keep thoughts from intruding."

"Indeed, it is. What kind of thoughts, if you don't mind my asking?" he enquired.

"Well, when I tried just to concentrate on your voice as you instructed, sometimes fragments of music would come into my mind."

"Ah, yes. That is a drawback of the particular method I was trying to employ," he said. "It's hard for me not to slip into humming a Bach cantata," he said, his eyes smiling at her.

She laughed. "The music I thought of was more along the lines of old songs and lullabies my gran used to sing to me," she said. She dropped her eyes, suddenly self-conscious at sharing such childish personal remembrances with him.

"Really? I should like to hear them sometime," he said. He immediately chided himself for his forwardness. He was courtly out of habit, with both male and female, old and young, and his words had come naturally. However, he realised, under the current circumstances...alone with an attractive young woman...they might be interpreted as true flirtation.

He immediately turned his conversation back to their task. "Shall we try again? This time I will confine myself to humming only two notes."

They repeated the exercise twice more, with Minerva reporting only slightly greater success at clearing her mind. "I'm sorry," she said dejectedly. "I don't know why I'm having such trouble with this."

"Do not feel discouraged, Minerva; this can be very difficult. Especially if you have any worries or fears preying on your mind. If that is the case, we can postpone this exercise. Unless you feel you would like to unburden yourself; I find that can be helpful at times," Professor Dumbledore said.

"No, sir. I have no particular troubles at the moment," she said, not quite looking him in the eye.

He briefly considered pressing her on the topic, sensing there was something she was hiding, but decided against it. "I am very glad to hear it. Perhaps we should try a different method of focusing your concentration. If you wouldn't mind, my dear, placing your hands in mine?"

"Certainly, sir," she said, offering her hands to him. He took them, resting her small palms lightly on top of his large ones.

"Now, try the same thing...clear your mind...by focusing on the warmth of my hands. Close your eyes." She did so, and he observed a slight flush come into her cheeks as he held her hands in his. After two minutes, he released her hands and instructed her to open her eyes.

"How was that?" he asked.

"Um, marginally better than the humming. It was easier to just focus on the feeling of your hands," she said.

"Good. Let's try it one more time; this time try to hold off your thoughts a bit longer," he instructed.

He held her hands for three minutes. When she closed her eyes, he could not help taking the opportunity to observe her closely. She was no longer flushed, and he could see that her eyes were motionless behind her closed lids. Good. She was more relaxed. When he released her, he said, "Well, I think that's probably enough of that exercise for the moment. I would like you to practise each night before you sleep. You may wish to place a warming charm on some object you can hold during your practice, at least for the first few times, to give yourself something tactile to focus on, as we just have done."

She nodded.

He could tell she was dissatisfied by her own performance, so he said, "Minerva, please try not to be so hard on yourself. Learning to free the mind is one of the hardest aspects of very advanced magic. Most spells require one only to focus on the intent or another very specific thought. Focusing on nothing is much more difficult. It took me two months before I could achieve a clear enough mind to progress during my Legilimency training."

She paled. She had forgotten that he was a Legilimens.

He understood immediately what was bothering her; it was a common reaction when people first learnt of his rare ability to look into the minds of others. They seemed to think that he could simply tiptoe through minds as easily as he might trespass in someone's rose garden.

"Don't worry, my dear," he reassured her. "I would never practise Legilimency on anyone without asking or without the permission of the Wizengamot. Besides, if I were to attempt to enter your mind, you would most assuredly know it. It is a very unpleasant feeling when one is unprepared or unwilling," he told her. "Not that I believe for a moment that you have anything to hide," he added.

She was startled, until he grinned at her, and she realised he was teasing. Two could play at that game, she thought.

"You might be very surprised, Professor," she said.

"Would I?"

"Indeed. Shocked, even," she said.

He realised that the game had quite suddenly wandered into dangerous territory. He needed to steer it back on course *now*.

"Well, as I'm sure you wouldn't wish to overtax the heart of an old man, we'll forgo the discussion of your wickedness for today," he said smiling congenially. "Perhaps it would be a good time to break for some tea. Would that please?"

"Yes, sir, thank you," she replied. What had she been thinking?

Professor Dumbledore charmed the water to the correct temperature and added the tea to the pot. When it had steeped, he asked, "Shall I be Mother, then?"

"Yes, please."

He poured out two cups and offered her milk, which she took, and sugar, which she did not. He added a generous dollop of milk and three teaspoons of sugar to his tea. He noticed her noticing.

"Bit of a sweet tooth," he explained.

"So I gathered," she answered, smiling wryly at him.

As they had their tea, he said casually, "It appears young Tom Riddle is quite smitten with you."

She took a sip from her cup before answering. "It would appear so."

"You don't sound especially pleased at the prospect."

"No. To tell the truth, it's rather a bore."

"A bore? To have the attention of such a popular, handsome young man?" Dumbledore asked, feigning surprise.

"He doesn't interest me," she said.

"If you don't mind my prying, may I ask why not?"

"He's . . ." She didn't quite know how to finish. Dumbledore waited, so she continued: "He makes me uncomfortable. He seems so solicitous, so gentlemanly, but it's all an act. I don't really know why he's interested in me."

"That isn't especially hard to understand," said Dumbledore. "You are . . . forgive me, my dear, but you are lovely." He quickly added, "Not that that's the only reason, of course, or even the most important one. You must know that you are an extraordinary young lady. You are obviously very intelligent and accomplished," he continued, "and you are . . ." He searched for a word that wouldn't sound inappropriate. "Intense."

"Sir?" She was blushing furiously.

"I mean only that you have a drive and a focus that probably appeal to Tom," he said. "He strikes me as driven, as well. I am not surprised that you should be the focus of

his romantic intentions," said the professor.

"I wish he would focus them on someone else," she said.

There was a long pause before Dumbledore spoke.

"Minerva, ordinarily I would not presume to interject my opinions into the personal affairs of a student, but I must admit I am glad to hear that you are not interested in Tom Riddle."

Her heart seemed to skip several beats.

"Why is that, sir?" she asked very softly.

"I have been following Tom's progress since he first came to Hogwarts, and I have noticed things that concern me. I will not enumerate them for you, but suffice it to say that I believe his intentions are not entirely benign." She looked alarmed at this, so he hastened to add, "Oh, not regarding you, specifically. But in general. I believe you are wise to stay clear of him, Minerva."

"Thank you for the advice, sir," she said.

They finished their tea, and Professor Dumbledore cleared the service to a side table.

"Now, are you ready to try again?" he asked.

She was a bit disappointed to realise that he wanted to continue with the mind-clearing exercises. She had hoped to move on to something more interesting during the last hour of their meeting.

"Yes, sir."

They repeated the exercise several more times. Minerva was slightly more successful with each attempt, and at last, Professor Dumbledore said, "I believe you are getting the knack, as they say. We have time for one more attempt before our time is finished."

She placed her hands in his and closed her eyes. This time, he kept her hands for five minutes, watching her face intently as he held them. Without intending to, he allowed his right thumb to caress the back of her hand. He saw her breath hitch in that instant and realised what he had done. He released her hands and said softly, "Open your eyes, Minerva." They looked at each other without speaking for a few seconds. He looked away first.

Keeping his voice even, he said, "Well, I think that will be enough for today. You've worked hard. I hope you are pleased with yourself."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

"I shall see you at dinner, then."

"Yes. Good afternoon, Professor Dumbledore." She hesitated for a split second, then rose and went.

Once safely out of his office, she went into the nearest girls' lavatory and splashed her hot face with cool water. She peered into the mirror, wondering what Professor Dumbledore saw when he looked at her. It suddenly occurred to her to wonder just when he had started calling her by her given name.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

Minerva sat alone in the Gryffindor girls' dormitory, grateful for the silence. She had intended to practise emptying her mind, as Professor Dumbledore had instructed, but too many thoughts and feelings were bubbling too near the surface of her consciousness to allow her to concentrate on anything, much less on nothing at all.

She kept replaying the day's lesson in her memory: specifically, the moment when Professor Dumbledore had run his thumb over her hand. She had not been able to help her reaction, and she knew the professor had noticed it. Had it happened even a week ago, her primary feeling would have been one of embarrassment; however, something had changed, and now her feelings were much less predetermined.

She had realised some time ago that she had what she told herself was a schoolgirl crush on her teacher. She had accepted it, as she was nothing if not rational, and reason told her it was not surprising, given the time and care Professor Dumbledore habitually bestowed on her, as well as his courtly behaviour and their shared interests. She knew from listening to her housemates that such attachments were far from uncommon. Until recently, it had not caused her much difficulty in her interactions with him. She had analysed it intellectually and decided that it would wane, as she knew these things normally did, or would soon be replaced with another affection for a more suitable object. In the meantime, she would just carry on as if her feelings were no different than they were for any of her other teachers. Or maybe just a little different; he was her favourite professor, after all, and he had become her mentor.

There were two new factors, however, that threatened her ability to manage this . . . situation rationally. The first was her newfound recognition of her physical attraction to him. She had been aware of her burgeoning sexuality since she was fourteen; this had first manifested itself in dreams in which things happened to her body, things she couldn't quite define but that she enjoyed, and she awoke from them feeling slightly empty, as if something she desperately wanted was just outside her reach. She had

also found herself fantasising about things she had read, and about someone doing those things...and more...to her, but never in her dreams or her fantasies had the someone taken recognisable, specific form.

It was several months after this awakening began that she had discovered that she could touch herself in ways that would assuage for a time the peculiar ache the dreams and fantasies caused in her centre. She knew quite a bit more about human biology than did most of her peers, and she was neither especially upset about the feelings she had been having nor ashamed of the way she had found to satisfy them. She knew other girls in her dormitory did the same; she could occasionally hear them moaning and sighing in a way she recognised from her own explorations. Dormitory life afforded little privacy, and she was also aware of at least two girls who had apparently found ways to satisfy themselves with one another. She was not shocked at this, but she was curious about it. Did they do this simply because it was another way to orgasm or because they harboured those kinds of feelings specifically for each other? She asked herself if she would welcome such an opportunity to expand her access to sexual gratification and decided she wouldn't. So perhaps Agnes Crouch and Regan Robards did indeed desire one another specifically.

She recognised now that she desired Albus Dumbledore...specifically. Which brought her to the second new factor: she believed that he desired her too. The caress that very afternoon, coupled with the strange, quiet thickness of his voice when he had told her to open her eyes suggested it, as had the look on his face when she opened them. His momentary inability to look her in the eye seemed to her as telling as any blush of her own. As she thought about the afternoon...about him...her hand crept down to the secret place between her legs. For the first time, she allowed herself to imagine that the fingers that stroked her flesh were his, that the digits that slipped inside her were him. She allowed herself to want him...specifically...as she touched herself, and to imagine that he wanted her the same way. She thought of the way he now said her name, her given name, and imagined him calling it out in the heat of passion. She allowed herself for the first time to call his name as she came, once more glad she was alone in her dormitory.

As her breath slowed and her heart regained its normal rhythm, she realised she didn't know whether or not his desire was specific to her or not. She had to admit it was possible he was simply attracted to her because she was a young, pretty female, although she had never heard a whisper of gossip about him, as she had about other men of her acquaintance. She didn't know if his attraction was general or because she was Minerva McGonagall, specifically.

No, she didn't know, but she meant to find out.

/***/

Albus glanced at the clock on the wall. Most of the staff, and many students, thought it was a silly affectation, his liking for the Muggle artefact, but he found clocks, watches, and timepieces of all sorts an ingenious solution to a problem and felt they had a magic all their own. Moreover, he found that the presence of familiar Muggle objects in the classroom helped put some of the Muggle-born students more at ease. There was so much that was foreign to these students in their first weeks at Hogwarts that they would instinctively seek out familiar comforts of a world Albus knew most of them were about to leave behind forever. He was a legendarily kind man, and as such was happy to provide whatever comfort he could.

In fifteen minutes, he thought, Minerva would be in his office, expecting him to teach her. Expecting him to stay in control of events that took place in that room. Expecting him to care for her, but not too much. The first two he could manage; it was the third that was proving troublesome. Placing boundaries around one's actions was one thing, erecting them around one's feelings quite another. Occlumency was no help in hiding one's thoughts and feelings from oneself, not that Albus was a man especially inclined to try. However, this was an entirely new and uncomfortable experience for him.

Albus Dumbledore was an experienced observer of people and was well-versed in teasing out the unspoken meanings behind words and actions. He didn't need Legilimency to know that Minerva harboured feelings for him just underneath the surface control she was obviously working very hard to maintain. He would not permit himself to take advantage of those feelings simply because he happened to have some very specific and inappropriate feelings of his own. He would not tell himself that she was eighteen, technically an adult, and a mature eighteen at that. He would not think about the way she blushed or the sound of her gasp when he had caressed her hand. He would not think about the way she teased and bantered with him or how they seemed to have developed a secret language of their own. He would not think of these things, he decided.

It was not too late, he reasoned; after all, the caress had only been a momentary lapse, and not a serious one. He need not apologise, or even mention it at all, he thought. He would simply not repeat it. He would teach her. And he would not touch her.

His resolve lasted until he found her crying in a corridor after the Christmas feast.

Their lesson had gone as smoothly as he could have hoped. They discussed more Animagus theory, and he introduced her to a new exercise. He did not take her hands or lay his on her in any way. And if she looked at him more intensely than she had in the past, he tried not to notice it. At the end of it, he had said, "You did well today, Miss McGonagall. I think you deserve a rest tomorrow, as it is Christmas, and perhaps on Boxing Day as well."

She noticed he had reverted to calling her "Miss McGonagall".

"We can still meet if you like, Professor; I don't mind," she said.

"Well, I for one, intend to be nursing a hangover on Boxing Day. Headmaster Dippet is always most generous with Hogwarts' private mead at the Christmas feast." He winked at her. "I will see you there tomorrow evening, I trust?"

"Yes, sir." Would he not be at meals until then?

As happened so often, he seemed to know what she was thinking. "I have some visits to pay this evening and tomorrow, so I will be away from the castle until the feast."

"Until tomorrow evening, then," she replied.

"Until tomorrow evening, my dear."

He didn't see her again until the feast. He sat several seats away from her, and she appeared to be conversing happily with the students who sat near her...even, to his slight dismay, Tom Riddle, who had occupied what Albus had come to think of as his perch next to Minerva...and had politely accepted the glass of mead the Headmaster had offered to the three seventh-years at table.

In truth, however, Minerva was melancholy. She was surprised at how much she missed being with her family at Christmas. She knew they were all there at Castle Isleif: her father, Einar, and her grandmother, enjoying smoked salmon and some of the glorious champagne her father had brought back from his last trip to France before the occupation. They would be opening gifts and Christmas crackers, and after dessert they would sing Christmas songs, and her father would read from Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, which had been a family tradition since her earliest memory of childhood.

After dessert, and after the staff had enjoyed another round of mead, Minerva excused herself from the table. She was tired of keeping up the appearance of festivity, and she was irritated that Professor Dumbledore, whom she had not seen since her lesson the previous afternoon, appeared to be ignoring her. He had kissed the cheeks of several other students...and Professor Merrythought...when wishing them a happy Christmas, but he had spared her only the barest nod of his head and a quiet, "And to you, as well," when she had wished him the joy of the season.

She had gotten out the door and down the corridor when a hand caught her arm.

"Minerva, didn't you hear me call you?" asked Tom Riddle.

"I'm sorry, Tom, I didn't," she said.

"I tried to catch you before you left the feast, but you hurried out so fast, I didn't have a chance," Tom said. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Oh, Tom. I'm just so tired. Maybe another time."

"But another time won't be Christmas," he replied, giving her his grin. "And I have a present for you, Minerva."

She was taken aback. "A gift, Tom? That's very thoughtful, I'm sure, but I'm afraid I haven't anything for you."

"That's all right. This is just something I happened to see, and it reminded me of you," he said, taking a small box from his pocket. "Happy Christmas, Minerva," he said, holding it out to her.

She took it...reluctantly...and opened the ribbon. The box then unwrapped itself, and the top opened to reveal a silver necklace with a delicately wrought pendant in the shape of a dragon, its tail curling around to meet its mouth. She looked up at him questioningly.

"It's a Norse dragon...Jormungand, I think the man said...it's very old. It reminded me of you because of its Viking origin and because you can be as strong and fierce as a dragon. And you fly like one on the Quidditch pitch." He grinned at her again. "And it's very beautiful, like you." He reached out a finger to caress her cheek.

She pulled back immediately, saying, "I can't possibly accept this, Tom. It's too much, it's too . . ." She trailed off.

"What?"

"Too personal. I'm not sure what you want from me, but I can't be with you. I can't . . . love you. I'm sorry," she said, holding the box out to him.

"You haven't given me a chance yet, Minerva," he answered, ignoring the proffered box. "I could make you happy, I know I could." He frowned. That sounded suspiciously like begging to his ears, and he hated it.

"I'm sorry," she repeated. "Please, I can't take this," she said, offering the box again. He took it this time.

"I guess everyone was right," he said, sighing. "They told me I wouldn't be able to melt your heart. You're like some beautiful statue, Minerva. So perfect, so serene. I thought I could bring you to life. I was wrong. I'm sorry," he said, sounding so sincere, so regretful. He gave her a wan smile, then turned and walked away.

Minerva stood rooted to the spot. She was angry. Angry with Tom, who had ambushed her and had surely meant to wound her with his parting words...his false ruefulness didn't fool her. And angry with herself because she did feel wounded. She knew many of her classmates found her cold. She was polite and cordial to everyone, and nobody could claim she wasn't kind, but she was not effusive with her emotions. She was quiet and thoughtful, and in truth, she found she had little in common with most of her peers. She had made some friends based on her enjoyment of and prowess at Quidditch, but having just resigned from the Gryffindor team, she was afraid even those friendships were about to wane. Even her father, before she had left for Hogwarts her first year, had advised her not to be "too hard" on her peers, but she couldn't help it if she found most of them tedious. She tried not to let it show, but pretence had never been her strong suit.

All at once, she felt terribly lonely. She normally enjoyed her solitude, but the combination of the holiday, Tom's remarks, and the fact that the one person at Hogwarts she had always been able to connect with seemed to be ignoring her suddenly came together to envelop her in a cauldron of misery. She could not prevent the tears that had been standing at the periphery of her vision from falling. She went over to a bench in the corridor, sat down, buried her face in her hands, and cried.

Five minutes later, she heard Professor Dumbledore's warm, familiar bass-baritone. "Why, Minerva! Whatever is the matter, my dear?"

She looked up to see him standing over her, his eyes full of questioning concern. He had been her teacher and Head of House for the past six years, and he had never seen her cry.

Hearing his voice and his use of her first name once again made her tears come faster and harder. He sat down next to her, and despite his earlier vow to himself, put his arms around her shoulders, letting her weep against his own. There could be no harm in comforting her, after all. It was expected, wasn't it?

He murmured, "There now, *shh* . . ." several times, his hand making small circles on her back, and as the storm gradually passed, he fished in his pocket to proffer a handkerchief for her to wipe her eyes and nose. After she had done so, he asked, "Would you like to tell me what's troubling you, Minerva?"

"I'm sorry, Professor," she said. "I'm just . . . it's just the holidays, I think. Just feeling homesick."

"I see. And Mr Riddle wouldn't have anything to do with it?"

She looked up at him, surprised.

"I saw him follow you out of the Great Hall. I simply used Ockham's razor to make a deduction," he said, smiling at her.

She managed a small smile back at him. He was speaking their almost-private language.

"He wanted to give me a present. I wouldn't take it, he said . . . some things," she told him.

"What things?"

"He implied I was cold, like a statue," she said.

"That was wrong of him."

"I'm an icicle," she continued bitterly. "At least, that's what everyone thinks. After all, I keep turning down the ever-charming Tom Riddle."

"I don't think you're an icicle," said Albus softly. She looked at him, and he back at her, with the tears drying on her cheeks. It seemed to Minerva that it took an eternity for him to move his head toward hers. She was trembling, sure he was going to kiss her, and she turned her face upward to him, her lips slightly parted. Instead, he hesitated less than an inch from her mouth, then took her head in his hands, bent it gently down, and kissed the top of her head.

"Come, I'll walk you back to Gryffindor Tower," he said, taking her hand.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is

brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

Everything was the same, and yet, everything was different. That's how it felt to Minerva, anyway. They carried on as if nothing had happened, as if no spark had been lit between them Christmas night in the corridor outside the Great Hall. They recommenced their lessons on 27 December, and there was no acknowledgement of what was growing between them. Yet each of them was keenly aware of it, and each knew that the other felt it too. It was the proverbial Thestral in the middle of the room, and they tiptoed around it, pretending to each other, if not to themselves, not to see.

Albus had promised himself he would not allow himself to be too close to her physically again, as it had become painfully obvious to him that, despite his age, despite his power, he was not fully in control of himself when she was near. He had considered calling a halt to their private lessons, but he knew how hurtful that would be to her. If their attraction to one another impeded her development as a witch, it would be grossly unfair and his fault, he reasoned. He was the adult, and it was up to him to manage the situation appropriately. Moreover, he knew any excuse he could give for discontinuing their lessons would be transparent to her and would serve only to bring the thing out into the open. If that were to happen, he believed that what little control he currently exercised over the situation would fly away. She would fight him, and he wasn't sure he could win that kind of battle with her. But above all, he could not bear to hurt her.

For her part, Minerva understood as well as he did the meaning behind the additional space that now appeared between the chairs in his office, and the fact that he rarely sat facing her anymore. She hated that he no longer felt comfortable being close to her, but she relished what it meant. She was more determined than ever to make him declare openly that he loved her (if he did), or that he wanted her (which she knew), but she didn't know how to go about it. She hadn't much experience to go on, and she was, by nature, direct. She had never had much use for coyness or slyness before, and she wasn't certain those would be the best tools to use now, but she didn't think directness was the best approach either. The stakes were too high not to have a way out, a way to claim it was all a misunderstanding. She did not want to risk losing his respect or his friendship, however strained it might be at the moment.

In the end, she settled for a hybrid approach. She would create the opportunity but leave it to him to make the conclusive move. She would have to be bold, but not too forward. Direct, but subtly so. A walking contradiction, in other words. She approached it like a chess game, trying to anticipate all possible results of each move she could make.

The day before Hogmanay, she went into Hogsmeade. It was her privilege as a seventh-year and Head Girl to come and go as she pleased, provided she let her Head of House know when and where she was going, which she dutifully did.

Which was why, if anyone who knew Minerva had seen her go into Tiptplethwaite's Fine Spirits, they would have been utterly astonished. It was not, strictly speaking, forbidden for students to go into the shop, but in practice, few did. First, it was impossible for anyone under age seventeen to get past the Age Line that had been drawn at the shop's door. Second, true to its name, the shop specialised in quality wines and spirits rather than the cheap Firewhisky and ale most students inclined to the enticements of drink could afford.

"Do you carry any Muggle spirits?" Minerva enquired of the proprietress.

Georgiana Tiptplethwaite looked the girl up and down, as if trying to decide if she should accept her custom. She was clearly a student, although the way she carried herself and looked the shopkeeper right in the eye suggested she was not up to any mischief.

After a moment, Madam Tiptplethwaite answered gruffly, "In the corner, next to the mead section."

"Thank you," replied Minerva, ignoring the woman's tone.

There was indeed a small selection of Muggle wines and stronger spirits, and although the selection of Scotch whisky was small, Minerva was able to find something suitable for her purpose. She paid the outrageous (to her very Scottish sensibilities) sum for the bottle, and tucked it into her bag. Once outside the shop, she took the precaution of Transfiguring the label to read "Cadwallader's Best Gillywater". She briefly considered changing the colour of the liquid inside to resemble Gillywater more closely but thought the better of it. She wouldn't want to affect the quality of the Scotch, and in any event, nobody was likely to see the bottle until she was ready to use it.

/***/

New Year's Eve was not typically an event of great celebration at Hogwarts. Most of the staff and students would not return until 2 January, and classes would not begin until the following day. Minerva knew that some of the staff typically went to the Three Broomsticks to ring in the new year and that the Headmaster and his deputy were not usually among them.

She spent the day in nervous anticipation, although she did nothing to alert Professor Dumbledore to her state during their afternoon lesson. After dinner in the Great Hall, she treated herself to a long soak in the prefects' bath, then settled down with a book to wait. At 11:40, she closed the book and went to her trunk. She withdrew not her usual flannel nightdress but a white batiste gown with long sleeves and a slightly scooped neckline trimmed with eyelet lace and held closed at the top with a satin ribbon. It had been a gift from her grandmother when she began her seventh year at Hogwarts. "You should have something prettier than old flannel, now you're grown," her gran had said, but Minerva almost never wore it. It was pretty, she thought, and although she had inwardly rolled her eyes at her grandmother, she was happy to have something more feminine and grown-up for this occasion.

She put on the gown and her normal cotton tartan dressing gown, then went to the vanity that the girls in her dorm shared and brushed her hair until it shone. She had taken out the green ribbon that normally held it back, and it now flowed in ebony waves over her shoulders and down to the middle of her back.

She donned her slippers and took the bottle of Scotch from its hiding place in her trunk. Transfiguring the label back to its original state, she put it in a small cotton bag with a tin of shortbread. She was half tempted to open the bottle and take a few swigs to steel her nerves, but she resisted. It wouldn't do to have Professor Dumbledore think she was a closet souse.

Just before midnight, she slipped out of the portrait-hole...ignoring the Fat Lady's raised eyebrow...and padded down the corridor toward her Head of House's quarters. When she arrived at his door, she hesitated for a minute, gathering her courage, which was threatening to desert her. She forced herself to knock on the door firmly. Nobody answered for a minute, and she was afraid she had miscalculated and that he had gone out after all, but just as she was about to give up, the door opened to reveal a surprised Professor Dumbledore, still fully dressed in purple robes.

For just a moment, she forgot what she had planned to say. He began, "Minerva, my dear! What are..."

"I've come first-footing. Of course it's bad luck for the first-foot to be a woman, but I am tall and dark-haired, and I bring offerings," she said, pulling out the bottle of Scotch.

It was the first time she had ever seen him at a loss for words. He stood with his mouth agape for a moment before recovering his wits. She was afraid he was going to scold her and send her away, but he relieved her by emitting a low laugh.

He said, "Of course. I should have remembered Hogmanay."

He stood aside and gestured her in. She did not fail to notice how his eyes darted around the corridor, making sure nobody was around to see her enter his quarters.

"You realise, of course, that this is somewhat foolhardy, Miss McGonagall," he admonished gently as she glided past him into his sitting room. "People might take the impression that..."

"I know. It's just that I couldn't bear not celebrating Hogmanay, and I couldn't think of anyone else I'd like to celebrate with," she said, looking him in the eye.

"You mean there's nobody else up at this hour."

"No, I meant exactly what I said."

There was a moment of silence. This was unexpected. And dangerous, he knew, and he realised she knew it too. There was perhaps more Slytherin in her than he had at first believed.

"Well, perhaps one toast to the new year is in order, as you've gone to the trouble of bringing provisions," he said, Summoning a pair of glasses from the cabinet at the side of the room.

"Aye, and I have more," she said, producing the tin of shortbread. "A bit of biscuit, and," she said, withdrawing a piece of shortbread, "a lump of coal are traditional." She withdrew her wand and Transfigured the shortbread into coal. She was rewarded with a smile from her professor. "If I may?" she continued, walking to the fireplace.

"Of course," he answered, amusement dancing across his features.

She tossed the coal into the fire, then turned back at him. "May your hearth never grow cold," she said, looking at him, a slightly insouciant smile on her face.

Very dangerous indeed, he thought. *She knows precisely what she's doing* He decided to play things straight.

"Shall I pour?" he asked, taking the bottle from the side table where she had laid it.

"Please."

"Glenmorangie, very nice," he remarked as he opened the bottle.

"Not as nice as what my da usually has, but it'll do," she said and immediately regretted it. Mentioning her father at this point was incredibly indelicate. "Do you like Scotch whisky?" she asked quickly to cover her blunder.

"When it's as fine as this," he said, pouring two fingers in one glass and three in the other. When he handed her the glass with the smaller amount, she raised her eyebrow.

"Afraid I can't hold my liquor?" she asked.

He simply smiled and said, "To the new year," lifting his glass.

"A guid new year to ane an' a' mony may ye see," she answered, and they both drank.

She shivered and asked, "Could we sit by the fire for a few minutes? I'm a bit cold."

"Of course, my dear," he answered, and they sat on a small sofa facing the fire.

She felt his closeness, and despite the chill she had just felt, her skin suddenly felt very warm and flushed.

They said nothing for a few minutes, just sat and drank the whisky. She felt its warmth begin to permeate her belly and course through her veins. When he finished his drink, she thought he was about to send her back to her dormitory.

It's now or never, she thought, and emboldened by the drink, she leant against him, putting her head against his shoulder.

"This is lovely," she said.

"Minerva . . ."

"Yes?" she said, lifting her head.

He knew what he needed to do. He needed to stand up, force her to stand, and gently but firmly steer her out of his quarters and back to the safety of her dormitory. He needed to remember who he was and who she was and why this was all wrong. And that was surely what he meant to do. Surely, when he took her by the shoulders, he meant to push her away, to tell her in no uncertain terms that she was a child and needed to forget about her girlish fantasies; surely, he meant to do these very responsible and correct things.

Instead, somehow, he felt himself pull her toward him and lower his mouth to meet hers. He tasted her breath, sweetened by the whisky, and felt the pliancy of her slightly parted lips. He felt his tongue move, tentatively at first, then more forcefully against them and into her mouth, and he felt her tongue answer. He felt himself press his mouth more insistently against hers, felt her arms snake around his neck, pulling him even closer. He sucked her lower lip into his mouth and ran his tongue over it, eliciting a moan from her.

He was kissing her, and it was a whole new kind of magic to her. She had been kissed before, but never by a grown man who knew what to do, nor by someone she loved and wanted. This was no exercise, as those past kisses had seemed, but something elemental and vital. She wanted to taste him forever, press him ever closer.

Suddenly, he broke the kiss. She pressed her head toward him, hungry for more of his mouth, but he held her by the upper arms.

"Minerva, stop. Minerva . . . please, stop."

She sat back a bit, looking at him questioningly.

"We cannot do this," he said.

"I thought we already were," she said, smiling at him.

"Minerva, you know what I mean."

She sighed. "I don't see what the problem is, if you want it and I want it."

"You don't see the problem?"

"No."

"The problem, my dear," he said, "is that I am your teacher. And you are eighteen."

"You were my teacher a minute ago, and I was eighteen. And you enjoyed kissing me," she said, trying to keep the note of accusation from her voice.

"Yes," he admitted. "But I shouldn't have. And I am so very sorry, Minerva."

"Why? I'm not."

"You have nothing to be sorry for. This is all my fault..."

"How, exactly, is it your fault that I threw myself at you?" she exploded, suddenly angry. "That I came here with the intention of seducing you? Please do me the courtesy of giving me proper credit, Professor. I am perfectly capable of making my own mistakes, *sir*." He was trying to deprive her of agency in this, and it made her furious as few other slights could.

He let her glare at him for a few moments. All at once, her anger seemed to evaporate. "But I don't think it was a mistake," she said softly.

"Perhaps not a mistake, exactly," he allowed. "But a one-time event. This cannot happen again, Minerva. It *will* not. I would like to remain your teacher, and I cannot do that if I become your lover. And I think, at this point, it is far more important that you learn magic from me rather than . . . the other things you seem to think I have to offer you. If you would like to continue to learn from me, I need your promise that you will put this out of your mind."

"I don't think I can," she said.

"Minerva, we cannot go back to the way things were before this happened, but we can put it behind us and move on from here. I will always cherish the kiss because you gave it freely and with the most flattering of intentions. But it will be the last. I hope you understand that," he said.

She nodded, not looking at him.

"Now I think it's time you got back to your dormitory."

They rose, and he saw her to the door.

"Goodnight, my dear." She stood in the doorway for a moment, then turned and walked down the corridor. He watched her go, then closed the door, leaning his head against it for a few seconds to catch his bearings.

As he crossed the sitting room to his bedroom, he spied the Scotch bottle sitting on the side table like a silent accusation. He entered his bedroom, stripped off his robes, and went into the bathroom.

He took the first cold shower he had had since his twenties, feeling each stinging jet of frigid water hit his body like a scourge.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

Minerva was never quite sure how she made it back to her dormitory that night, but somehow she found herself in the round room, once again surrounded by empty beds. As she sat on her own bed, she couldn't think. It seemed to her that she had been operating on two disparate planes of existence lately: one of ecstasy, the other, despair. He had kissed her, and despite his words afterwards, she was elated. Yet he had also made it clear that he did not intend to do so again, which left her feeling empty and bereft. At least he hadn't thrown her out, and he had said he intended to continue teaching her. And at no point had he claimed he didn't want her.

As she lay down, she used some of the exercises she had learnt from him to calm...if not clear...her mind. When she felt able to make use of her reason once again, she considered what she should do next. She was quite clear on the fact that he wanted her and that it might be all too easy for her to push that desire into action. But she didn't want to make him regret whatever happened between them. She was coming to understand that she loved him, but she still didn't know if he loved her or if his actions were a result of simple desire. She knew him well enough by now to guess that although he was perfectly capable of taking what he wanted from her to satisfy his carnal urges, it would ultimately make him feel guilty to do so without loving her in return. She realised that as much as she wanted him, it was more important to her that it bring him joy.

This left her with the inescapable conclusion that she must tell him how she felt and encourage him to admit whatever feelings he had for her. If it was only lust, she would leave him be and do her best not to tease him or encourage him in any way. If it was more than that . . . well, she would have to work out with him what it meant for their relationship.

Remembering her anger at him for attempting to assume full responsibility for the kiss made her think about her own selfishness. She wanted him, and she had been willing to use her body to entice him into an action he might later have regretted. She would not make that error again, even if it turned out that he loved her.

It was a long time before she slept, and she was not distressed to find when she woke that she had missed breakfast in the Great Hall; she was not quite ready to face him again. A few of the staff were missing as well, so nobody especially remarked on Professor Dumbledore's absence, and the only person who made note of the fact that neither the Transfiguration professor nor Minerva McGonagall was at breakfast was Tom Riddle.

/***/

Lunch passed uneventfully. Professor Dumbledore was his usual genial self and barely looked at Minerva, who did her best not to glance too often at him as she made feeble small talk with her tablemates. To her immense relief, Tom Riddle had chosen a seat far from her and appeared to be deep in conversation with Professor Slughorn.

When the appointed hour for their lesson came, Minerva's knock on Professor Dumbledore's office door was uncharacteristically timid.

"How are you, Minerva?" he asked when she entered.

"I'm contrite."

"You needn't be."

"It's kind of you to say that, sir, but I do owe you an apology. It was wrong of me to try to persuade you to do something that made you uncomfortable."

"Apology accepted. And I think we need say no more about it..."

"No."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I don't think it's a good idea to ignore what happened. I think we should talk about it," she said.

He said nothing for a moment. He had expected contrition on her part, possibly embarrassment...but he hadn't expected her to want to dwell on the incident. However, he reasoned, perhaps she was right. She obviously had more to say and would not be able to move past this without discussing it.

"Very well, Minerva," he said, keeping his tone neutral. "I'm willing to hear what you have to say."

"I came to your rooms last night because I wanted to find out how you felt about me. I've had the feeling over the past weeks that you were interested in me . . . as more than just a student," she said. When she saw him grip his robes with nervous hands, she hastened to add, "Not that you ever did or said anything inappropriate. It was just a feeling I got from our interactions. I may have been mistaken, or . . ." She took a breath. "Or it may have been wishful thinking." She didn't give him time to confirm or deny her suspicions. She had to say what she needed to tell him without interruption, or she would never get through it. "Either way, though, it was wrong of me to do it that way. I should have been honest enough to talk to you about my feelings before trying to . . . to entice you to act on feelings you may or may not have."

She dipped into her reserve of courage, and said, "So I'm going to be honest with you now: I love you."

He stared at her and saw that, oddly enough, she was not blushing. "Minerva, I . . . I don't know what to say . . ." He was not entirely unprepared for a declaration of love; however, he was utterly undone with surprise at the realisation that he believed her and at the joy that suffused him suddenly.

"You could start by telling me how you feel about it," she said.

When he didn't speak, she continued, "You must know that was not easy for me. I'm aware that I am jeopardising everything I've worked for...everything ~~we~~ we've worked for...in telling you. But I owe you the truth. I'd like it very much if you could be honest with me. Do you . . . care for me?" Her courage had failed her at the very end; she was unable to utter the word "love" in posing her question to him.

"Minerva, I'm flattered..." he began, annoyed at his inability to utter anything but a foolish cliché.

"That's not what I asked," she said.

"What would you have me say, then?" he shouted, and she flinched. Then more quietly, but still sharply, he said, "That I care for you? All right, yes, I care for you. You have been dear to me since the first days I knew you. That I desire you? But you already knew that, I think. Do you want to hear me say that I love you? All right, then. I love you, then."

She was aware of his magic crackling around them as if they were caught between duelling bolts of lightning, and if she hadn't understood that his anger was more at himself than at her, she might have been frightened by it.

She said very softly, "It isn't a question of what I want to hear. It's a question of the truth. Is that the truth, Albus? Do you love me?"

He looked at her almost pleadingly and said, "Merlin help me, it is. It's the truth."

She was frightened by how defeated he sounded. Despite her joy at his admission, she wondered now if this was a terrible mistake. She did not want to make him miserable.

They were quiet for a few moments, then she said, "So what do you think we ought to do?"

"*Do*?" he asked. "Nothing, Minerva. We *do nothing* about it."

"Why?" she asked, hoping she didn't sound plaintive.

"Because it would be wrong."

"Why?" She headed off his anger, saying, "I'm not trying to annoy you by being obtuse, Albus, nor am I trying to change your mind, but I really would like to know what you think is wrong about two unattached adults acting on their feelings."

He almost laughed. He should have realised that if he wanted to prevail, he would need to appeal to her reason. Marshalling his arguments, he began: "First and foremost, you are my student. It would be perceived as an abuse of power."

She said, "I understand how it might be perceived, but is it really an abuse? You would not be forcing me into anything or asking for my favours in exchange for good marks. I think I've demonstrated I'm capable of earning those without resorting to prostitution."

He ignored her jibe, saying, "Then second, Minerva, is that you are not an adult."

"The law says I am and have been for the past year," she said. "Or do you not think me mature enough to know my own mind?"

"You are too mature for your years in many ways, Minerva, but not in this, I fear."

"Aren't you confusing maturity with experience, though? I haven't been in and out of love a hundred times like some of the other girls, it's true, but I would think that an argument in favour of maturity, wouldn't you?"

"Perhaps. But if you have never been in love before, how can you be sure that love is what you feel for me?"

"Everyone who has ever loved has fallen in love for a first time, isn't that so? To say that it is not love because I have not experienced it before is a paradox, Albus," she said, the ghost of a smile lurking at her mouth.

"Indeed, but that is not what I said."

"No, but it was your implication."

Merlin's balls, she's enjoying this, he thought. "Is this a forensics tournament to you, Minerva?" he asked angrily.

She was taken aback. "No, of course not," she whispered. "I'm sorry . . ."

He sighed. "No, I'm sorry. I don't mean to be cross. But you must understand how difficult this is for me."

"I do know that," she said, chastened. "And I don't want to make you unhappy. I never want to do that," she said softly.

He saw the tears that had gathered in her eyes, and he was overcome by the urge to touch her. He fought it and lost but settled for taking her hands in his. "You don't make me unhappy, my dear. I don't think you could ever do that. It is our circumstances that disturb me."

He led her to the chairs by the fireplace and gestured for her to sit. He took the chair next to her and said, "Quite aside from any other consideration, think about what would happen if we were to act on this and were discovered."

"I know. You would lose your position," she said.

"Certainly, and rightfully so. But I am more concerned with what it would mean for you."

"I would be expelled."

"Most likely, although I would try to prevent it. However, in the event, I doubt my opinions would carry much weight in the matter," he said with a slight smile, and she was pleased to see the twinkle reappear in his eyes at last.

"I am not willing to take that risk," he said. "Are you?"

"If you are not, it hardly matters what I am willing to do."

"Are you avoiding the question, Minerva?" he asked. "That's unlike you."

"Not avoiding. I just don't know the answer."

"Fair enough."

"So we go on as before?"

"No, not as before," he said. "You were right when you said we could not ignore it. But I think, if we are careful, we can still work together without undue risk of . . . complications."

"If I promise not to throw myself at your head," she said, smiling wanly at him.

"Quite," he said, chuckling. "But if you recall, it wasn't you who kissed me. I was the party who was unable to control myself. But I shall endeavour to do so in future if you promise to help me."

"How?"

"I'm not sure," he said with a laugh. "Perhaps you could transform yourself into a hag before we meet."

"Or a banshee...that might be easier," she said, grinning. "I already have the hair . . ."

"Yes, but that would be quite noisy, wouldn't it? I doubt we would get much done," he said.

They laughed together for a minute before he turned serious again. "No, my dear, I think you had best remain as you are."

Without meaning to, he reached out to brush a strand of her hair from her face. And without meaning to, she closed her eyes and leant into his touch.

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

All the tension of the past few hours and days seemed to flow out of Minerva as she leant her head against Albus's shoulder. Her eyes were still closed when she felt him kiss the top of her head. Their chairs had moved closer together, seemingly of their own accord, and she felt his arms close around her. She could hear the pounding of his

heart and felt her own thrum along in answer. She tilted her head upward, and he kissed her forehead and each eyelid before moving his lips against hers.

They kissed softly for a few moments, with no urgency or pressure, just small, butterfly-light movements of their lips in tandem. She wound her arms around him, running one hand through his long, auburn hair as she broke the contact between their mouths to light soft, tender kisses on his cheeks just above where his beard began. She kissed his mouth again, with more pressure, as he murmured against her lips, "Minerva . . ." The feeling of her name crossing his lips as they pressed against hers sent a shiver of intense desire through her. She pressed her tongue between his lips and was met by his seeking entrance to her mouth.

When he had thoroughly explored her mouth, he moved his lips to her neck, and she tilted her head back, exposing the tantalising white column to him. He kissed and gently sucked at the skin from just under her ear down to the edge of her blouse as she ran her hands over his shoulders to his chest, trying to feel more of him through his heavy robes.

He lifted his head from her neck, and looking into her eyes, he said, "Tell me to stop."

"Don't stop. Please . . ." she whispered. "I want it . . . I want *you*."

He pulled her to him roughly then, and crushed his mouth to hers as if he were trying to frighten her away, but she only clung to him, pressing her body as close to his as she could. When he broke the kiss, they were both slightly breathless.

"We mustn't do this here," he said hoarsely and rose, pulling her to her feet with him. He led her over to a bookcase and whispered a spell. To her surprise, the bookcase swung open to reveal the sitting room she had been in just the night before. He chuckled at her astonishment and told her, "Our offices are all connected to our private quarters by magic. It's always prudent to have more than one way in or out of a room, I find."

"Very useful," she agreed, stepping into the room. He took a few steps toward the fireplace, but she pulled him back by the arm and put her own arms around his neck, nuzzling her cheek against his beard. He ran his hands down her back, letting them come to rest against her lumbar curve. He pulled her tighter against him, and she could feel what she knew to be his erection pressing against her belly. She wanted to reach down and touch it with her hands...as much out of curiosity as desire...but she wasn't quite bold enough yet.

He pulled away after a moment and went to the fireplace, which bloomed into crackling life when he pointed his wand at it. He beckoned her to come sit on the sofa by the fire, and she did.

All his resolve, all his promises to himself had fallen away. He reached for her and pressed her down against the sofa, burying his face in her neck, grazing it with lips, teeth, and tongue. She bent her head, and he felt her breath hot in his ear as she ran her tongue around the outside of it then sucked his earlobe into her lips and between her teeth. He moved his head up and found her lips again, sucking first the top then the bottom into his mouth. Her hands were grasping and kneading the backs of his shoulders, while his free hand made its way from her shoulder to her breast, making her moan with pleasure at this first intimate touch. He stroked it through the thin cotton of her blouse, running his thumb over the hardening nipple. Her breath started to come in gasps and her hands moved down his back, urging him to move more fully on top of her. She pushed her shoes off and wrapped her free leg around his. His hand travelled from her breast to her leg, moving up under the wool of her skirt over her calf to her thigh. She arched upward, trying to grind her pelvis against him, but his weight held her down. She pressed her hands against his buttocks, trying wordlessly to convey what she needed.

She almost wept when he sat up. "Please, Albus," she said, "don't make me beg . . ."

"*Shh*," he said, putting his finger to his lips. "Will you come to my bed?" he asked, almost unable to speak for the sight of her with her rumpled blouse and her skirt rucked up to her thighs, her hair wild around her face.

"I thought you'd never ask," she replied, rising from the sofa.

He kissed her gently and took her by the hand, leading her through the opposite door into his bedroom. The late afternoon light gave everything in the room a purplish hue due to the blue curtains around the large four-poster bed that dominated the room. She turned toward him and began to unbutton her blouse, but his hand stopped hers. She looked at him questioningly, again afraid he had changed his mind.

She was reassured when he said, "I'd like to do that, if you'll let me."

She dropped her hand and watched, mesmerised, while he undid the tiny buttons to her blouse. They both laughed a little at how his hands were shaking. When the buttons were undone, he leant in to kiss her neck as he pushed the blouse from her shoulders, letting it drop to the floor. He reached around, feeling at the waist of her skirt for the fastening, which he found at the back and unclasped. Before he unzipped it, he removed her wand from the pocket and sent it floating to the dresser. She heard the zipper, and her skirt fell to the floor, pooling around her feet. She stepped out of it and stood looking at him almost defiantly.

He ran his hands down her sides, enjoying the way the silk of her slip slid across his palms. Kissing and nuzzling her neck, he grasped her slip by the hem and began to lift it. She raised her arms to allow him to pull it off her. Her breasts were small, so she wore no brassiere underneath. She flushed as he stepped back and let his eyes move down her body.

"Sweet Nimue, Minerva, you are so beautiful," he said thickly as he looked at her.

"I'm glad you think so," she whispered as he stepped back to her and put his hands on her bare shoulders, kissing each one, then dropped his hands to cup her breasts.

"So beautiful," he murmured again against her chest and knelt down in front of her, running his hands down to rest on her hips as he kissed the cleft between her breasts, then moved his lips to kiss the left one on the top, just above the areola. When he moved his mouth to kiss the nipple, she moaned. She thought she might melt with pleasure as he began to lick and tease it with his tongue, finally sucking as much of her breast into his mouth as he could before moving his attentions to the other side. After kissing, licking, and suckling her breasts until she could barely stand upright, he began to trail light kisses down her abdomen, stopping just above the waistband of her knickers.

When he reached his hands up under the right leg of her knickers, she flinched.

He looked up at her, thinking she wanted him to stop, but she explained, "I'm ticklish just there."

He smiled and said, "I shall have to be more careful," as his hands found the fastenings to her suspenders. She noticed how deftly he was able to unhook them, and she tried not to think about when and with whom he had learnt the trick to it. He drew her stocking down and off her right leg, then moved to the other side. When her left stocking was off, he placed one palm on each thigh, moving his hands up under the legs of her knickers, then around to clasp and knead her buttocks for a moment. As he withdrew his hands, he allowed one to brush lightly over her sex, eliciting a gasp. He looked up at her, questioning. She cupped his face with her hands and bent to kiss his lips in answer. When she straightened up again, he hooked his fingers in the waistband of her knickers and drew them down slowly. She stepped out of them and slightly away from him, allowing him to look at her fully nude for the first time.

How had he never noticed how impossibly long her legs were? He had a fleeting image of them wrapped around him, but he pushed it away. There would be time enough for that, he thought. "You are so beautiful," he repeated, finding nothing else to say, all other useful language having fled him some minutes ago.

"Will you undress?" she asked. Now that he had seen her, she was anxious to sate her own curiosity about what lay beneath his voluminous robes.

He nodded and unhooked the clasps that fastened his robe. When it was undone, he shrugged it to the floor, followed by his under-robe. He wore moss-green wool undershorts beneath it. He kicked off his shoes and leant down to remove his socks...vividly striped, she noticed...nearly losing his balance in the process. Minerva stifled her giggle until she saw that he was grinning too, and they allowed themselves a brief laugh.

He had large, muscular shoulders and arms, and a broad chest. His belly was flat, but it didn't look hard the way those of the young men she had seen did. His chest was lined with a thick mat of hair...darker than that of his head or beard...which ran in diminishing thickness down his abdomen, disappearing below the waistband of his undershorts. She thought he was the most wondrous thing she had ever seen, and she walked up to him and placed her hands on his chest, running them up and down, enjoying the rough feel of the hair beneath her palms. She laid her cheek against it, smelling the subtle fragrance of him...something musky mixed with lemon...then turned her head to kiss his chest as she moved her hands around to float across the warm, smooth skin of his back. She moved her hands down over his buttocks and pulled him closer to her. She could feel his hard cock through his shorts against her, and she found the courage to move her hands around to stroke it, tentatively at first, then more firmly, feeling along its length with her fingers. She felt him shudder, and she wondered if it was because she was hurting him or because what she was doing felt good.

He answered her question by moaning into her ear as he kissed her neck, "Oh, Minerva. Do you feel what you do to me?"

"Show me," she whispered, not quite believing she was saying the words. She backed away to sit at the edge of the bed as he hooked his shorts up and over his erection, letting them join his robes on the floor, then stepping out of them.

Although she had seen pictures of nude men before, she had never seen an erect penis. In truth, she found the sight a bit comical, but she had enough wits left about her not to show it. She also wondered how it would ever fit inside her, but the sensible part of her guessed that that would take care of itself in time.

As he approached her, she had a moment of panic. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to do, which was a very unusual feeling for Minerva. She took a moment to regret that she hadn't actually listened more closely to the gossip of her dorm-mates; their midnight whisperings might have held a clue as to what one should do with a penis. So she took the approach she found most often to be the most useful: she was direct.

"How should I touch you?" she asked.

"However you like."

"I want to please you."

"You will . . . you do. You don't have to touch it at all, if you'd rather not," he said.

She corrected that misapprehension immediately by running two fingers gently up his shaft, as she had done when he was still fully clothed. Emboldened by his intake of breath, she grasped him gently and began to stroke her palm up and down his length. When she ran her hand over the head, she was surprised to find moisture there. She looked up at him and was reassured when she saw his eyes were closed and his head thrown back slightly. She continued her motion for a minute, then tentatively reached her hand down to run her fingers over his testicles. She was surprised at how soft the skin was. She opened her palm to cradle them gingerly...she knew she had to be very gentle here...and he rewarded her with a deep moan.

"Wait, Minerva . . . stop a minute . . ."

"I'm sorry..." she began, thinking she had hurt him.

"No, it's just that it's too good," he said. "Lie back on the bed, my love."

She thrilled to hear him call her that. She was slightly apprehensive over what was about to happen, but she was also very, very aroused and trusted him completely.

He lay down beside her and began to touch her again, running his hands over her breasts and abdomen, kissing her lips as he did so, gently sucking on each one in turn. She felt him move a hand over her sex, rubbing gently, urging her thighs apart with his other hand. She tensed slightly when she felt his fingers part her nether lips and move down to her opening. As he massaged it with the pads of his fingers, she relaxed again and felt herself opening to his touch, hoping he would slip his fingers inside her, as she had often done when she pleased herself. Instead, he moved his fingers upward and over her clitoris, gently stroking it until she began to moan softly.

After a minute, he moved his fingers back to her vagina and tentatively inserted a finger part way. This time she didn't tense at all, and he knew she was ready. He was more than ready...he was aching to be inside her...but he stopped for a moment to ask, "Shall I cast a contraceptive spell?"

"No," she answered, "it's done. I do it every month." Lest he think something of it, she added, "Ever since I've been able to conceive. Just to be safe."

"Clever girl," he said, wondering how she had learnt the spell. He might ask her sometime, but not now.

He kissed her again and moved on top of her, letting her feel the weight of him for a moment. He could feel her heart hammering in her chest and wondered if it was nerves or desire. His own was doing the same, and if he were to tell the truth, he would have to admit to a few nerves himself.

She moved her legs further apart to give him better access. Her thoughts were a heady mix of desire, joy, and fear. She knew it would hurt, but she welcomed it even as she dreaded the pain. She hoped she would be able to please him despite her inexperience, but she knew he would be patient if she were inept. He was a teacher, after all.

He used his hand to move the head of his cock to her entrance and gave her time to stop him if she wished. If he had asked, he would have found out that she loved the feeling of him hovering there, just at the brink and that she wanted nothing more in that moment than to feel him move inside her fully. He began to advance his penis slowly into her.

As he pushed into her warmth, he met with a slight resistance that answered the question he wanted to ask but hadn't. He stopped and looked into Minerva's eyes.

"Are you sure you want this?" he asked.

"Yes. Make love to me, Albus. Please."

He kissed her lips and, watching her face, began to move inside her, pushing tentatively at first, then more insistently, against her barrier. She cried out when her hymen broke. He stilled his movements and put his palm to her cheek, stroking her face while he waited for her pain to subside. After a minute, she took his palm from her face and kissed it, then placed it on her breast. He squeezed it gently and bent his head to kiss the rosy peak. He felt her muscles contract around his penis, urging him to continue.

And he did, with short, gentle thrusts, graduating to long, slow strokes once he was sure she could take it. Gods, she was so wet and tight! He wasn't sure how long he could last in her sweetness, so he concentrated on her breasts, cupping one and then the other in his palms and rolling his thumbs over her taut, sensitive nipples as he continued his rhythm.

She sighed. Oh, but it felt so good! After the initial sharp pain of his penetration ebbed, she found the sensation of his penis deep inside her at first distinctly pleasurable, and then utterly intoxicating. When he bent his lips to her breasts again, she couldn't help emitting a series of low moans. "Oh, yes, Albus . . . oh, yes!" she breathed as her neck stretched back, crushing her head to the pillow, and he began to thrust into her harder and faster. His breath started to come in short, shuddering gasps, and, despite her inexperience, she knew that he was close to coming.

She raked her nails down his back and put her hands on his buttocks, pulling him down harder on top of her as she arched her hips to meet him in wordless joy. It was enough to send him hurtling over the edge. He spilled into her, shouting her name loudly, then softer and softer..."Minerva! Ah, Minerva . . . Minerva . . . Minerva"...until it was nothing but a whisper.

Once their breathing had slowed, he looked at her face again. She smiled at him, and he asked, "Did I hurt you?"

"A little, at first," she admitted, then seeing his concern, she added, "But after that it was lovely." She sighed happily. "Really lovely."

He shifted his weight off her and lay on his side, facing her. When he slipped out of her, she felt the loss of him like a deep ache in her core. When she moved to put her head on his chest, he stopped her. "We're not finished yet," he said, eyes glinting mischievously, pushing her gently down onto her back again.

As much as he hoped she had enjoyed what they had just done (and he believed she truly had...Merlin, she was so responsive!), he knew it was unlikely that she had been able to climax during their coupling, given her virginity. He wanted very much to make her first time as pleasurable as possible.

She was breathless with anticipation when Albus put two fingers in his mouth, then moved his hand down to her sex. He slipped the fingers between her folds and began to stroke her clitoris, lightly at first, then with greater pressure, as she moaned her delight. After a minute, he slipped his index finger into her opening to gather more slick moisture and brought it back to her nub, quickening his stroke then slowing it, experimenting to see what she liked. He knew he had found the right spot and rhythm when her breathy moans became wild keening. She exploded when he brought his other hand to gently pinch a still-hard nipple.

The power of her orgasm was orders of magnitude more intense than any she had ever had when she touched herself, even during her most fevered fantasies. *Great Medea's ghost!* This was so much better than she had been led to believe by the whispers and giggles of the girls who shared her dormitory, with their silly boasting and false outrage over their boyfriends' inept fumbings. She couldn't help giggling herself when she thought about what they would say if they knew the cool, bookish Head Girl had just been well and truly ravished by their Transfiguration professor...and had loved every minute of it.

"What's so amusing?" Albus asked, drawing her into the crook of his arm.

"Nothing. I was only thinking that you just gave new meaning to the words 'fucked her brains out'."

Albus was shocked; she never used coarse language. "Whatever has happened to my sweet little Minerva McGonagall?" he asked.

"She's been Transfigured into a wanton hoor," she said, giving the words her most Scottish enunciation. "Do you mind much?"

"To the contrary," he answered, "but such dramatic magic has its risks, you know."

"I know, Albus," she said, suddenly serious. "Unlike many of my peers, I understand the meaning of the word 'discretion'."

"Minerva, I'm not worried for myself. Or rather, not only for myself. The damage to your reputation would be ruinous should anyone find out about us, especially just before you hope to secure an internship with the Auror office."

She was too happy to think of any consequences of what they had done. "Nobody will find out," she said firmly. "After all, you're the most powerful wizard in Britain, and I'm the cleverest witch at Hogwarts."

"I daresay you're the cleverest witch I am ever likely to know. And the loveliest. But you are very, very young."

"And that bothers you?"

"Shouldn't it?"

"Albus, why do you always answer a difficult question with a question?"

"Does that bother you?"

With that, she hexed him with a wandless tickling charm until he cried for mercy.

About an hour later, as she dozed contentedly in his arms, Albus watched her in awe. He marvelled at the very fact of her: of her beauty and her brilliance, and most of all, her unbelievable willingness to love him. Sighing, he carefully moved his arm from under her head and saw her eyes open. She smiled, and he kissed her luxuriantly.

"As loath as I am to leave my bed when there's a beautiful witch in it, I'm afraid I have to put in an appearance at a meeting with the Headmaster before dinner," he said, nuzzling her lips with his own. "Stay here as long as you like, but it would be wise for you to come to dinner in the Great Hall. Any alteration in your routine could raise suspicion."

He hated that they had to sneak around like criminals, but there was more at risk than his position or her reputation. He knew that as the most powerful wizard in Britain (he had to admit she was correct on that point), he was squarely in the sights of Gellert's spies. Anyone who was known to be too close to him would be too.

He rose from the bed, leant in to kiss her one more time, and strode to the bathroom, closing the door behind him. When he went to use the lavatory, he found blood on his fingers and penis. He realised it was hers and felt guilty for the first time in more than an hour. He knew that it was likely to become an all-too-familiar feeling.

Still in the bed, Minerva stretched like a contented cat. It was one of the privileges of youth that she suffered no pangs of conscience over the difficult position she had put her Transfiguration professor in. She loved him, and she knew he loved her; that was the most important thing, wasn't it?

When he emerged from the bathroom, she was sleeping again. He dressed quietly and slipped out the door without waking her.

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

When she woke, it was dark. She knew where she was the moment she opened her eyes, but the near-complete absence of light unnerved her, as she didn't know how long she had slept. The moon shining through the tower window provided enough illumination for her to make out the shadows of furniture, and she remembered her wand was on the dresser. Rather than fumble her way across a dark and unfamiliar room, she Summoned her wand and used it to light the candles in the bedside-table lamp, then the candelabra that hung in the middle of the bedroom.

She was about to cast a Tempus Charm when she noticed the antique cuckoo clock on the wall and smiled to herself; it was just like Albus to keep this funny Muggle artefact in his private quarters just as he kept one in his classroom. The clock read six twenty, which meant she only had ten minutes before she was late for dinner.

She went to the bathroom, unsure if she should use his shower or not. She would have liked to make use of the prefects' bath again...truth be told, she was slightly sore...but there wasn't time. She stood under the water just long enough to wash the dried perspiration from her body, and the sticky mixture of blood and semen from her thighs and nether regions.

A messy business, this sex thing, she thought to herself, amused.

She dried herself with a spell and dressed quickly. She had no comb or brush, so she smoothed her hair with another spell, with nearly adequate results, and hurried down to the Great Hall.

She hadn't considered what it would be like to see him again in public after their tryst, and when she spied him taking his seat at the High Table, she felt a frisson of warmth flood her core. She hoped she wouldn't blush.

Albus saw her hurry into the hall and marvelled at her poise as she strode confidently up to the table and took the seat opposite him.

"Good evening, Professor," she said.

"Good evening, Miss McGonagall," he replied.

He watched with veiled amusement as she tucked into her meal with a gusto he had not seen before. She noticed him noticing and smiled into her plate. When she saw him take a sip of water, she had to push away thoughts of what his lips had been doing only a few hours before. She took a sip of her own water to steady herself.

"Well, Miss McGonagall," said Professor Merrythought, who was sitting just to Albus's left, "I trust your extra lessons are going well? Professor Dumbledore isn't being too hard on you?"

Albus nearly choked on his venison when he heard Minerva reply, "Very well indeed, thank you, Professor. I feel I'm benefitting even more than I anticipated from Professor Dumbledore's body of knowledge and experience. I'm most grateful to him for agreeing to have me"...here she took another sip of water..."as his private pupil over the holidays."

She is a wicked, wicked girl, he thought.

Professor Merrythought nodded as though she had expected that answer. "And you, Professor Dumbledore," she said, "are you pleased with Miss McGonagall's progress so far?"

"Very much so, Professor Merrythought," he replied. "She is, as you know, an incredibly gifted student." He had to bite his lip to keep from adding something about her talent with a wand.

Careful, man, he warned himself.

"Yes," said Merrythought. Turning back to Minerva, she said, "Miss McGonagall, if it is still your intention to apply to the Auror office after your graduation, I will be delighted to arrange an interview for you and provide you with a letter of recommendation. I'm sure Professor Dumbledore will be happy to do the same." He nodded, and Professor Merrythought said, "We'll meet to discuss it once term gets started again, but we shouldn't wait too long; we don't want to interfere with your revising for your N.E.W.T.s."

"Thank you, Professor," Minerva said. "I appreciate your confidence in me. I'll look forward to speaking with you about it." Professor Merrythought nodded again and turned to speak with Professor Slughorn, who was talking with Tom Riddle about the importance of making good contacts while still at school.

Minerva heard Professor Merrythought say, "In another two years, I expect to be having the same conversation with you, Mr Riddle, as I just had with Miss McGonagall. I don't know about you, Professor Slughorn, but I feel most fortunate to have taught two of the most talented students I have ever encountered, all within the space of a few years."

"Hear, hear," answered Slughorn, lifting his glass of pumpkin juice.

/***/

After dinner, Minerva went back to the Gryffindor common room to read. After her brief exchange with Professor Merrythought at dinner, she had silently promised herself that she would not allow her love affair to distract her from her studies.

She had finished the book Professor Dumbledore...as she forced herself to think of him in this context...had given her at their last lesson, and had started on the next when she heard someone come in through the portrait hole. Her heart gave a few extra beats when she saw it was Albus, and she wondered if that would always happen from now on.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you," he said.

"Not at all," she said, closing her book. "I just finished *Tertium Organum*. Ouspensky has some interesting ideas, but I'm not sure I understand them all. I'll probably need to read it again before I can digest it."

"I had to read it several times myself before I could make sense of it," he agreed. "While the passages on the manifestation of consciousness in different beings seem most applicable to Animagus transformation, I suggest you pay more attention to what he has to say about forms of consciousness; it seems to me to be closer to the heart of what transformation really means."

"Thank you, I will."

He looked uncomfortable for a moment, then spoke. "I brought you something . . . for any discomfort you might have," he said, holding out a small tin to her.

"That's very sweet of you, Albus," she said, taking it. "I am a little sore," she confessed, colouring slightly.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I don't mind. It reminds me of us . . . of what we did," she said softly. "It was lovely."

"I thought so too." After a moment, he said, "Minerva, would you like to spend the night in my quarters? It will be the last opportunity for some time, as the other students

will be returning tomorrow. He added, "We don't have to do anything . . . we can just sleep, if you like."

Her heart leapt again in her chest. "But I don't like, Albus," she said coming toward him, her voice low and soft. "As nice as this afternoon was, it wasn't nearly enough." She put her arms around his neck.

"Is that so?" he asked, then dropped his head to kiss her neck. He stopped himself after a few moments, then said quietly, "Why don't you get anything you need for the night, then join me?"

She nodded and dropped her arms from his neck. "I'll see you in a minute, then."

He slipped out the portrait hole, and she went to her dormitory to get a toothbrush and comb. She debated taking a nightdress and dressing gown but decided against it. She did take a fresh pair of knickers and used her wand to Shrink the items so they would all fit in the pocket of her cardigan.

When he arrived back in his quarters, he heaved a sigh of relief. He hadn't been sure what she would say to his invitation; he had suspected she would be as anxious as he was to spend time together before term began again, but he hadn't been sure she would be ready for more lovemaking, and he didn't want her to feel he was pressing her. Her response had reassured him on that point, however.

Just as he lit the fire in his sitting room, he heard the knock. When he admitted her, he gestured her over to the sofa in front of the fireplace, saying, "I believe you expressed a wish to sit near the fire with me the other evening."

"I'd like that," she said, and settled down next to him.

He reached out and stroked her hair. "Would you like some hot cocoa?" he asked. "I usually have some before bed."

"No, thank you. But you go ahead."

He hesitated. "Er, perhaps not, actually. I'd have to call a house-elf, and although they don't tend to gossip..."

"Oh, I see," she interrupted. "I could just go into the other room."

"No, no, my dear. I shall just content myself with you for this evening," he said. He wasn't ready for the hiding to begin so soon, and he was damned if they'd do it in his own quarters.

After a moment, she said, "This is going to be complicated, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so. I'm not accustomed to this kind of deception," he said, "and it will only get harder when everyone returns tomorrow."

"I know," she said. Then she forced herself to add, "Albus, if you don't want to continue, I will understand."

"*Shh*, my love. I've made my decision. It's worth any inconvenience as far as I am concerned. We shall just have to be very, very careful," he said.

"Gods, Albus, but I do love you," she said, putting her arms around his shoulders. Hearing him say it like that...that he had decided she was worth the not-inconsiderable risk...suffused her with happiness and desire.

He kissed her for a moment, but as she began to press herself to him, he broke contact with her mouth. "I do think we should talk a bit before you render me incapable of speech," he said with a wry smile.

"All right," she agreed, sitting back.

"Obviously, we will not have much time alone together once term begins again," he said. "Of course, we will have our Tuesday evenings and Saturday afternoons, but I do think we should reserve those for lessons. When there's time after lessons, we could spend more personal time together. But I don't want to shortchange your education," he said.

"Nor do I."

"I am sorry I cannot court you properly, Minerva."

"Don't be. I've never had much use for flowers and dinner dates, anyway. I think I much prefer this more direct approach."

"Perhaps," he said. "But I should like to do it, just the same. Maybe it's my age..."

"Oh, don't start on that."

"Does it truly not bother you?" he enquired. He was not especially insecure about his age, nor about her obvious attraction to him, but he was curious about the workings of her mind.

"Not at all. You're hardly an old man, Albus."

"Many would say sixty-two qualifies as old."

"For some wizards, maybe. But given what we know about magical power and aging, you are barely middle-aged," she said.

"Yes, but I can't think too many witches your age dream of finding middle-aged lovers."

"I can't speak for other witches," she said, "but you are the only one I have ever dreamed of. And it wouldn't matter if you were twenty or a hundred and twenty, it would still be you I'd dream of."

"I can't tell you how that makes me feel, Minerva," he said, his voice heavy with emotion.

"Show me, then," she said, putting her hands on his chest.

They kissed hungrily for a few minutes until she said, murmuring against his lips, *Mmm*, I think I'd like to go to bed now."

He kissed her again, and she added, "If that meets with your approval, of course."

He said nothing but stood and gathered her in his arms, then carried her into the bedroom, opening the door with a wandless spell.

"Would this be part of courting me, sir?" she asked.

"No. This would be me showing you how much I want you," he said, setting her on the bed, then joining her and pushing her down before rolling on top of her.

She felt how hard he was, and it sent little pings of need through her, even before he began to stroke her breasts through her clothes. "Wait," she breathed after a moment.

He stopped what he was doing, and she gently pushed on his shoulders to indicate he should get off of her. "I think I should use the salve you gave me," she said, the colour rising in her cheeks.

"Of course, I'm sorry," he said.

"Nothing to be sorry for. I just would rather not have to get up once we get started," she told him. She rose and went into the bathroom, removed her clothes and applied some of the ointment where she was tender, waiting for a minute for it to take effect. She supposed she could have asked Albus to do the honours, but she was still slightly shy, and she didn't want to remind him too pointedly that she had been a virgin when she had gotten up that morning.

When she emerged, he had turned down the bedclothes and taken off his shoes, socks, and outer robe. She knelt on the bed beside him and began to unfasten his under-robe.

He lay back against the bed and watched her. She ran her hands over his chest and pushed the robe from his shoulders. He leant up, and she helped him take it the rest of the way off. She ran her palms over the expanse of his chest again and leant down to kiss it. She wasn't sure if men liked to have their nipples sucked, so she ran her tongue over one experimentally and felt it harden under her ministrations. He didn't object, so she continued for a minute, then moved to the other side, as he had done with her that afternoon. She straddled him and pressed herself against his bare chest, enjoying how the wiry hair teased her nipples, and kissed him deeply.

He put his arms around her and pulled her even closer, arching his pelvis up so she could feel his hardness under his shorts. Taking hold of her hips, he began to rub himself against her, encouraging her to take up the motion. The fabric of his shorts was rough against her sensitive parts, so after a minute, she moved off him so she could pull the shorts from his legs.

She straddled him again and began to rub herself against his hard cock, making him groan. His hands found her breasts and began to fondle them, palpating them with his palms and rolling the nipples between his fingers. As his penis massaged her sensitive nub, she could feel the orgasm building in her core. She wanted to feel what it would be like to come with him inside her, so she stopped her motion, and carefully lowering herself onto his erection, began moving up and down on him, slowly at first, then faster, as her breath and his began to come in gasps. He reached down between her legs, and after a few false starts, positioned his hand so that his fingers would rub against her clit as she moved against him. She came apart a minute later, crying, "Oh! Gods, Albus, oh!" The feeling of him moving inside her as her orgasm took her was the most intense physical experience she had ever had.

He watched her face as she exploded with pleasure and was fascinated by the look of wonder and surprise that crossed her features as she came back to herself and her breathing slowed. He was very close to his own release and began to thrust his hips up as she stayed still above him. As he came, he pulled her down on top of him and pressed her arse, wanting to drive deeper into her, and it sounded to her as if he was growling. He pumped into her a few more times, then relaxed back into the mattress with a gasp, rubbing his hands gently up and down her back.

They lay that way for a few minutes, just breathing together, until she whispered, "I need to get up for a minute. He kissed her, and she climbed off him and went into the bathroom. When she returned a minute later, he asked, "Are you all right?"

"More than all right. I just had to use the loo," she said, surprised that she wasn't embarrassed to tell him.

"Not sore?"

"Not a bit," she answered, settling herself in his arms. After a minute, she asked, "Is it always that amazing?"

He chuckled. "No, not always. But it helps to be desperately in love with your partner."

After a moment, she asked softly, "And are you?"

"Yes."

She had to work hard to keep the tears that came to her eyes from falling.

After a few minutes, she heard his breathing become deeper and more regular, and she knew he was asleep. She shifted, trying not to disturb him, and rolled to one side. She was not accustomed to sharing a bed with anyone, and she had trouble sleeping that night, but she would not have changed anything. It was, she thought, the most perfect day she had ever had.

She woke the next morning as the sun began to peer through the gap in the curtains. She heard Albus snoring lightly next to her and smiled. She tried to lie still without disturbing him, but eventually she needed to change her position, and he stirred. When he opened his eyes, he was greeted with the agreeable sight of Minerva's face on the pillow next to him.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning. Did you sleep all right?"

"Yes," she said, not entirely truthfully. "Thank you for letting me stay."

"Oh, Minerva, I should be thanking you. I wish it could be every night," he said, stroking her cheek.

"*Mmm*, me, too," she said, catching his hand in hers and bringing it to her lips.

They ended up making love one more time, this time with less urgency than in their first two couplings, although both were aware that their time together was growing short. When they were finished, he said, "And now, I'm afraid I must get up." Before he did so, he kissed her again and answered the question she had not spoken, saying, "I'll leave you a clean towel and flannel for the shower." Then he disappeared into the bathroom, and she heard the shower begin to run a minute later. She would have liked to join him there, but there would be time for that on another occasion, she hoped.

He emerged a few minutes later, a towel wrapped around his middle, and it was all she could do to keep from leaping from the bed and tearing it from him. He seemed to know what she was thinking, because he said, "I'm expected to be right on time for breakfast this morning; the Headmaster noticed my absence yesterday and remarked on it."

She must have looked worried, because he added, "Not a problem; I just shouldn't get into the habit, as Armando put it. I think he thought I had been drinking on New Year's Eve."

"So you had," she said, reminding him of the Scotch they had shared.

"Indeed," he said, smiling. "It would be as well for you to appear at breakfast too, Minerva," he said, not needing to spell out the reasons; he knew she was aware of their precarious position as he was.

As she rose and walked to the bathroom, he had to tear his eyes away.

After breakfast, Minerva decided to have the long bath in the prefects' bathroom she had been wanting. When she finished, she took her time combing out her hair at the vanity she normally had to share with several other girls. As she looked at her face, she considered how different her life had become in just twenty-four hours...different, and yet so much the same. In another few hours, the other students would pour in from Hogsmeade Station, full of tales from their holidays, and she realised her life would go on much as it had over the past months; only she would know what an enormous change had been wrought just under the surface of it. It seemed to her that such a

seismic shift in her being would have to find expression in her face, but as she looked in the mirror, she saw no sign to suggest that her world had suddenly exploded into paradox. It was now both far wider and narrower than it had been before, she thought. The possibilities that presented themselves seemed as endless as the fascinating twists and bends of her lover's mind...a mind she knew she could easily lose herself in exploring...and of course, there was his body and the sensations it evoked, which was still a new and equally compelling revelation to her. And yet, it seemed her existence had been honed to a single pinpoint of light that was Albus Dumbledore. She knew this was dangerous. She did not want to lose herself in him, so she would guard against it, she decided...keep something of herself for herself. He would surely want her to.

Later, she would revisit these early days of their affair, and her naïveté would nearly take her breath away. But that was years away, and now she could see only her joy at loving him and being beloved of him.

Chapter Eleven

Chapter 11 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

Albus sat in the Great Hall, not really listening as Headmaster Dippet welcomed the students back to Hogwarts for the new term. He was thinking instead of how he might find more time in his already-busy days to see Minerva. He would see her during N.E.W.T. classes...which promised to be a torturous exercise for both of them...and at their semi-weekly Animagus lessons, but he had a sneaking suspicion that these officially sanctioned meetings would not be enough for either of them.

It really was quite unnerving, he thought, how easily he had slipped over the precipice from distraction to obsession. The previous evening, when he had gone straight from Minerva to his meeting with the Headmaster, he had been unable to concentrate on the discussion at hand...how to transition Rubeus Hagrid from disgraced student to apprentice groundskeeper...thanks to the images and memories that kept leaping insistently into his mind.

Armando, who, for all his bonhomie and astute sense for the internecine politics of school governance, was not the most observant of men, had noticed his Deputy's unwonted inattentiveness.

"I say, Albus, are you quite all right?" he had asked the second time Dumbledore had not answered a question put to him.

"I beg your pardon, Armando?"

"You seem to be somewhere else today. Is all well with you? I noticed you weren't at breakfast this morning."

Dippet seemed just touch annoyed.

"I am sorry," said Albus. "I'm afraid I was up rather late last night; I ran into a bit of difficulty in reviewing an article on Elemental Transfiguration and had to reacquire myself with Gamp's theories."

"Really?" Dippet had asked, not convinced that Albus Dumbledore would have any trouble remembering anything having to do with Hieronymus Gamp, on whose work the Transfiguration master was the author of several book chapters. Too late, Albus realised that it was a stupid, transparent falsehood.

Albus had said, "What was it you asked me when I went so rudely woolgathering, Armando?" hoping to change the subject.

"Just whether you had given any thought to how we might answer the concerns of parents who believe young Hagrid to be a danger."

They had continued the discussion right up until it was time for dinner, and Albus had been careful to keep his mind on the conversation and out of his private quarters.

Now, as he looked out over the sea of newly returned students, he allowed his eyes to rest for just a moment on Minerva, who was seated safely back at the Gryffindor table, far from him, and, Albus noted with relief, even farther from Tom Riddle, who had taken his normal place surrounded by admirers at the Slytherin table. It was a useful exercise, he told himself, to regard her in public without thinking of her in a more private context. He was not entirely successful, however. As she tossed her head back to laugh...unusually...at something one of her tablemates had said, he was unable to prevent the image of her hovering over him, head thrown back in ecstasy, from crowding out everything else for a few moments.

When he returned to his quarters, he considered moving his memories of the past two days to his Pensieve. While it would not remove them entirely from his mind, they would be less available at the surface of his consciousness, and thus less likely to leap into his thoughts unbidden. But he rejected the idea, not quite ready to dispatch them just yet. Truth be told, he enjoyed the tiny frisson of pleasure mixed with guilt that arose in him whenever a memory of making love to Minerva popped into his head.

He thought also about what she had said about having no use for traditional courting. He had no doubt this was so, yet he yearned to do something that would be *normal*. Something he might do if their situation were not so impossible. They could not share meals in a public place nor take long strolls around the lake hand in hand. It would need to be something private. The germ of an idea began to form in his head. He crossed to a bookshelf and searched for a few moments before he found the book he wanted and pulled it from the shelf.

/***/

Minerva yawned. She had gotten too little sleep of late, especially the past night...not that she was complaining...and decided to head to bed earlier than usual.

When she had changed to her nightclothes and went to turn down her bed, she saw a small volume in red leather lying on her pillow. She frowned. She didn't remember leaving a book on the bed, and besides, this one looked unfamiliar to her. She read the title: *The Shapeshifter's Code of Ministry Regulations: 1735-1935*.

Ugh! She hoped it wasn't part of her next assignment for Professor Dumbledore.

She picked it up, intending to browse through it before going to sleep, and settled into her bed to read. When she opened the book, however, a curious thing happened. The title page began to empty of its print, and in its place, florid, purple-inked script began to appear. It read:

My sweet Minerva,

Please forgive the rather uninspired title on the front of this volume; I thought it best to conceal these pages in a package that would put off even the most intrepid of busybodies, for what I commit to parchment herein is intended for you and you alone, my love. This book is protected by a charm that prevents anyone but you from reading the true contents; to anyone else's eyes, it will appear to be exactly as described on the cover.

Alas, I have not the eloquence to express how I feel, except to write these words, which suddenly seem so inadequate: I love you. I hope you will forgive an old man his folly and allow me to borrow the words of the great poets to help me convey to you what is in my heart.

If you look in the pages of this book each night before you sleep, you will find another passage that has put me in mind of you, my darling.

Sleep well, and dream of me, as I will of you.

~ A

She read the note through three times, her smile broadening a little each time. She pulled the bed curtains around her, lest any of the other girls wander in, and lit her wand tip, charming it to hover just over the book so she could see. She opened the volume to the first entry:

Come, then, and mounted on the wings of Love

We'll cut the flitting air, and soar above

The monster's head, and in the noblest seats

Of those blest shades quench and renew our heats.

There shall the Queens of Love and Innocence,

Beauty and Nature, banish all offence

From our close ivy-twines; there I'll behold

Thy bared snow and thy unbraided gold;

There my enfranchised hand on every side

Shall o'er thy naked polished ivory slide.

No curtain there, though of transparent lawn,

Shall be before thy virgin-treasure drawn;

But the rich mine, to the inquiring eye

Exposed shall ready for mintage lie;

And we will coin young Cupids. There a bed

Of roses and fresh myrtles shall be spread

Under the cooler shade of cypress groves;

Our pillows of the down of Venus' doves,

Whereon our panting limbs we'll gently lay,

In the faint respites of our active play;

That so our slumbers may in dreams have leisure

To tell the nimble fancy our past pleasure,

And so our souls that cannot be embraced

Shall the embraces of our bodies taste.

Meanwhile the bubbling stream shall court the shore,

The enamoured chirping-wood-choir shall adore

In varied tunes the Deity of Love;

The gentle blasts of western winds shall move

The trembling leaves, and through their close boughs breathe

Still music, whilst we rest ourselves beneath

Their dancing shade; till a soft murmur, sent

From souls entranced in amorous languishment,

Rouse us, and shoot into our veins fresh fire,

Till we in their sweet ecstasy expire.

Thomas Carew, "A Rapture" (20-54)

The naked eroticism of the poem sent waves of longing through her. How she wanted him right at that moment! He had to have known the effect the poem would have on her, she thought. She fell asleep thinking of the ways she could show him what reading it had done to her the next time they were together.

They managed to get through class the next day without incident. If anyone noticed that Professor Dumbledore no longer came close to his star pupil to examine her work or correct an error, nobody remarked on it. Minerva managed to keep her thoughts away from dangerous waters by employing some of the mind-clearing exercises she had learnt during their Animagus lessons. It didn't matter much that she also missed much of the class discussion that way; she knew most of the material already, anyway.

They were not quite so successful at their private lesson. They had the best of intentions, they really did. But she made the mistake of mentioning his gift right off, and that was all it took. Before long, she was clawing at his robes, and he was pulling her toward his private quarters. When they were finished, rather than showering, he merely *Scourgified* both of them, in the interest of time.

"We really should get back to your lesson," he said.

"I know. I'm sorry, I just couldn't wait."

"Don't be sorry, I'm happy my little folly had the desired effect," he said.

"So you did send me that poem just to get me all hot and bothered?"

"No, although I will admit I had hoped that might be a delicious side-effect. I sent it because it came into my head when I thought of you, and I wanted you to know."

"I loved it, thank you," she said, caressing his face with her palm.

"Are you familiar with the poem?" he enquired.

"No, not at all."

"You should read the rest of it. I only included the most . . . pertinent section, but the remainder of it is quite startlingly erotic, even for a Petrarchan poet," he advised, ever the teacher.

"Only if you'll read it with me," she answered.

He smiled at her. "That, my dear Miss McGonagall, would be my pleasure." He kissed her again and said, "Now, the lesson . . ."

"Oh, all right," she said, getting out of his bed.

They did manage to do forty-five minutes of proper tutoring that day. As she was preparing to leave, he said, "In future, we really should not neglect your lessons in favour of other activities, tempting as they may be."

"I know," she said, slightly chastened.

"I've been looking at my schedule to see if there is any additional time we might spend together," he said, and her heart jumped. "I may be able to clear Thursday evenings after dinner, if you would be amenable to meeting then."

"Of course!" She would have to give up the wizard chess club, but she didn't give it a second thought.

"I thought perhaps we could then reserve your Tuesday and Saturday lessons for . . . well, lessons. And Thursdays we would spend together as . . ." he stopped, uncharacteristically shy of putting a name to things.

"Friends? Lovers?" she prompted.

"Either. Both."

"We are both, then?"

"Of course. I'm not a man who takes lovers of convenience, Minerva," he said, suddenly grave.

"I know that," she said. She, of course, did not yet know what kind of woman she was with regard to lovers, but she would find out in due course.

"Good. Now, off you go," he said, handing her the two books he had assigned for the week.

And so it was that Albus and Minerva continued her Animagus training. On Tuesdays and Saturdays, he taught her about transformation, and on Thursday evenings, he taught her about pleasure. She was an exemplary student of both disciplines.

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"Now that the snow has melted, I thought we could take today's lesson outside," Professor Dumbledore said.

"Outside?" Minerva asked.

"Yes. The day is rather warm for March, and it provides a good opportunity to move to the next phase in your training."

"Really? What is it?"

"I think we'll wait and discuss it when we get to the spot I have in mind," he said, smiling at her enthusiasm. "I think you will need a slightly warmer cloak, however," he said when she put her over-robe on. "Allow me?" he asked, brandishing his wand.

"Be my guest."

He pointed his wand at her, saying, "*Pallium Profundus*." She felt her cloak grow heavier and warmer.

He donned his own thick cloak, and they set out down the path past Groundskeeper Ogg's hut.

"Where are we going, Professor?" she asked. They had an unspoken agreement that during her lessons, even they believed if no one were around to overhear, she would address him thus.

"There is a spot just inside the Forbidden Forest that I think will suit our purposes quite nicely, Miss McGonagall," he answered.

"But . . . isn't it dangerous?"

"Not when you're with me," he reassured her.

A few minutes after entering the forest proper, they came to a small clearing.

"Ah, this was the spot I had in mind," said Albus. Minerva looked at him expectantly.

"Now, my dear, I will ask you to get down on your hands and knees," he said.

She quirked an eyebrow at him, and he said, "I realise the ground is a bit wet, but we can't *Scourgify* your robes afterwards. I need you to feel the forest floor under your hands for this exercise."

She did as he asked and waited for his next instructions.

"First, I would like you to clear your mind as you have been doing. When you have done that, I ask you simply to feel. Allow your senses to experience the forest...all your senses: sight, sound, smell, touch...even taste, if you are moved to it. I will tell you when to stop. You may begin whenever you are ready," he told her.

Minerva automatically began the exercise to clear her mind. Closing her eyes, she focused on the sound of her own respiration, eventually tuning it out. She began her sensual exploration of the forest with the palms of her hands, feeling the wetness and the cold, and the rough texture of the pine needles against her skin. She flexed her fingers, enjoying the feel of the moist soil oozing thickly between them, going up under her fingernails.

Albus watched, fascinated, as she did this for several minutes.

She was impelled inexplicably to bury her nose in the soil, feeling its grainy dampness with the sensitive organ, then drawing back slightly to inhale its loamy scent. There were other odours there too, feral and meaty, that she could not identify. She realised she was allowing her conscious brain to intrude on the sensory experience, and she quickly refocused on the odour itself without thinking about it. She allowed the layers of scent to permeate her olfactory organs, and a primitive portion of her brain recognised one of the smells as blood. It raised in her a strange yearning. Her tongue flicked out from between her lips and barely contacted the small mound of soil her grasping fingers had created. The taste was slightly sweet and metallic. She kept her tongue extended, tasting the intriguing scents that teased and tantalised on the breeze. When she finally retracted it, she could feel the grit on her lips.

She began to allow sounds to penetrate her focus: birds twittering a few yards off, their shrill voices rising and falling according to their proximity, and felt a desire to move toward the sounds. Just as she was about to sprint off, another sound, this one low and threatening, seemed to arise from beneath the ground and stopped her. She cocked her head, listening, crouching low to the ground. At last, she opened her eyes and was nearly blinded by the shocking brightness. She shut them immediately and waited a few moments before opening them again. There were colours and shapes dancing in front of her, but they were hazy, and the images overlapped. She blinked several times, then the visual disturbance was gone.

"Minerva . . ." came Professor Dumbledore's voice.

She looked up and saw him looking at her with an expression of surprise on his face. She immediately felt self-conscious. What had she done while in her reverie?

"What's the matter, Professor?" she asked nervously. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Not at all, my dear," he answered, helping her to stand. "Tell me...what happened just now, when you opened your eyes?"

"Well, at first it was painful...too bright, I think," she said. "Then my vision was distorted; I couldn't make out details, it was all colours and shapes and light. Then I blinked, I think, and it was gone. Please, can you tell me what happened?"

"Your eyes, Minerva. For a few seconds, they seemed to change," he answered, looking at her intently.

"Really? What did they look like?"

"I can't be entirely sure, as it was so brief, but they seemed to change shape slightly, and the pupils were no longer round; they were more like vertical slits."

"What do you think it means?" she asked, slightly anxious.

"I think, my dear, that you have just given the first indication of what your Animagus form might be," he said, smiling at her, which put her more at ease.

"What do you think it was?" she asked, excited now.

"Well, there are several classes of animals that have eyes like that: there are reptiles, amphibians, certain mammals . . ."

"Do you think it was a reptile?" She was taken aback. She wasn't sure why, but she didn't like the idea of being a snake or a crocodile.

"It is hard to say, Minerva. We won't know until the transformation is more complete."

"So you think I really was starting to transform?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"Yes, and it is nothing short of astonishing. I would not have expected something like this to happen until you had been training for at least a year. You really are a most extraordinary witch."

She beamed at his assessment. "Thank you for saying so, Professor."

"Now I'd like you to do the inventory of systems, please," he said.

"Of course." She closed her eyes and ran through each of her bodily systems, asking herself if anything felt at all unusual; nothing did. "Everything seems fine, Professor," she said.

"Very good. Nevertheless, I would like you to see Madam Soranus to have her run a complete diagnostic on you," he said. When Minerva started to protest, he cut her off: "No arguments."

She sighed, then asked hopefully, "Should we try it again?"

"I think that will be enough for today, my dear. Among other things, I'm not sure my aging heart could take another go."

She rolled her eyes at him saying, "But our time can't be up yet."

"No. I'll take you to the infirmary, then you can come see me in my office. I don't have any meetings this afternoon, so we will have more time to discuss your progress," he said.

She smiled to herself and said, "All right. Lead the way, Professor."

When they got to the infirmary, Professor Dumbledore said to the mediwitch, "Alfidia, I'd like you to run a general diagnostic on Miss McGonagall, if you would."

When the matron frowned, he added, "I believe she is perfectly well, but we have been working on some advanced Transfiguration spellwork that involved her participation, and I would like to reassure myself that it has had no deleterious effects."

"Very well, Professor Dumbledore," answered the matron.

"Good. I leave you in excellent hands, Miss McGonagall," he said to Minerva before leaving.

"Come along, girl," said Madam Soranus sharply.

The diagnostics took half an hour, with the matron muttering under her breath about "dangerous spells" and "professors who ought to know better" the whole time. When she finished, she said, "All right, Miss McGonagall. You seem healthy enough to me. Get along with you, now."

Minerva didn't need any urging. She was on her feet and halfway out the door almost before the matron finished speaking, tossing a "Thank you, Madam Soranus," over her shoulder as she went.

Madam Soranus stood shaking her head. "Young girls these days. Don't know their proper place, they don't. Advanced spellwork, indeed!"

Minerva found Albus sitting behind his desk leafing through a large volume on Animagi through the ages.

"Ah, Minerva. Sit down, my dear. I was just looking through this to see if I could find any other instances of precocious transformation. So far, I've only come across a young wizard in the seventeenth century who managed to sprout a full peacock's tail at the age of fifteen. Of course, the contemporaneous reports may not be entirely reliable," he said. "So, did you receive a clean bill of health from Madam Soranus?"

"Yes, a grudging one, though. She doesn't like me much," said Minerva.

"Ah, well, Alfidia is somewhat old-fashioned in her views about what proper witches should and should not study. I'm afraid she's of the opinion that young ladies of good breeding should not bother themselves with N.E.W.T.s and such."

"And am I a 'young lady of good breeding'?" Minerva asked with a wry smile.

"Impeccable breeding, I should say, if what I have heard of your father is accurate."

"He would disagree heartily with Madam Soranus about girls and their education."

"Indeed. You are proof enough of that. He educated you himself, I believe?"

"Yes. With help from my grandmother," Minerva said, not entirely anxious to discuss her family with Albus at the moment.

He noticed her discomfort and changed the subject. "What happened this afternoon was nothing short of astonishing. I hope you realise that, Minerva."

"Yes, if you say so."

"It confirms for me something I have suspected...well, more than suspected...since you first came to Hogwarts," he said, and she was slightly unnerved by his serious tone.

"And what is that?"

"That you are possessed of an incredibly powerful magic, Minerva. Some of the most powerful I have ever sensed."

His statement took her breath away. She knew she was powerful, yes...not only had she been told so by others, but she sensed it herself...but to hear Albus Dumbledore say what he had . . . it was like someone had doused her in warm water.

"Do you really think so?" she whispered.

"Yes. What you have goes beyond your obvious talent and intelligence. I doubt there is any other way you could have managed even the partial transformation you did today without the foundation of an extremely powerful magical core. You are talented at Transfiguration, of course, but you are nowhere near experienced enough to have made that happen through skill alone."

He wasn't certain how to read her face. What he saw there was not precisely happiness, nor fear, nor any other easily identifiable emotion.

"You will need to be careful with it, my dear. Such magic is a great gift, to be sure, but if directed the wrong way, it can be disastrous, not only for you, but for others. I . . . I have had some experience of this," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't wish to go into the details now, but let's just say that I hope you will take a different path to fully inhabiting your power than I did," he said. "I would be honoured if you would allow me to help you . . . to guide you."

"The honour would be mine, Professor. There's no one I would trust more."

He smiled at her. A few moments later, he said, "You must be tired, Minerva."

"A little," she confessed. "But I could be persuaded to have a cup of tea, if you'd like."

"I would like, very much. In my private quarters, perhaps?"

"Yes, that would be very nice."

They adjourned to Albus's sitting room, and he made the tea while she sat on the sofa, eyes closed.

Here you are, my sweet," said Albus, handing her a cup. "Just a bit of milk, does that suit?"

"It does, thank you."

As they sipped their tea, Minerva couldn't conceal a yawn.

"You *are* tired, my dear," said Albus. "Today was an intense experience for you."

"Yes," she said. "It was quite intense, as you put it. Everything was so . . . heightened . . . sounds, smells, textures. It was like adding another dimension to my senses." After a moment, she added, "Thank you, Albus."

"For what?"

"For making this possible for me. Without your help, I would have no chance of becoming an Animagus."

"Maybe or maybe not," he said. "In any event, it is my pleasure. I would like to see you reach your full potential."

She set her cup down and slid closer to him. "I'd like to explore a few other ways to give you pleasure . . . right now, if you're game," she said, putting her arms around his neck.

"I thought you were tired," he said, the force of his protest weakened by the appearance of a smile on his lips.

"Not so very tired, I find," she answered, kissing him on the mouth.

They sat kissing for a few minutes, then he stood suddenly, saying, "I need to close off the Floo." He pointed his wand at the fireplace, which flared suddenly and died out. "I nearly forgot," he said, his brow furrowing.

"No harm done, though," Minerva said. "I'll try to remind you when I come to you."

"I normally do it before you arrive. I just didn't expect this today."

She hesitated to ask her next question, but curiosity got the better of her. "Wouldn't it look odd if someone tried to Floo you and your fireplace was closed off?"

"Not necessarily," he answered. "Except for the Headmaster and me, most of the staff close their Floos at night, and Armando and I do it at other times we don't wish to be disturbed. Of course the Headmaster and I can each access any room in the castle in the event of an emergency, but Armando has never made use of that privilege to come to my quarters unannounced."

When he saw concern on her face, he added, "If there were an emergency, and he found my Floo closed, he would likely send a house-elf to fetch me. They can Apparate into any room in the castle if ordered to, so it would be faster than barging up here himself."

"That's good to know," said Minerva, putting her arms around him again.

"Nevertheless, I think moving to the bedroom might be wise."

When they got there, he surprised her by immediately Banishing their clothes. He usually enjoyed watching her undress or undressing her himself. "Couldn't wait . . ." he murmured, burying his face between her breasts. They stood there, kissing, nuzzling, sucking and stroking one another for a few minutes, then he said, "I think you ought to get off your feet, my dear," and she was surprised again when she was magically lifted off her feet and deposited in the middle of the bed.

"Albus! What's gotten into you?" she asked in mock outrage.

"I'm just trying to spare your energy, my darling," he said, grinning wickedly. "Now, just lie back, close your eyes, and let me do all the work~~hmm~~?"

She followed his directive and felt him kissing her neck and massaging her breasts gently. His lips soon replaced his hands, which moved down to stroke the insides of her thighs, coaxing them to fall wider apart. After kissing and suckling her nipples until they stood in hard, pebbled peaks, he traced a lazy path down her belly with his tongue, then began to suck and gently nip at her inner thighs, first one, then the other, his hands rubbing gently up and down the outsides.

When she felt him kiss the lips of her sex, her eyes snapped open, and she looked down at his auburn head, which was situated between her legs. As he pushed her knees apart and slipped his tongue between her folds, she exclaimed in surprise, "I . . . you . . . oh!" before the sensation of his tongue sliding over her clitoris robbed her of sensible speech. Her head fell back onto the pillow, and she let herself get lost in the delicious sensations his tongue and lips were producing. He licked at her nub, occasionally stopping to suck it gently between his lips, until she was gasping. When he moved his tongue lower and probed her wet opening with its tip before sliding as much of it as he could inside her, she screamed with pleasure: "Oh! Albus . . . oh, yes, yessss!" He thrust his tongue in and out several times, then quickly moved it back to lick her clit with slow, firm strokes. He could feel her legs trembling and heard her breath begin to come in ragged gasps. Thrusting two fingers into her, he pumped them in and out as he continued pleasuring her jewel with his tongue. When he felt her start to spasm, he quickly withdrew, moved up over her, and slid his hard cock into her, just in time to feel her pulse around him, crying, "Oh, gods, Albus . . . so good . . . so good!" He made only gentle thrusts with his hips, stopping to press himself against her mound as he felt her muscles contract around his erection, the pressure on her clitoris extending the length and power of her orgasm, until she was breathless and limp.

He began to move in and out of her, pulling her legs in close to his body. He kissed her mouth, and she could taste herself on his lips and tongue. She had never tasted her own juices before, and she found the vaguely sweet, musky flavour strange, but arousing. As his thrusts increased in speed and power, she looked at his face. His eyes were squeezed shut, his mouth open as he pumped into her. She had found over the past weeks that she loved watching him as he took her, loved seeing him lose all control, knowing she was the cause of it.

"Oh, gods . . . oh, Minerva . . . so beautiful, so tight . . . ah!" he cried as he emptied himself inside her. He jerked spasmodically several times until he was completely spent and let his upper body melt down until it pressed against hers. She nuzzled his ear and kissed his neck, revelling in the sensation of his penis still lodged inside her and his weight pinning her to the mattress.

After a few minutes, he lifted his head and kissed her lips several times, then rolled off her. She shifted over to rest her head on his shoulder, her hand making lazy circles

over his chest.

"Did you enjoy that, my love?" he asked after a minute.

"I'm surprised you need to ask. It was . . . well, let's just say that words fail me."

He laughed and said, "Well, that must be a first."

In truth, she was a bit embarrassed by the fact that she had never quite realised that he might want to put his mouth ~~there~~. She wondered if it was something most people did or if it was unusual. Then she decided she didn't care. He seemed to enjoy it, and Merlin knew she had. She thought about what it might be like to have his penis in her mouth; she had heard other girls in her dormitory talk about it in hushed tones, muffling squeals of disgust as one of them described something she had seen in a dirty book. The idea intrigued Minerva, though. If what he had done to her felt so incredible, did that mean he would feel equally wonderful if she did the same to him? She thought perhaps the next time they were together, she might try to find out.

Albus was utterly content in that moment. He loved a beautiful, amazing witch who, against all rational consideration, loved him, too, and what's more, seemed to want him as much as he wanted her. It had been years since he had been with a woman, and in his last real relationship, sex had been something of an afterthought. His lady friend had been willing, but only that, and it had eventually begun to feel as if he were importuning her with each embrace. He wondered if Minerva's enthusiasm was a product of her youth and if it would wane with time. He had never been with a witch so young before, he thought with a small frisson of shame.

They dozed together for an hour. When he awoke, the sun was just setting. He kissed Minerva's lips gently to wake her.

"*Mmm*," she moaned, opening her eyes to gaze at him.

"I'm afraid it's time to go, my love. Dinner is in half an hour," he told her.

"Oh. Can't we skip it? This is so lovely," she said.

"I agree, but you know we can't."

"I know," she sighed.

He got up, saying, "I'll shower quickly, then you can, and we can leave via my office. Just in case anyone saw us go in together."

She waited a few minutes after he disappeared into the bathroom, then got up and put her ear close to the door. She heard the shower running. She quietly opened the door and slipped inside.

"Minerva?" Albus called from the shower.

She opened the shower door, saying, "I thought you could use some company. Besides, it will be faster this way," and stepped inside.

"I don't know about faster," he said, as she pressed her body against his soapy one. "But the company is certainly stimulating."

"It certainly is," she agreed.

The shower took rather longer than either of them expected, and they emerged from Albus's office looking flushed, but well scrubbed, and headed off to the Great Hall for dinner as professor and model student once again.

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"Very funny, Albus."

Minerva was standing just inside the door to his private quarters on Thursday evening, hands on her hips, attempting to glare at her lover.

"Whatever do you mean, my love?" Albus asked.

"The poem. Last night."

"Oh, yes. I thought you might appreciate it. It sprang to mind as I was marking some particularly creative first-year essays. The poet put me in mind of you. Any relation, I wonder?"

"A great-great-uncle. But I suspect you knew that."

"Not at all. So you are a niece of the Pride of Dundee? How very interesting. Why have you never mentioned it, my dear?" he asked, all innocence.

"It isn't a connection we McGonagalls are especially proud of," she said.

"Why? Because he was a Muggle?"

"A Squib, actually. But, no, not because of that. Because his poetry was so dreadful."

Albus began to recite:

"The lassie is tidy in her claes,

Baith neat and clean to see;

And her body's sma and slender,

And a neat foot has she;

And aboon a' the lassies e'er I saw,

There's nane like her to me

The bonnie broon-hair'd lassie o' Bonnie Dundee.

"How can you be unmoved by such eloquence, Minerva?" he asked, grinning at her.

"Oh, I am moved, Albus. Moved to nausea."

"Perhaps we can find a way to take your mind off your ailment, then," he said, pulling her close.

"I really don't think I should reward you for your little joke at my family's expense," she said, allowing him to kiss her neck.

"Let me make it up to you."

Later, as they were lying in his bed, sated and sleepy, he brought up something that had been rolling around in his mind for days.

"What are your plans for the Easter holidays?"

"Revise for N.E.W.T.s. Why?" she asked.

"I thought...if you're amenable...we might be able to spend a day or two together away from Hogwarts."

"I would love that!" She kissed him heartily.

"I have to stay here for most of the week, of course, but each of the staff is permitted two days off during the holiday," he said. "Perhaps you could arrange to meet me."

"Where?"

"I have a small home...my family's home, actually...in Godric's Hollow."

"Won't your family be there?"

"No. Nobody lives there regularly."

She knew very little about Albus Dumbledore's family. She thought the holiday might provide the opportunity to remedy that.

"It sounds heavenly, Albus," she said.

"It isn't anyone's idea of heaven, but it would afford us some time alone, away from the complications of our situation here," he said. "I'll request my days from Armando and let you know the dates. I'll think about the best arrangement for getting there; I take it you've never been to Godric's Hollow?"

"No, never."

"A Side-Along Apparition might be best, then," he said, thinking aloud. Glancing at the Muggle clock on his wall, he said, "But now I'm afraid it's time for you to go, my sweet."

She followed his gaze to the clock "Gods! I'm going to be late for rounds!" she said. "I'm on duty tonight until midnight." She jumped up and began to collect her clothes hurriedly. "Damn. I don't even have time for a shower."

"I'm sorry, Minerva."

"Not a problem, really. I'll just *Scourgify*. That will be good enough for rounds."

She dressed quickly and performed the spell to rid herself of the most obvious signs of their lovemaking, tidied her hair, kissed him quickly, then slipped out his office door. She raced to Gryffindor Tower to begin her rounds. Fifteen minutes later, as she was patrolling the Charms corridor, she heard an unwelcome sound.

"Minerva."

It was Tom Riddle.

She tried to fix a neutral expression on her face as she turned. "Tom."

He strode over to stand next to her...a little closer than she liked...and said, "It's been ages since I've seen you. Lucky we're both on duty this evening, isn't it?"

She said nothing.

"You're not still angry with me over Christmas, are you?" he asked.

"No, Tom," she sighed. "I'm not angry."

"I'm glad. I hope we can still be friends."

She gave him a small, forced smile.

"You're still working on that secret project for Dumbledore?" he asked.

"Yes. And it's not a 'secret project'. It's just an advanced Transfiguration project he's helping me with," she said. She didn't want to discuss it with him.

At that moment, she felt something warm and wet in her knickers. A trickle of moisture began to inch down her thigh, and she realised with dismay what it was.

"It must be very advanced if it's taking so much of your time. First you quit the Quidditch team, now I hear you've given up the chess club too. Are you spending all that time on the project with Dumbledore?" Tom asked.

"It's really none of your concern," she said. The last thing she wanted was to stand there discussing Albus with Tom Riddle while her professor's semen ran down her leg.

"I'm sorry, Minerva. I didn't mean to pry," he said, and she knew his chagrin was feigned.

He continued: "I just meant that your project must be very important to you if you're spending all your free time on it. Your friends are worried about you, you know. We never see you anymore."

His "we" grated on her nerves. Her patience with his insincerity was at an end.

"If my *friends* really care about me, they will realise that it's important to me and will stop bothering me about it. Now if you'll excuse me, I really have to be getting on with my rounds," she said and stalked off. When she was out of his sight, she slipped into the girls' lavatory to clean herself up.

Riddle watched her go, smiling at how easily he had been able to put her on the defensive about Dumbledore. She was hiding something about their work, he was sure of it. He didn't yet know what it was, but when he found out...and he was confident he *would* find out...he would use it to his advantage with Minerva, and...even better...to the bastard professor's disadvantage. He would need to be very careful, though. Dumbledore didn't trust him, so the ingratiating routine with which he usually snookered his elders wouldn't work with the Deputy Headmaster. Now, thanks to that meddling son of a bitch, Minerva didn't trust him, either.

Yes, caution would have to be the watchword. That was all right, though; Tom Riddle enjoyed a challenge.

/***/

Minerva felt a little dizzy when she opened her eyes after Apparating with Albus, so she hung on to his arm for a minute while she got her bearings. They had left the school separately and met up at the cloutie well in Culloden Woods, a place each of them knew from previous visits. Albus then took her to Godric's Hollow from there via Side-Along Apparition.

She found herself in a small sitting room with a fireplace at one end and a rough-hewn table flanked by two long benches at the other. There were two wingback chairs and a faded settee in front of the fireplace. The room was neat but dusty with disuse.

"It's lovely, Albus," she said. In truth, she was a bit surprised at how humble the room was. Not that it bothered her, but she had expected something a bit grander for the family home of one of the most famous wizards of the age.

"It's not much," said Albus, "but it's comfortable enough. Come, I'll show you the rest of the cottage."

It didn't take long; there was a small but cosy kitchen equipped with an antique cooker and cool cupboard, as well as a fireplace complete with hanging cauldron. The garden that opened off the kitchen was overgrown with weeds, but it looked as if it had been quite charming at one time. The upstairs consisted of three small, unremarkable bedrooms and a bath that boasted a large tub.

"That's all there is to it. I told you, it's not much. The running water was added only about ten years ago. I don't come here often," he said.

"This is where you grew up?"

"Yes, in part. We moved to Godric's Hollow from Mould-on-the-Wold when I was ten."

"Is any of your family still in Godric's Hollow?"

"No. My brother and I are the only ones left, and we both moved away a long time ago," he answered quietly.

"I'm sorry, Albus. I didn't mean to bring up any painful memories," she said. She remembered what he had said about taking the wrong path and hoped she hadn't overstepped with her questions.

"It's quite all right, my dear. One day I'll tell you more about my family, but I'd like to save that for another time." He was not ready to discuss his troubled family history with her just yet. "I thought we'd use the largest bedroom, if that suits you."

"Fine," she said. "I'll put my things in there, then." She Banished her small carpetbag to the room, and Albus followed suit.

"I had the Hogwarts house-elves send in some supplies, if you're hungry," he said. "Or we could go into one of the nearby Muggle towns for dinner. We would be unlikely to be noticed there."

"I rather like the idea of going out together," she said. She remembered what she had told him about not needing to be wined and dined, but she had to admit that the idea of doing something as ordinary as sharing a meal in public had an appeal.

"Very well. Why don't we just freshen up, then we can be off," he said.

Fifteen minutes later, he was wearing what she thought to be passable, if outdated, Muggle clothing and had charmed his hair and beard to a length that would be less remarkable in Tewkesbury, where he had decided they would go. Like most young people she knew, Minerva generally dressed in a style similar to that of Muggles, so she didn't need to make many changes to her clothes or appearance other than to Transfigure her cloak to a simple mackintosh.

She took his arm, and they turned into the dizzying, pressing darkness. A moment later they were standing in a narrow alleyway. They stepped out into a small high street lined by half-timbered buildings. There was a light rain falling, and Albus said, "I'm afraid we'll get a little wet, my dear; I don't dare use an Impervious Charm with all the Muggles about."

"A little water never hurt anyone," Minerva replied as they hurried down the block. When they reached the corner, he directed her through the heavy oak door of one of the larger edifices. The interior of the pub was dark, but windows on the far wall opened onto a small courtyard and afforded a nice view of the river that ran just behind the pub. It was still relatively early for dinner, so they had their pick of tables and selected one near the windows.

A few minutes later, a young woman approached them, saying, "Welcome to Ye Olde Black Bear. May I get you something to drink?"

"I think I will have a Robinson's," said Albus, "And the young lady will have . . ." He looked at Minerva questioningly.

"I'll have the same," she said. It had been ages since she'd been in a Muggle restaurant, and she wasn't sure what the options were, so she followed Albus's lead and hoped for the best.

When the serving girl had gone for their drinks, Albus said, "I apologise for placing my order before yours; I wasn't sure how familiar you were with Muggle drink."

"Not very," admitted Minerva. "My father is fond of Scotch whisky, and we used to have Muggle wine at home, but it's been scarce since the war...the Muggle war, I mean."

"Indeed," said Albus. "I hope you will enjoy the ale, then."

They both selected fish for their meal: Albus the fish and chips, Minerva the Dover sole, and both dishes were quite passable. They talked about the Muggle war and Albus's hopes that the recent Russian incursions into Poland signalled the beginnings of a turnaround in Eastern Europe. Minerva told Albus about the wizarding family from Berlin that her father had taken in when the Allied bombing raids that had begun during the winter had destroyed the small wizarding centre of the German capital. Her father had written of horrors that his friends had witnessed during the past few years, she said, but he hadn't gone into any detail.

Albus looked grim. "I'm afraid we will hear of some terrible things once the war comes to an end. That is, if the wizarding world can be persuaded to pay any attention to them."

"Do you think we should take a greater hand in Muggle affairs?"

Albus was quiet for a few moments before he responded. "It is a very difficult question, Minerva. We have the power to prevent some of the atrocities committed by Muggles like those who follow Hitler, but it is difficult to know exactly what ramifications our interference will have in the long run. To be quite honest, I'm not sure that some of those atrocities are not, in fact, partly a result of wizarding influence."

"You mean Grindelwald?"

"Him, yes. And others like him. It is impossible to be certain, of course. But it would be consistent with what I know of Grindelwald's philosophy if he were to attempt to work through, or at least with, the Muggle dictator," said Albus. "And that is another very good example of why we need to be extremely cautious before attempting to interfere in Muggle affairs. It would be a great temptation to believe we should hold a kind of stewardship over them, and that leads to . . . excess."

Minerva got the impression that he was far away at the moment. She wondered if his sudden melancholy had to do with the "wrong path" he had hinted about having taken.

"I apologise, Minerva. Here I am, out with a beautiful woman, and I have become positively maudlin," he said, smiling at her once again. "Let's find a happier topic of discussion."

"How about dessert?" she said, knowing the prospect of something sweet would lighten his mood. "What on the menu would you recommend?"

They settled on an apple crumble, and as they ate, Albus regaled her with tales of first-year transfigurations gone wrong. By the time they had finished their meal, the pub had filled up. Minerva excused herself to go to the loo, and on the way back she was accosted by an obviously drunken young man in uniform as she tried to squeeze past the crowd at the bar.

"Oi, there love. 'Aven't seen you 'ere before. Let us buy you a pint," he said, his hazy gaze running up and down her form.

"No, thank you," she said, trying to shimmy past the man through the small gap between the wall and his body.

But the young man put his hand on her arm, saying, "Come on, just a pint, what's the 'arm? I'm shipping out in two days . . . might be me last chance to 'ave a drink with a pretty girl afore Jerry gets hold of me." He pulled her toward the bar with a bit more force than he probably intended.

"Sorry, but no . . . please let me pass," Minerva said as calmly as she could. If this had been a wizarding establishment, the young man would already have been sporting a crop of excruciatingly itchy boils on his arse...Minerva's favourite way of dealing with wandering hands being to give them something else to do...but she couldn't hex a Muggle.

Fortunately, Albus had noticed her predicament and came to help extract her. "Excuse me, soldier. The young lady and I were just leaving. Shall we, Minerva?" he asked, offering her his elbow.

The young man dropped Minerva's arm. "Sorry, miss. Didn't realise you was 'ere with yer dad. No offence meant, guv'nor."

Dumbledore merely smiled pleasantly at him and took Minerva's arm. They left the pub together, and as soon as they were outside, Minerva said mischievously, "Thanks for that, *Dad*." Albus didn't say anything, and she thought that perhaps she shouldn't tease him about their age difference.

"Thank you for a lovely dinner," she said to smooth things over.

"You're quite welcome, my dear. Would you fancy a walk along the river?"

"*Hmm*. I think I'd rather go back to your cottage, if you don't mind," she said. It was chilly, and she was now anxious to be alone with him.

"All right," he replied. When they got to the alleyway they had used to Apparate into town, he suddenly pulled her against him and kissed her, his mouth hot and frantic. As his tongue found hers, he moved her backwards, pressing her up against one of the damp stone walls. He surprised her further by grinding his pelvis against her, making sure she could feel him through their clothes. She wondered for a moment if he was going to take her right there in the alley, and the notion sent a burst of heat through her body, but then he slipped his arm around her waist and tightened his grip, and she felt him begin to turn them. The abrupt *whoosh* and pressure of Apparition was less nauseating when his tongue was in her mouth.

Funny, they didn't mention that in Apparition lessons, she thought smugly as they suddenly stood kissing in his sitting room.

His hands found her breasts at the same moment hers settled on his arse, and she pulled him closer, squeezing his buttocks as his fingers fumbled at the buttons to her blouse. She shivered, but whether it was from his touch or from cold, she didn't know, and he moved his hands away from her body long enough to gesture at the fireplace, raising a crackling fire. He continued his attempts on her blouse, and she moved one hand around to rub him through the heavy wool of his trousers. His hands paused for a moment when his breath hitched as she stroked him.

She felt powerful at that moment, and she craved more of the exquisite feeling of making him moan, the sound vibrating against her torso as she pressed against him. Pulling slightly back, she looked down at where his erection was clearly straining against the cloth of his trousers. She moved her other hand to join the first at the buttons to his fly and carefully undid them. She slipped one hand under the waistband of his shorts to stroke him as his hands sought the fastening to her skirt. Before he could unhook it, she stepped away again and looked at his face. He looked back at her questioningly as she pushed his trousers off his hips then sent his shorts to the floor after them. She dropped to her knees, took out her wand, and Banished his shoes, socks, and pants to a corner of the room, then put her wand down out of harm's way. She ran her hands up his legs slowly, admiring the firm muscles under the wiry hair, then moved her hands to grasp his hips. When she leant forward to kiss his belly just below his navel, his erect penis brushed against her cheek, and she heard his sharp intake of breath, encouraging her in what she wanted to do.

Grasping him gently with one hand, she brought her lips down to kiss his penis. She let her tongue glide softly over the head, tasting him for the first time. She wasn't quite sure what was expected, so she followed her instincts and licked him from crown to base and back. Taking the head of his cock between her lips, she moved them halfway down his shaft, running her tongue against the underside of it as she came back up. As she moved her tongue over the head, she glanced up at him and saw him looking down at what she was doing. She suddenly felt herself get very wet as she watched him watching her, and she closed her lips around him again, sliding down, taking all of him in her mouth this time. She felt him at the back of her throat and was pleased with herself when she didn't gag on his length. She began to move her mouth slowly up and down him, experimenting with using her tongue in different ways, and when she moved a hand to gently cradle and stroke his testicles, he began to moan.

"Oh, Minerva," he groaned as his hands came down to tangle in her hair, and he tried not to pull it or to thrust into her mouth, but it felt so good, what she was doing! "Gods, Minerva, you're sucking my cock . . . it's so good . . . in your mouth . . . ah!" he cried as she moved up and down on his erection. He could feel his orgasm building, and he wanted to tell her, didn't want to come in her mouth without some warning in case she didn't want it, so he managed to sputter, "So close . . . Minerva . . . going to

come . . . you . . ." but she didn't stop licking and sucking, and then he was coming explosively...he could feel his penis hit the back of her throat and she was swallowing, her movements putting such exquisite pressure on the head of his spasming cock, and he had no words for how it felt.

His ejaculate tasted bitter on the back of her tongue as she swallowed, then, as he pulled back and out of her mouth, she thought it tasted a bit of walnut shells as well. Not unpleasant, she thought. She wondered for a moment if all men tasted the same. He was still trembling a little, and his hands were still in her hair as she looked up at his face. His eyes were closed now, and he appeared to be trying to steady his breath. She knew he had enjoyed what she had just done, and she was a little surprised to realise how much she had too. Being on her knees was slightly awkward, and her jaw had gotten a bit tired, but she loved the feeling of power it had given her. She had felt that when they made love, of course, but it was different because she was not entirely in control then, even when she was on top of him; she was always too lost in the sensation of him moving inside her. When he was in her mouth, she had felt his orgasm very clearly in the way his penis had pulsed and throbbed just before he came. Now that she had experienced it, maybe next time she could stop just before, let him cool down, then work him back up to orgasm again, as he had sometimes done with her. That might be a lot of fun for both of them, she thought, smiling to herself.

His eyes opened, and he looked down at her. Her eyes were wide, looking up at him, and her face was flushed. He reached down and caressed her cheek, then helped her to her feet and pulled her into a tight embrace. A second later, and they were upstairs in the bedroom. He lit the fireplace wandlessly and turned down the bedclothes. She smiled as he removed his shirt, and she made quick work of her own clothes, then slid into bed beside him.

"Was that all right?" she asked, although she knew full well that it had been.

"It was wonderful. Thank you," he said, kissing the crown of her head.

"Good. I wasn't sure quite what you'd like. I've never . . . you know . . ."

"You were perfect. How was it for you, though?"

"Very nice. I liked hearing you get so excited."

"I was afraid you'd be offended at my vulgarity. I didn't intend to use quite those words," he said a little sheepishly.

"Not at all. I loved it, hearing you say those things."

"I tried to let you know when I was about to come," he said. "I didn't know if you would have preferred not to have me do it in your mouth."

"I knew. I wanted to taste you."

Her words and her bluntness were beginning to excite him again. He rolled towards her and kissed her deeply as he moved one hand down to her sex.

She opened her legs a bit and sighed as his fingers found her clitoris and began to rub it gently, while his other hand floated up to her breast and began to toy with the nipple. When she began to moan, he moved down her body and replaced his fingers with his tongue, transforming her moans into wild cries. He had thought he was spent after the powerful orgasm she'd brought him to, but her excitement made him hard again, and he found himself sliding into her warmth as she cried out her climax, and he rode the waves of pleasure along with her. He took his time, moving slowly in and out of her, stopping occasionally to stroke her clit with his fingers, until she was once again trembling on the brink. Then he sped up, pumping into her hard and fast, feeling his own climax build alongside hers. They came almost simultaneously, both panting and perspiring lightly, but neither crying out this time.

He actually fell asleep on top of her shortly afterwards, and she finally had to wake him to ask him to move off of her. He was asleep again within minutes, and she smiled to hear him begin to snore shallowly, because she knew that for once, neither of them would have to jump up and rush off, but that they would sleep all night next to one another for only the second time. She finally drifted off to sleep thinking about the ways she could wake him in the morning.

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

The next day they woke early but stayed in bed late.

After a breakfast of tea, toast, and kippers, they Apparated to just outside of town and had a walk in the crisp late-morning air. When they got back, they talked about the next steps in Minerva's Animagus training but didn't do any practical exercises. Minerva wanted to get some revising done, so she and Albus sat at the table in the sitting room, she with her textbooks and notes, he with several journals he had been wanting to catch up on.

After more than three hours, Minerva threw down her quill in exasperation. "How could I have been so stupid as to undertake ~~a~~*ine* bloody N.E.W.T.s?"

When Albus just grinned at her, she added, "And why didn't you stop me? You're my Head of House; my sanity ~~is~~*our* responsibility!"

"As I recall, I told you that I only did eight and that you might find yourself overtaxed with nine. You assured me in no uncertain terms that I was mistaken," he said, still smiling infuriatingly at her.

"Well, I wouldn't *be* overtaxed if certain professors could be a little clearer in their lectures."

"And who is the unfortunate subject of your wrath today? I certainly hope it isn't me," Albus said.

"No. You at least manage to be comprehensible most of the time. It's Slughorn. He's got me completely confused on the differences between brewing methods for healing potions and palliatives; it's not just strength, clearly there's magical intent involved, but he hasn't said at what point intent becomes the decisive element."

"Perhaps you just didn't take clear enough notes," Albus said, goading her.

She fixed him with a withering stare, and he closed his journal, saying, "Come. Show me where you're having trouble. I may not be a Potions master, but I did manage an 'Outstanding' on my Potions N.E.W.T."

They spent the next forty-five minutes going over her notes until she felt better about her grasp of the difficult topic. "Thank you, Albus," she said as she closed her textbook. "That was actually helpful."

"I'm not sure how I feel about the qualifier, but I'm glad to be of service. Now how about a spot of lunch? Talking about desiccated Glumbumble apocrine glands makes me curiously hungry."

As they ate, Minerva asked Albus about his N.E.W.T.s. "Which subjects did you do?"

"Transfiguration, Charms, Defence, Potions, History of Magic, Herbology, Ancient Runes, and Arithmancy."

"Not Astronomy?"

"No. I was never any good at stargazing," he said. "Navel-gazing, perhaps."

She smiled at his jest and asked, "And did you pass all of them? If it's not too personal a question."

"I did."

"Let me guess: you achieved 'Outstandings' in every subject."

"No. I'm afraid I only managed an 'Exceeds Expectations' in Arithmancy."

"*Hmpf*. I'll be happy if I just manage to pass Transfiguration and Charms."

He chuckled a little at that, and she asked, "What's so funny?"

"I have wee confession."

She raised an eyebrow, and he continued: "Professor Merrythought and I have placed a small wager on the outcome of your N.E.W.T.s."

She almost choked on her Butterbeer. "*You what?*"

"We placed a wager. We've been doing it for years, in fact. We select the most talented student in the year and bet on how many 'Outstandings' he or she will achieve. It's somewhat analogous to Muggle thoroughbred horseracing, which was a hobby, apparently, of Galatea's mother's," he told her. "She was a Muggle," he added.

"That is completely and utterly barmy. Not to mention totally inappropriate."

"Yes, that's what makes it so pleasurable," he said happily.

She looked at him, speechless for a moment, then asked: "So?"

"So . . . what?"

"So, how many 'Outstandings' did you wager I'd get?"

"Well, Galatea...this is just between us, you understand . . ."

"Yes, yes, of course," she said. "So tell me."

"Professor Merrythought guessed seven 'Outstandings' and two 'Exceeds Expectations'."

"And you, Albus?"

"I placed my Galleons on nine 'Outstandings,' of course," he said.

"I think I'm going to be ill," she said, although she was smiling.

"Try not to think about it."

"Why on earth did you tell me?"

"I thought it might inspire you," he said. "You seem to have the right competitive spirit, after all . . ."

"You are, in fact, quite mad," she said, shaking her head.

"Yes, I am," he agreed. "But you love me anyway, don't you, my sweet?"

"Yes," she said, sighing, "I suppose I do." She leant across the table to kiss him lightly on the lips. "Just don't up and leave me when I lose you your Galleons, though."

"You have my word of honour as a gentleman and a madman," he said, raising his right hand in oath.

After a few moments, she asked, "Which subjects did Professor Merrythought think I'd muff up?"

"An 'Exceeds Expectations' hardly constitutes 'muffing up', as you so charmingly put it. And I don't think I should tell you; I wouldn't want you to lose your confidence needlessly."

She took out her wand and brandished it at him. "Tell me, or I'll hex you, Albus Dumbledore, in a very uncomfortable spot."

"That would be contrary to your own interests, I believe."

The next moment found him covered in bright-yellow feathers and sporting a large beak where his mouth had been.

After a minute, she changed him back, and he said amiably, "Well, I suppose you can rule out Transfiguration. You're clearly an outstanding student there."

"I suppose I'd better get back to revising. I wouldn't want to be the cause of your landing in debtors' prison."

"As much as I appreciate your concern for my fiscal well-being, I think you've done enough revising for one day. And in all seriousness, my dear, I don't think you need worry about your N.E.W.T.s. too much. You will acquit yourself well, I have no doubt, and it doesn't matter much if you don't garner top marks in every subject, my little wagger notwithstanding. Given your current ambitions, the only ones that really pertain are Transfiguration, Defence, and Charms, and I daresay you'll achieve your 'Outstanding' in all three even if you never look at another note."

He was afraid he had made her nervous and wanted to reassure her now. "You are, without question, the most brilliant student it has ever been my good fortune to teach," he said.

"I do love you, Albus," she said after a moment. "Barmy or not."

"And I love you."

She got up, walked around the table to him, and sat down on his lap, putting her arms around his neck. She kissed him several times and whispered, "Take me to bed."

"In the middle of the afternoon?" he asked in mock surprise.

"*Mmm, hmm,*" she said, kissing him again.

"Well, if you insist . . ."

/***/

When Minerva opened her eyes and saw the tall figure standing in the doorway, she had to blink to convince herself it was real. She made no sound but began to push on Albus's shoulders with her feet, struggling to sit up. Albus lifted his head from between her legs and looked up at her, seeing the shock on her face. He was about to ask her what the matter was when he heard a snort from behind him.

He whipped around and saw the man standing in the doorway shake his head, then disappear down the hallway.

"Albus . . . ?" Minerva whispered, her eyes wide and her face the colour of new parchment.

"*Shh.* It's all right, my love," he said. "It's my brother."

"Your..."

"Just wait here, I'll be back in a minute," he said, rising and putting on his over-robe, not bothering with an under-robe or undergarments. When he had gone, she got up, gathered her clothes, and dressed quickly. She ran a comb through her hair, then Scourgified both herself and the bedclothes before making the bed without magic to give her trembling hands something to do.

When Albus got downstairs, the other man was in the small kitchen putting away some supplies he had bought on the way to the cottage.

"Aberforth..."

"She one of your students?" Aberforth Dumbledore asked without turning to face Albus.

"I don't think that's any of your concern," said Albus.

"Maybe it is, maybe it isn't," said Aberforth, turning to his brother. "But this house is half mine. If you're doing something illegal here, I'd say that's my concern. So, is she?"

When Albus didn't answer, Aberforth shook his head again. "How old is she?" he asked.

"Aberforth..."

"How old?"

"Eighteen," Albus said quietly.

"Well, at least she's legal...I'll give you that, genius. Pretty, too. Did you wait, or you been having her since she first grew a set of tits?"

"Christ, Aberforth . . ."

"Oh, sorry. Forgot a fine gentleman like you doesn't talk about things like that. Herr Professor can bring his doxy to my house and fuck her in my bed, but it's uncouth for me to mention her tits. Which looked very nice, by the way."

"I'm warning you, Aberforth, stop," said Albus, pulling his wand from his robe pocket.

"You going to hex me, Albus? Mebbe curse me? Go on, do it, then," challenged the younger man, standing his ground.

The brothers stood glaring at one another, then Albus slowly lowered his wand and his eyes.

"What in Merlin's name were you thinking?" asked Aberforth.

"I don't know . . . I don't know . . ." Albus muttered, almost to himself.

"What's happened to that great brain of yours? Or has it finally taken second place to a less grand portion of your anatomy? Did you ever once stop to think of what would happen to *her* if you got caught? By someone other than your black-sheep brother, I mean."

"I know," replied Albus softly.

"Then you're a bastard," said Aberforth. "It's all very well for you; sure, you might lose your position at the school, but a great and famous man like you won't have any trouble finding another job, I warrant. After the initial slap on the wrist, it'll be all winks and pats on the back for you. Meanwhile, she's tossed out of school with no prospects and a reputation says she's a whore."

"Don't ever call her that."

"You won't need me to do it. That's what the papers and everyone else will say, and you know it."

"I never intended to harm her," said Albus.

"You never do, Albus. But somehow, all the people around you manage to get hurt anyway. Your exalted intentions notwithstanding."

"I will not have this conversation with you," Albus said, turning to go.

"No, it isn't very pleasant to find out you're just a man like everyone else. And not a very nice one, at that," Aberforth said after him.

Albus paused for a moment, his back to his brother, then walked out.

When he got back upstairs, Minerva asked, "What happened?"

"The same thing that always happens whenever Aberforth and I meet," said Albus, rubbing his forehead. "We argued."

"Was he terribly angry?"

"Yes," he said. "With me, not with you."

"I'm so sorry, Albus."

"No, there's no reason for you to be sorry. This was my idea. It never occurred to me that anyone would show up here. The place is warded against everyone except Aberforth and me. It was just rotten luck that he chose today to make one of his rare visits. I am the one who is sorry, Minerva. I should have checked with him before making plans."

There was a sharp knock at the bedroom door.

"Yes?" called Albus.

"Just wanted to get a few things," came Aberforth's voice through the door. "Didn't want to barge in again. Just let me know when I can get in there."

Albus glanced around and said, "It's all right. Come in."

When the door opened, Minerva rose from where she had been seated on the edge of the bed. Aberforth entered and gave Minerva a terse nod before crossing to the old wardrobe, opening it, and rifling through a box of papers sitting on a shelf. He located what he was apparently looking for, pulling a sheaf of parchment from the box with a puff of dust.

"Garden needs de-gnoming. Bathilda owled me they're coming over the fence. Asked me to see to it. Forgot the spells," he said, holding up the papers. "Guess I could have had you do it," he muttered. "I'll just take care of it and leave the rest for another time. Leave you two be."

"You don't need to go," said Albus. "We can leave."

"No need," Aberforth said and stalked out.

Albus turned to Minerva, whose cheeks were mottled with pink. "Abe can be a bit brusque," he said. "It means nothing. It's just his way."

"I can't imagine this was a very pleasant surprise for him, though."

"No. Why don't you go have a wash-up and I'll smooth things over with him if I can. Then we can decide what to do about dinner, all right?"

She nodded and went to get her things for the bath.

Albus found Aberforth in the sitting room making some notes on a bit of dirty parchment. "I'm sorry," he said as he approached his younger brother. "About using the house without telling you and about pulling my wand earlier."

"I'm just going to do the gnomes," Aberforth said, ignoring the apology, "so they don't bother Bathilda anymore. You can do the rest. Or not. I'm making a list."

Albus nodded. "I'll take care of anything else."

"Your girl looked embarrassed," said Aberforth. "Sorry about that."

"It's an embarrassing situation. Look, it's getting late in the day. We can go back to Hogwarts, there's no need for you to leave."

"I may not be as great at Apparition as you, but I think I can manage to get back to Manchester without Splinching."

"I simply meant that you might be tired," said Albus, ignoring the jibe. "In any event, we were going to have some dinner shortly, if you'd like to join us."

"Always the gentleman, aren't you Albus?" sneered Aberforth. "Somehow, I don't think your girl would appreciate your inviting me."

"Not if you're going to be so surly," said Albus irritably. "I had hoped we might be able to be civilised," he added.

"You know me better than that," said Aberforth smiling unpleasantly. After a few moments, he said, "I'll be in the garden."

When Minerva had finished in the bathroom, she returned to the bedroom to dry and comb her hair while Albus went to use the bath. When she had dressed and felt presentable, she took a few deep breaths and went downstairs.

Aberforth was still in the garden, so she took up her notebook and sat down at the table to revise. A few minutes later, Aberforth came back in. Minerva stood, saying, "Mr Dumbledore?" She approached him and held out her hand. "I'm Minerva McGonagall."

Aberforth took it cautiously and said, "Aberforth Dumbledore." He gave her hand a rough shake, then dropped it as if it were hot.

She summoned her courage and said, "I'm sorry about earlier. It must have been an unpleasant surprise."

He couldn't look at her. "S'all right. Not your fault."

"I'm also sorry if it caused an argument between you and Albus."

"Gah! That's nothing new. Albus and I don't see eye to eye on much, any road," he said.

"That's a shame." She didn't know what else to say, and she was beginning to regret coming down.

He surprised her by asking, "How long you been with him?"

"Um . . . well, we've known each other for several years, but we've only been seeing one another . . . socially"... she could think of no other word..."for a few months."

She saw a crooked smile cross his lips, and he said, "You're still in school."

She felt the heat rise to her face. This conversation was a mistake. "Yes. Until June."

"You're in love with him?" Aberforth asked, shocking her further.

"I . . . that's quite a personal question, Mr Dumbledore," she said, trying to recover some of her dignity.

"Right. You don't need to tell me. But I've got a bit of advice for you, anyway." He looked her directly in the face for the first time since they'd met. "Watch yourself, girl. Don't get in too deep with my brother."

She began to get angry. "I hardly think..."

"You may think he loves you . . . he may tell you he does...hell, he probably has himself convinced he does...but he'll hurt you in the end. He'll use you for a time, then when it suits him, he'll drop you like so much ballast. He'll tell you it's all for the best, and he'll make you believe it. He cares about his grand philosophies but not about people."

She was stunned by the man's malice. It was her first encounter with such viciousness, and she had no response yet. Finally, she managed a weak defence of her lover: "That's not true. He isn't like that."

"I've known him a lot longer than you, missy. I know him better than he knows himself. I'm just trying to save you some grief, but don't listen to me. You'll find out."

Decades later, she would realise that Aberforth had meant exactly what he had said: he was trying to help her in his gruff, unpleasant way. She would eventually come to appreciate his unschooled directness, but at the moment, she could only stand there and loathe this man who looked so much like Albus while exuding so much anger and resentment.

"Thank you for your concern," she said, ice in her tone. "But I think I can take care of myself."

"No doubt, Miss Minerva McGonagall, no doubt," Aberforth replied, the unpleasant smile curling his lips. "I'll just take my leave, then. Tell Albus I left the list on the table." He Summoned his heavy wool coat and cap, tipping the latter at her as he went out the door.

She stood, shaking with anger, not knowing what to do. Albus had hinted that his relationship with his brother was not good, but she had not expected the man to speak as he had, and especially not about her relationship with Albus.

When Albus came downstairs, he found Minerva on the settee, gazing into the fire she had conjured.

"Where's Aberforth?" he asked, coming up behind her and putting a hand on her shoulder.

"Gone."

He came around to sit next to her. "Are you all right, my love?"

"Yes, I'm fine, Albus," she answered, putting a hand over his.

"Did you two speak?" Albus asked with only a hint of anxiety in his voice.

"Yes, briefly. I introduced myself; I thought I should. I'm sorry if that was wrong."

"Not at all, my dear. It must have been a bit awkward, though, under the circumstances."

"Awkward, yes. Anyway, he left. He said to tell you there's a list on the table."

"Minerva, did he say anything to upset you?"

"Not really, no. He was just . . . brusque, as you said," she said, and he recognised she was lying, but he decided not to press the matter.

"Are you hungry, my sweet? We could go out again, or we could just make use of what's here," he said.

"Let's stay here, then, if that's all right with you," she said, nuzzling him.

"Certainly." He paused, then lifted her chin so she was looking at his face. "I love you, Minerva."

"I know. I love you too, Albus," she answered, kissing him gently. "I do love you so."

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter 15 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

The next weeks were so busy that Minerva barely had time to think about what had happened over the Easter break or about what Albus's brother had said to her.

In addition to classes and her Head Girl duties, there was revising for her N.E.W.T.s...she was more determined than ever to achieve "Outstandings" in all nine topics and ensure Albus would win his bet...tutoring three fifth-year Gryffindors in Transfiguration in preparation for their O.W.L.s, writing letters of enquiry to the Ministry in hopes of

securing an internship, researching possible apprenticeships and contacting independent Transfiguration masters and mistresses about same, preparing for the upcoming school duelling championship, and, of course, her ongoing Animagus lessons with Albus.

The way Minerva finally figured out what her eventual Animagus form would be was quite funny.

Her lessons with Albus had been going well, and she had managed to transform her eyes again several times, holding the change for several seconds. Neither she nor Albus could be certain exactly what kind of eyes they were, though. It was not until she managed several small patches of fur distributed over seemingly random sites on her body that they were able to determine at last that she would be a mammal. She was relieved at this. It was silly, she knew, to hold a bias against reptiles and amphibians...the other candidate groups, based on her transformed eye structure...but mammals tended to be bigger, and to her way of thinking, more attractive. Not that it really mattered, of course, but still . . .

For his part, Albus was astounded. He never would have expected even Minerva to progress so far toward actual transformation in the short time they had been working together. He had spent more than a year in study with Professor Falco and had never managed to change even a hair on his head. That, he had to admit to himself, had been a surprise and a disappointment to both pupil and tutor. Current Animagus theory had it that the ability to transform was governed by a complex set of genes and that only a subset of wizards and witches possessed both the genetic propensity and the even rarer ability to channel their magic adequately to achieve a full transformation. Albus's inability to do it was the one significant failure of his magic he had ever experienced. He consoled himself with the knowledge that nobody in his recent family history had been an Animagus either, so perhaps it was his heredity at fault.

He was, however, extremely proud of his young protégée. He wrote to his old tutor:

30 April 1944

Dear Flavius,

I am happy, and frankly amazed, to report that Miss McGonagall has progressed beyond all my expectations in her initial Animagus training.

She has already managed several partial transformations and is able to hold them for a few seconds. We do not yet know what form her Animagus will finally take (assuming she eventually achieves full transformation; I have no worries on that score, however), but I believe she will be a mammal, based upon the recent appearance of fur.

She has an excellent grasp of theory as well.

I am confident that you will be as impressed with her as I have been and that you will not be sorry you agreed to take her on as a pupil this summer. In addition to her dedication and ability, she is a delightful young woman, and I believe you will enjoy her company.

On a personal note, I am relieved to find that my teaching abilities seem to have outstripped my meagre transformational skills.

I trust you and Gudrun are both well, and I look forward to dropping in on you after the end of term. It really has been far too long.

Best regards,

Albus

It was the middle of May when Minerva accomplished her most complete transformation yet. She was, for the first time, physically aware of the fur that had appeared on her skin under her clothes, and it felt as if her entire torso was covered this time. In the brief seconds it held, she longed to tear her clothes off to see what it looked like. Not only that, but it was damned uncomfortable and hot!

After she had regained her normal appearance, she mentioned the discomfort to Albus, who chuckled and said, "Just wait, my dear. When you achieve your first full transformation, you may find your clothes to be your biggest problem."

"Yes, I know," she said. She had read all about the difficulties many fledgling Animagi had in mastering the ability to Banish and Unbanish their clothes at the moment of transformation. Those who took the forms of smaller animals sometimes found themselves nearly crushed by heavy cloth or entrapped by headgear, while those who changed to larger animals generally burst right out of their clothing. This was the reason, she had read, that many Transfiguration masters and mistresses who taught would-be Animagi insisted that their pupils attempt their first transformations in the nude.

"I just assumed, Professor, that you would have me strip off before attempting to transform," she said, affecting an innocent tone.

"As much fun as that would be, Minerva, I fear that pleasure will belong to Professor Falco," he said.

Minerva's eyebrows elevated a half-inch of their own accord. "Will he really ask me to take off my clothes?" she asked. Somehow, despite her reading, it hadn't occurred to her that she might be required to do so in front of the elderly Transfiguration master who was to become her tutor.

"Not to worry, my dear," he said, grinning. "It is my understanding that Professor Falco generally asks his wife to chaperone any lesson in which a female pupil is likely to lose her clothing. It's as much for his protection as for yours. I believe Madam Falco suggested it several years ago. Gudrun is a very persuasive witch."

When at last Minerva retired to her dormitory that evening and undressed for the night, she heard a sneeze from the bed next to hers. She had finished cleaning her teeth and combing out her hair when she heard several more in succession.

She slid between the crisp white sheets of her bed and heard the accusatory and congestion-blunted voice of her dorm-mate and sometime-nemesis, Finnonula Campbell, say, "Gods! Did someone bring their cat in here?"

A fugue of soprano "nos" answered the query.

"Well, someone's been playing with one, then, because I can barely breathe!" Finnonula said.

Minerva said, "Finnonula, we all know about your allergy. I'm sure nobody would . . . oh!" A sudden thought occurred to her and stopped her words.

"What?" asked Finnonula.

"Wait," said Minerva, practically tearing off the bedclothes. Her dirty clothes from the day had already been Banished to the nightly laundry along with all the other girls', so she shoved her feet in her slippers, not bothering to put on her dressing gown, and padded off to the bathroom. Once there, she stepped into a shower cubicle and stripped off her nightdress, turning it inside out in the process. Using her lighted wand, she carefully examined the surface of the flannel gown until she found what she was searching for. She held it up to the light. It was a hair, fine, but shorter and thicker than any that grew on Minerva normally. It was hard to tell, but it appeared to be grey with a tip of white.

Trembling, she placed the hair carefully on the floor at her feet and raised her wand, holding her other hand out in front of her.

"Accio cat hair," she whispered. She didn't see anything move, but when she examined her open palm closely, there sat the hair, plain as you please.

A cat.

Her Animagus form was a cat. A grey one, if the single hair was a reliable indicator.

She wanted to yell aloud...shout it from the castle turrets: "A cat!" She wanted to go galloping down the stairway, tear through the common room and out the portrait hole, fly through the corridor and bang on Albus's door, crying, "I'm a cat!" as soon as her astonished mentor and lover opened it.

Of course, she didn't do any of those things. Instead, she took a towel from the large wicker basket and turned on the shower tap. She removed her knickers and stepped under the stream, scrubbing herself quickly and thoroughly.

When she was done, she dried off, spelling her hair dry, despite the fact that she always hated how it looked when she did it by magic, then Transfigured another towel into a simple dressing gown, and headed back to her dormitory. When she got there, she deposited her gown and knickers into the dirty clothing basket, retrieved a clean nightdress and knickers from her trunk, put them on, and slid back into her bed without a word to her confused dorm-mates.

"And what was that all about, Minerva?" asked the notoriously nosy Imelda Vance.

"I just remembered that I've been exposed to a cat after all," said Minerva. "Sorry, Finnonula. I went to wash so that you wouldn't have any more problems with allergy."

"Thanks, Minerva," said Finnonula. The two girls didn't care much for one another, but Finnonula had to admit that Minerva was generally a thoughtful and responsible dorm-mate.

The next day, Minerva's N.E.W.T. class in Transfiguration passed her by in a blur. When Professor Dumbledore had finally given them their homework assignment and dismissed the class, Minerva lingered behind, pretending to have misplaced a favourite quill.

When the last student had filed out, Albus magicked the door closed, saying with a smile, "Well? I'm guessing you have something you want to tell me. You spent the entire class period looking like the Kneazle who swallowed the Snidget."

"Professor, you have no idea how close you are!"

His raised eyebrows prompted her to continue.

"I think I know what my Animagus form will be!" She could barely contain her excitement.

"And?"

"I'm a cat!"

"And how did you figure this out?" asked Albus in surprise.

When she had explained the story of the cat hair and the allergic dorm-mate to him, he threw his head back and laughed. When he had wiped the delighted tears from his eyes, he said, "Now, we can't be entirely sure which species of cat you'll be. Miss Campbell may be allergic to more than one, and of course, the *Accio* spell doesn't require that kind of specificity."

"Yes, but when I cast it, I was thinking specifically of a domestic cat hair. Wouldn't that make a difference?"

"It might at that. Are you pleased?"

"Very," she said. "To tell the truth, I didn't much relish the idea of being a frog or a snake."

"And to tell the truth, I don't blame you," he said. "But don't tell Professor Burke," he added, "he's very proud of Slytherin's reptilian mascot."

They both had a good laugh, then she said, "I'd best be getting on now. I've got Defence in five minutes, and Professor Merrythought hates tardiness."

"Indeed," agreed Albus. He lowered his voice to whisper in her ear, "But I very much look forward to celebrating your discovery properly tomorrow evening."

Her voice was equally low: "And I hope, Professor, that there will be nothing proper about it."

And with that, she was gone, leaving him grinning after her like a fool in love.

/***/

"Who in blazes scheduled the Inter-House Duelling Championship for two weeks before N.E.W.T.s?" Minerva huffed as she plopped down into a chair in the large, disused classroom.

"That would be me, Miss McGonagall," said Professor Merrythought as she sailed into the room.

"I'm awfully sorry, Professor," said Minerva, standing when her teacher entered the room, "I meant no disrespect."

"That's quite all right, Miss McGonagall. And I am sorry about the unfortunate timing; it was the only weekend Headmaster Dippet could secure an observer from the Department of Magical Games and Sports," said Merrythought.

Turning to the group of twenty-six students gathered in the room, she announced: "All right. I've drawn up the pools by random selection, as usual, so if you have a problem with your matches, take it up with the Sorting Hat, not with me. I wouldn't advise it though; he was quite shirty with me when I put him back on the shelf. We will be following All-England regulations, of course.

"Refs will be Professors Burke, Dumbledore, Fancourt, and myself for the initial rounds; direct-elimination rounds will be judged by me and Master Filius Flitwick, who has been kind enough to agree to come up from London to referee for the championship."

There was a murmur of excitement at this. Filius Flitwick had been All-England duelling champion for six years straight back in the 1920s, and he had won the World Championship for England in 1924. Despite his diminutive stature, the Charms master was a legend among duelling enthusiasts. It was generally agreed upon that his slightness had given him an advantage in speed and agility, but whether this was unfair had been a matter of some debate. Eventually, the International Confederation had ruled that there was no minimum height limit for competitive duellists. (Anyone standing over seven feet, however, was ruled out of international competition, although there was rumoured to be a "talls league" that had been started by half-giants and victims of irreversible spells that left them unalterably heightened.)

Professor Merrythought held up her hand to quiet the excited burbling, saying, "You can all thank Professor Dumbledore, who prevailed upon his personal friendship with Master Flitwick to persuade the man to take the time from his busy schedule."

Professor Merrythought distributed schedules, eliciting both groans and squeals of glee when the duellists got their hands on them.

"All right, lads and lasses, that's all. Back to your dorms. It's late," said Merrythought, shooing the students out into the corridors.

"Oi, Riddle!" called a fifth-year Ravenclaw, racing up to join Tom, who was surrounded by friends, as usual. "Who've you got first?"

"Prewett," replied Tom.

"Ha! No problem there," said the Ravenclaw, eliciting laughter from the small cadre of Slytherins and Ravenclaws that walked along with Riddle.

Tom was not especially interested in his schedule. He was confident that he would easily best everyone on it in the first rounds. He scanned his parchment for one name only. He found it and quickly calculated that he and Minerva would meet in the fifth bout, assuming...as he did...that she would also beat her initial opponents. She had beaten him for the championship for the past two years in which they'd both been eligible to compete, and he intended to remedy the situation this year.

Alone in a corner of the Gryffindor common room, Minerva likewise scanned the schedule for Tom Riddle's name and quickly came to the same conclusion he had. She was not as sanguine as he was that she would best each prior opponent, but history suggested it would be the case. If so, she did not intend to fall to Tom Riddle's wand. Certainly not this year.

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter 16 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"Filius, my dear friend! So good to see you!"

Albus greeted Filius Flitwick with a small pat on the back and a handshake, being careful not to knock the diminutive wizard off his feet.

"Thank you, Albus. Wonderful to see you again, too! And thank you for meeting me at the Apparition point," answered Flitwick.

"It's my pleasure. Shall we?" Albus asked, opening the gates to Hogwarts with a flick of his wand.

As the two men walked down the path toward the castle, they fell into the kind of easy conversation that signals long friendship: enquiries and answers about favourite projects, news of mutual acquaintances, reminiscences of exploits long past.

Once Flitwick was settled in the small guest quarters near the Deputy's rooms, he and Albus headed to Headmaster Dippet's office for a drink before dinner in the Great Hall.

"Flitwick! It's a pleasure to see you again," said Dippet, shaking the man's hand just a bit too heartily. "Thank you for agreeing to come up for the tournament. I know how busy you must be."

"Oh, it's my pleasure, Headmaster," said Flitwick.

"Please, I am Armando to you," replied the Headmaster. "Do have a seat," he said, indicating a set of club chairs near the fireplace. "Do you care for elf-made wine? I have a very fine 'twenty-three I've been aching for an excuse to open."

"That would be delightful, thank you, Armando."

"I hope Albus didn't prevail upon your friendship too heavily," Dippet said as he opened the bottle and poured three glasses of pale-gold wine. "He can be altogether too persuasive, I find," he said with a wink at his Deputy as he distributed the glasses and took the third chair.

"Not at all, not at all. I was afraid Albus would stop inviting me, as I've had to decline the past two years due to travel," Filius said.

"To our would-be champions!" said Armando, raising his glass in a toast, and the other two men followed suit.

"I say, Armando, this wine is excellent!" declared Flitwick after sipping his.

"Isn't it? One of the great perks of being Headmaster is that people tend to send extravagant gifts. And of course, Hogwarts itself has an excellent cellar of mead," said Armando.

As they sipped the wine, they talked of the upcoming duelling match.

"I'm anxious to see how your top duellists are getting on; I remember a few of the third- and fourth-years I saw last time as being quite promising," said Flitwick.

"Yes," said Armando. "Albus can tell you about it better than I, though. I'm afraid I'm not much of duelling aficionado, although I'm very proud of our club."

"Galatea is quite excited about a few of our students," said Albus. "There is a third-year that just started with the club who she thinks will become quite a duellist when he gets a few years under his belt. Alastor Moody. Interesting lad. Promising in lots of ways, although I think he spends more time in detention than any other student at Hogwarts."

"Impulsive?" enquired Flitwick, intrigued.

"A bit. But to his credit, he's been working at curbing the trait," replied Albus. "The duelling club has been good for him in that respect. If there's one thing Galatea stresses, it's the importance of maintaining discipline and self-control under stressful conditions."

"Oh, very important for a duellist," agreed Filius. "And of course, in life. And what of that intense-looking, dark-haired girl who won the last year I was here? What was her

name again?"

"Minerva McGonagall," replied Albus.

"Ah, yes, McGonagall. Quite fierce she was, as I recall. Is she still here, or has she left?" Flitwick asked.

"She's a seventh-year and will be competing again. In fact, she won the last two championships as well," said Albus with a hint of pride.

"Minerva McGonagall has become quite a protégée of Albus's," said Dippet. "He has been working with her on beginning Animagus training."

"Really, Albus?" asked Flitwick. "Isn't she a bit young for such advanced work?"

"She's extraordinarily talented," said Albus, not anxious to continue this line of conversation. "She's already made excellent progress." He hadn't told the Headmaster just how far her training had progressed, only that it was going quite as well as they had hoped. Dippet had been understandably nervous about the project his Deputy had proposed for the Head Girl, but he trusted Albus's judgment of her magical abilities.

"Be that as it may, I was quite cross with him for losing us our Gryffindor Chaser," said Armando. "We really had a chance at the cup before she quit Quidditch in favour of Albus's tutoring sessions."

"Now, Armando," tutted Dumbledore, smiling nevertheless. "You're not meant to have preferences."

"You can't blame an old Gryffindor for harbouring a fondness for his House team," replied Dippet.

"Quidditch and duelling? In addition to Animagus training? Your Miss McGonagall must be a force to be reckoned with," said Flitwick.

"Indeed," replied Albus.

"Yes, and you haven't even told Filius about the nine N.E.W.T.s she's undertaking," said Armando.

"*Nine*? That's more than even you or I did, as I recall, Albus," said Filius.

"It's a wonder the girl hasn't wound up at St Mungo's with nervous exhaustion," said the Headmaster.

"She was already quite well educated when she came to Hogwarts," Albus told his friend. "Her father is a formidable scholar himself, and evidently, he was an excellent teacher. His son, Einar, is a third-year and is shaping up to be quite a comer too. He's following in his father's footsteps, spending the year on the Continent at Beauxbatons. He's very good in your field, Filius."

"Ah, yes. Madame Leblanc is probably the finest Charms mistress in Europe," said Flitwick. "Not to take anything away from Professor Burke, of course," he added quickly.

Albus concealed a small smile at that. He and Filius had often spoken of Herbert Burke and his poor teaching skills. The man had secured the Charms master post under the previous Headmaster, Phineas Nigellus Black, who had given it to him as a favour to his daughter, to whom Burke was married. It was a supremely unhappy marriage, and Madam Burke had prevailed upon her father to give Herbert the post, presumably to get him out of her hair. When Headmaster Black had died somewhat unexpectedly, the newly appointed Armando Dippet had kept Burke on, largely because Burke's estranged wife, Belvina, had many strategically placed friends, both at the Ministry and on the Hogwarts Board of Governors.

Albus had confided to Filius that his first priority, were he to succeed Dippet as Headmaster...as everyone assumed he would...would be to replace Burke. What he hadn't told Flitwick was that he intended to ask him to assume the post when the time came.

The three talked of this and that until it was time to go to dinner. Headmaster Dippet introduced their esteemed guest to the assembled students, who applauded England's Pride of 1924 heartily. Those who were unfamiliar with Flitwick's history as a duelling champion whispered among themselves about the man's small stature, while members of the Hogwarts Duelling Club were quick to quiet them with assurances of his prowess with a wand.

/***/

Saturday dawned, clear and warm, and the castle was abuzz early with activity in preparation for the weekend's duelling contest.

The Quidditch pitch was set up with two long, narrow duelling platforms; in the initial rounds, two bouts would be fought simultaneously. The platforms were canvas, charmed to make them soft on impact but firm to the step. In addition, Professors Merrythought, Burke, and Dumbledore had surrounded each platform with a series of charms designed to protect the spectators in the stands from being hit by any stray spells. The stands were decorated with the flags of all four Houses.

The Ministry observer, Drusilla Claymore, had arrived shortly after breakfast, and Professor Merrythought showed her around the arena as she inspected the facility to ensure it met the standards set down by the Department of Magical Games and Sports for safety and fair play.

Merrythought then met with the referees to give them their assignments. Each bout would have two referees to ensure nobody favoured his or her own House unfairly. The direct-elimination round bouts would be officiated by Professor Merrythought and Master Flitwick, who were the most knowledgeable in duelling regulations, although both had been Ravenclaws, and Merrythought was the current Head of that House. The other professors and the Ministry observer would be watching each direct-elimination bout as well to ensure fairness.

The student duellists were all warming up in a large, empty classroom, which appeared to be a sea of colour, thanks to the quilted vests the duellists wore, each in his or her House colours. Some were practicing wand-work, while others were taking the opportunity to limber up their bodies. Minerva had done several stretching exercises, then took to a quiet corner to focus her mind.

Tom Riddle watched her out of the corner of his eye. He spent his warm-up time observing his fellow duellists, refreshing his memory about weaknesses or flaws he could exploit. He was feeling quite confident.

Just before ten o'clock, Professor Merrythought gathered them together in one of the team holding-tents adjoining the Quidditch pitch. She spoke to them about sportsmanship and reminded them that spells intended to seriously injure or humiliate one's opponent were against regulations and that violators would not only lose the bout, but would be subject to disciplinary action. Duelling was a serious business, she told them, and anyone who put another duellist in danger, whether through intention or through sloppy spellwork, did not belong on the *piste*.

The group nodded gravely, and then it was time to begin.

Minerva was in the first pool, paired against Slytherin Lucretia Black, another seventh-year and a good duellist. The two young women mounted the far-right platform, bowed to the officials...for this match, Professors Burke and Fancourt, the Heads of Slytherin and Hufflepuff, respectively...met at the centre of the platform, bowed to each other, then turned and took their places at each end of the *piste*.

"Wands at the ready!" cried Professor Burke, and both girls raised their wands above their heads, taking the classic duelling stance: leaning slightly forward on one bent leg, the other stretched out behind.

"Begin!" shouted Burke.

Minerva knew from club practice that Lucretia tended to cast first and ask questions later, so she prepared to perform a series of blocking and evasive spells rather than attacking immediately, as she might have done with a less aggressive or less experienced opponent. Lucretia Black would not be thrown off her game by a quick and sudden offense. Minerva would wait and let Lucretia fire off a few spells, which would tire her and show Minerva what her opponent was thinking.

True to form, Lucretia opened immediately with an *Incarcerous* that Minerva was able to block handily. The Slytherin continued to throw hexes and jinxes as Minerva dodged and *Protego*-ed, only letting through a Jelly-Legs Jinx, which sent her to the mat but gave her an excellent vantage point from which to cast a *Duro* Charm on her opponent's feet, slowing her up long enough for Minerva to end the jinx and disarm her.

Minerva was perspiring lightly when she shook hands with her defeated opponent. Twenty minutes later, she was back on the *piste*, this time against a third-year Ravenclaw, whom she managed to blast across the platform within the first minute. She jogged down to the end of the platform to help James Dunstan to his feet and to ensure he was unharmed by her forceful hex.

She had a bit of a break after that and watched the precocious Alastor Moody easily defeat his sixth-year opponent with a neatly placed *Expelliarmus* followed by an *Avis* Charm that sent a flock of small birds circling around the boy so he couldn't retrieve his wand in time.

As Moody dismounted the platform, Minerva said, "Bit showy, wasn't it, Alastor?"

"No more so than blasting Dunstan halfway to Hades," Moody said, grinning.

She smiled back at him and said, "I'll see you on the *piste* after lunch, then. We're up first, I believe."

"I look forward to it, McGonagall," he answered and sauntered off.

Minerva stayed to watch some of the elimination bouts, then decided to head in and have a shower and change before lunch. She removed her shoes and socks, and peeled off her crimson-and-gold quilted vest, black breeches, and under-jacket, then her undergarments. She performed a quick *Scourgify* on her duelling costume, as she would need to put it back on after lunch. She debated washing her hair but decided in the end to leave it in the long plait she always wore when she duelled, so she wouldn't have to redo it before the afternoon match.

Lunch was a boisterous affair, with students and staff animatedly discussing and debating the various bouts, predicting winners and losers, and congratulating and consoling the duellists of their own Houses. When Minerva took her place at the Gryffindor table, she was greeted by a rousing cheer. Smiling shyly, she tucked into her cottage pie, her appetite piqued by the morning's exercise. Another cheer arose from the Gryffindor table when its second winner of the morning, Alastor Moody, sat down.

As the students began to leave the Great Hall after the meal, Minerva felt a gentle tug on her plait. She turned, about to excoriate the perpetrator, and found the wide, freckled face of Alastor Moody grinning cheekily at her.

"Just wanted to wish you luck this afternoon, McGonagall," he said.

"And to you as well, Alastor."

"You'll need it more than me," he added merrily, then turned to go as her lips narrowed at him.

/***/

Minerva was having a grand time. She and Moody had been duelling for more than seven minutes, neither gaining an advantage. The two Gryffindors were well matched for skill, which always made for a fun bout, and Minerva secretly enjoyed the gentle banter Alastor tossed about as he shot hexes and dodged jinxes.

"S that the best Scotland's got?" he jeered as he barely deflected a Sponge-Knees Jinx. "Try a taste of Ireland!" A blast from his wand sent an enormous Irish flag hurtling toward Minerva, who dropped to the mat and rolled under it, firing a Trip Jinx at her opponent for good measure. To her surprise, Moody hit the mat with a *thud*, giving her an opening. She fired an *Incarcerous*, hoping to ensnare Alastor before he could recover, but he was quick to Vanish the ropes that licked at him from the end of her wand.

"*Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled* . . ." he sang as he sprang to his feet, firing a Fixing Charm at Minerva, sticking the seat of her breeches firmly to the mat.

"You've such a bonnie voice, Alastor. But can ye can dance, too?" *Tarantellegra!* cried Minerva. Moody's legs began a spasmodic, jerking dance, requiring him to cast a quick *Finite* to end the hex. Minerva had already released herself from the Fixing Jinx and managed to get off a quick disarming spell, which deprived Moody of his wand. According to All-England duelling rules, once a competitor was disarmed, he or she would have five seconds in which to retrieve his or her wand before the bout was called.

Moody had his "*Accio*" halfway out of his mouth when Minerva hit him with a lightning-fast Langlock Jinx, making his incantation sound like *Eeo aann!* Moody's wand continued to lie where it had come to light at the side of the *piste*.

"Bout to Miss McGonagall," cried Professor Fancourt after the five seconds had elapsed.

Minerva stalked up to Alastor and pointed her wand at him, saying, "*Finite*."

"Thanks," said Moody, offering Minerva his hand. "Well fought, McGonagall."

"You too, Alastor."

"Knew I should have paid better attention in Defence. Maybe I'd be able to perform wordless magic," Moody said as they dismounted the platform.

"It's pretty advanced," said Minerva. "You don't usually start on it until fifth year."

"Maybe you could give me a few pointers," said Moody with a sly grin.

"Maybe you could spend some of your copious detention time on it," she countered, smiling in spite of herself.

"You wound me, lass, you wound me," Moody said, placing his hand over his heart in mock distress.

At dinner in the Great Hall, Headmaster Dippet announced the results of the day's bouts, as if everyone were not already aware of them.

"Congratulations to the students who will advance to tomorrow's direct-elimination round: Miss McGonagall and Mr Moody of Gryffindor, Miss Fawcett of Hufflepuff, Miss Lovegood and Messrs Trimble and Dawlish of Ravenclaw, and Miss Black and Mr Riddle of Slytherin."

Cheers went up from each House table as their finalists were announced.

"We look forward to more excellent duelling tomorrow and to crowning our school champion for 1944," said the Headmaster.

Tom Riddle quickly struck off Fawcett, Trimble, Dawlish, and Lovegood in his mind. Any of them would be easy to pick off. Lucretia Black was good, but he wasn't worried about her either. Moody...he could be a wild card. There was no denying that the third-year Gryffindor was a talented duellist. Very talented, in fact. But he was impetuous,

a fact that Tom could easily take advantage of.

There was no question in Tom Riddle's mind that he and Minerva McGonagall would face one another in the final bout.

/***/

The first bout of Sunday morning went exactly as Tom had predicted. He felled Reginald Dawlish with a well-placed *Incarcerous* within three minutes.

Soon after, Maura Lovegood fell to Alastor Moody, then Marius Trimble defeated Lucretia Black. Minerva's bout against Terry Fawcett ended with her swift victory.

Tom's next bout was not so easy, and he almost lost it to Moody. Six minutes in, the young Gryffindor caught him with a Conjunctivitis Curse before he could block it, blurring his vision. A lucky guess helped him dodge in the correct direction, out of the way of Moody's *Expelliarmus*. He recovered and bested Moody with a *Petrificus Totalus* that caught him in the right leg.

So much for Moody, he thought.

Minerva's heart fell when Alastor did. His defeat meant that if she bested Trimble in the upcoming bout, she and Tom Riddle would face off in the final. She had hoped it would not be him, but there was nothing for it but to do her best, as she always did.

Marius Trimble was soon dispatched, leaving the supporters of Gryffindor and Slytherin breathless with excitement. The two rival Houses had not faced one another in a final duelling match in five years, and the Slytherins were especially anxious to see that prig McGonagall lose her crown to their own Tom Riddle.

There was to be a short break before the final bout, to allow the finalists to rest before facing off, and each went to sit for a few minutes with their defeated teammates in the team holding-tents.

"Congratulations, Minerva," said Alastor when she strode into the tent. He Summoned a glass and filled it with an *Aguamenti*, handing it to Minerva.

"Thank you, Alastor," she said, taking the glass and drinking deeply. "I was really hoping it would be you and me in the final," she said when she had drained the glass.

"That makes two of us," said Moody, getting nods of agreement from the other Gryffindor duellists. His voice dropped low. "Between you and me, I don't trust Riddle. I've never actually caught him out, but I've a feeling he doesn't play quite fair."

Minerva just nodded. Moody gestured her over to a corner of the tent. When they were more or less out of earshot of the other students, he said, "It's none of my business, Minerva, and maybe you'll box me ears for it, but I notice things, and I don't like the way Riddle looks at you."

She was about to speak when he interrupted: "I know he's the school hero an' all, but . . . just be careful around him, is all I'm sayin.' Just a bit o' brotherly advice, since Einar isn't here to give it."

"I will. Thank you for your concern, little brother Alastor," she said with a smile and received one of his cockeyed grins in return.

Alastor winked at her insouciantly as they parted, and she shook her head. He was entirely too self-confident and cheeky for a fourteen-year-old, but he was also honest and direct, and underneath the gruffness and banter, entirely sincere.

And he was nothing if not observant.

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter 17 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"Wands at the ready!" shouted Professor Merrythought.

Minerva and Tom squared off, wands in the air, bodies tensed for combat. For a few seconds nothing happened; each appeared to be waiting for the other to make the first move. Then Tom extended his wand and cast a *Petrificus Totalus*. Minerva crouched below the curse, which flew just over her head, and cast.

"*Glisseo!*" she shouted, pointing her wand at the mat just under her opponent's feet. Tom lost his footing on the suddenly slick floor and hit the ground, landing ungracefully on his arse. He managed to block the disarming hex she shot next, and ended the Slipping Charm a moment later.

He rose, angry at the indignity of having been knocked off his feet in the first minute. He shot a Stinging Hex at Minerva, which caught her left thigh as she dodged. It immediately felt to her as if a thousand little pinpricks of fire were dancing on the skin of her leg. She had to take the time to cast a *Finite*, and in that moment, Tom was able to land his *Petrificus Totalus*.

The spectators gasped, thinking it was the end of the bout, but Minerva put her prodigious powers of concentration to work at once; it only took her three seconds to cast a wordless, wandless *Finite* and release herself from the charm. She stayed still, however, hoping to fool her opponent into thinking she was still Petrified so she could catch him off-guard with a Disarming spell.

Tom was approaching Minerva, intending to disarm her by hand and end the match...a time-honoured coup de grâce that would earn the duellist admiration for style...when he noticed her eyes move.

He was about three feet away from her when her eyes shifted slightly to look into his. What she saw frightened her. She had seen his predatory look before, during previous duels and practice bouts, but this was different; he looked . . . carnivorous. In the past, she had sensed that he wanted to curse her during those moments when their eyes met during a duel; this time, she was certain that what he really wanted was to devour her.

She made a slight movement, attempting to raise her wand, and suddenly felt an intense pressure inside her head, as if something was attempting to penetrate her skull. It broke through the membrane of her defence with a searing heat. Images and sounds came tumbling through her consciousness against her will: her father, weeping as he told her that her mother had died; her eleven-year-old self watching in joyous fascination as a bouquet of red and white camellias sprouted from the end of her wand as Mr Ollivander and her father stood by, beaming; Professor Dumbledore, smiling down at her after she had Transfigured her first needle into a pincushion; Albus kissing her on the settee in his sitting room; Albus again, moving on top of her in the large four-poster bed, making love to her for the first time . . .

She tried desperately to push the unwelcome presence from her mind, but it kept battering at her mercilessly, probing further and further, bruising the walls of her consciousness. As if from far away, she heard a voice shouting, "*Finite!*" and suddenly, the intruder was gone.

It was Albus who had realised what was happening. When Minerva had been Petrified, the spectators seemed to hold their breath as one, waiting for her either to end the enchantment with a wordless spell or for Tom Riddle to disarm her. When he stopped a few paces from her and nothing more appeared to happen, a confused murmur arose from the crowd. What was going on?

Professor Merrythought and Master Flitwick circled the pair closely, trying to determine if something illegal was happening, but it was impossible to tell. The duellists seemed only to have locked eyes.

When Minerva started to tremble, and the sweat started to bead on her forehead, it came to Albus with a shock that Riddle was using Legilimency on her. He had seen the reaction before, during the few times he had used it himself on a resistant subject.

"Galatea, end the bout," he urged Professor Merrythought. When she didn't react, he barked, "End it*Now!*" His tone prompted her to action, and she pointed her wand at the pair, calling the *Finite*.

When she felt Tom withdraw from her mind, Minerva fell to her knees. She was disoriented and shivering uncontrollably. She felt a pair of hands on her shoulders, and when her eyes were able to focus again, she saw the worried face of her Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher looking at her.

"Miss McGonagall, are you all right?" asked Professor Merrythought. Minerva nodded and got slowly to her feet with the aid of her professor's hand. "What happened?" asked Merrythought.

"I . . . I don't know," lied Minerva.

It had taken all of Albus's willpower not to rush to her, but he knew he would need to intercept Madam Claymore, who was about to interrogate Tom, before he could see to Minerva.

Riddle was still standing at the end of the *piste*, talking quietly with Filius Flitwick. Professor Dumbledore arrived at the same time as Madam Claymore.

"What was the spell you used, young man?" enquired Claymore accusingly.

"Madam Claymore," Dumbledore interrupted, "I suspect the mishap we just witnessed was an unfortunate accident rather than any misbehaviour on Mr Riddle's part."

"That remains to be seen, Professor," retorted Claymore.

"Perhaps. But as Deputy Headmaster of this school, I think it is incumbent upon me to get Mr Riddle's side of the story before he is subjected to a Ministry interrogation," Dumbledore replied calmly.

"I must agree with Professor Dumbledore," said Flitwick. "Mr Riddle appears to be just as confused as we are about the incident, and I think a calm discussion with Professor Dumbledore would be more likely to yield an answer than an interrogation."

Albus shot his friend a look of gratitude.

Madam Claymore was about to remonstrate when Headmaster Dippet joined the trio.

"What's happening?" he enquired of his Deputy. "Is Miss McGonagall injured?"

"No, I believe not," replied Albus. "Filius and I were just asking Madam Claymore to postpone her questioning until I can speak with Mr Riddle privately. The boy should be allowed to tell his side of things to someone who can advise him of his own best interests."

"Quite right," agreed Dippet.

Faced with the opposition of the three wizards, Claymore acquiesced. "Very well. I will expect to speak with you and Mr Riddle as soon as you have finished," she said to Albus and stalked off.

"Mr Riddle, you will please wait for me in my office," said Dumbledore in a voice that suggested Tom say nothing and obey. Riddle paused a moment, then turned and left without a word.

Minerva was sitting in a chair at the side of the *piste* with Professor Merrythought when Professor Dumbledore came to her. "Galatea, thank you for seeing to Miss McGonagall. I think she could benefit from a strong cup of tea in the infirmary. I'm sure she will be quite all right, won't you, my dear?"

"Yes, thank you, Professor," said Minerva, trying to catch his eye.

"I'm just going to speak with Mr Riddle. He seems as unsure of what happened as you are, Miss McGonagall," he said, looking at her meaningfully. Turning to Professor Merrythought, he said, "Perhaps you could escort Miss McGonagall to the infirmary?"

"Of course," replied Merrythought.

Tom was waiting outside Professor Dumbledore's office wearing an air of total calm.

"Please come in," said Albus as he opened the door with a quick spell. When they stepped inside, he said, "Do sit down, Mr Riddle."

"Thank you, sir, I prefer to stand," answered Tom with a smirk.

"I believe I invited you to *sit down*," hissed Dumbledore. Tom found himself quite suddenly, and without any will of his own, seated in the chair across from the professor's desk.

"How did you learn Legilimency?" Dumbledore asked the boy, calm once again.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Don't insult me, Tom. I've been practicing Legilimency since before your parents were born; I recognise it when I see it. Now, how did you learn it?"

"Books," said Tom, regarding his professor warily.

"Just books? I find that hard to believe, Tom."

The boy just shrugged.

"Very well. Where did you get these books?" asked Dumbledore, feigning patience.

"The library. A few from shops in Knockturn Alley."

"You must have practiced."

"Yes. It took a few years, but I finally mastered it," said Tom with a hint of pride.

"And on whom did you practice?"

"Children at the orphanage, during summers."

"Easy prey. But then you've always found it so, haven't you, Tom?"

"Easier than Minerva," said Tom, smiling to himself.

Albus's willpower was tested for the second time that day as he prevented himself from cursing the smug little prick into the next world.

"I would leave Minerva out of it if I were you," he said with deadly calm.

Tom smiled. "I saw you," he said, looking at the older man defiantly.

Dumbledore said nothing.

"You were . . . well, let's just say you were teaching her something that's not on the Hogwarts curriculum," Tom said with a rough laugh.

"I see," said Dumbledore quietly.

"Is that all you have to say?"

"No, it is not. I would strongly suggest, Tom, that you keep anything you may have seen in Minerva's mind to yourself."

"I'm sure that would be very convenient for you."

"I am not finished!" barked Dumbledore. He continued more calmly: "You may believe you have the upper hand, but have you forgotten that it is illegal to use Legilimency without prior permission from the Wizengamot? Or that being an unregistered Legilimens is automatically punishable by five years in Azkaban? Is it worth it? You'd better be certain it is, because I assure you that I will use everything in my not-inconsiderable power to ensure you rot on that godforsaken rock if you so much as breathe a word of this to anyone."

"You think..."

"*Shut up!*" roared Dumbledore, and Tom's chair was propelled backward several feet.

Dumbledore's voice was suddenly low and very dangerous as he approached the young man and leant down close to his face, brandishing his wand. "I could simply Oblivate you right now, and nobody would be the wiser, but I'm not especially good at it, and I might just slip and obliterate more of that extraordinary mind than I intend to. And while I would shed no tears over the loss, quite frankly, it wouldn't be especially satisfying just to leave you as a blot of mindless gelatine."

He lowered his wand but leant even closer to Riddle's face, putting his hands on either arm of the chair.

"So listen to me well, Tom Riddle: If you ever try to harm Minerva again, I swear you will regret the day you ever heard of magic. You think you know the Dark Arts? Well, think again. I know spells that would have you soiling your drawers for days if you even heard me whisper them. I know more Dark Magic than is contained in all the books in that cesspit they call Knockturn Alley, more than in all the Knockturn Alleys of all the cities of the world, and it would give me great pleasure to revisit some of my more obscure skills with you, Riddle.

"You will not go near Minerva again, and you will not say anything about what you saw today. Do not test me on this boy. Do not."

Riddle had paled, but he kept his gaze steady on his professor.

Dumbledore stepped away and looked at Riddle, saying calmly, "When we leave this room, you will say nothing about Legilimency or what you saw. We will tell everyone you attempted a Confundus Charm at the same time Minerva did and that it locked you together for a minute. That should satisfy the observer enough to keep you out of the Ministry interrogation room, provided you play along."

He gave an unpleasant smile, asking, "Now. Do we have an understanding?"

Riddle looked at the powerful wizard appraisingly for a moment before responding coldly, "Yes. We do."

"Good. Now get out of my sight."

Tom forced himself to move slowly and deliberately. He rose from the chair and walked out the door without shutting it behind him.

When he was gone, Albus let out a breath and went to find Madam Claymore, hoping he had done more than just scotched the snake.

/***/

When Albus went to the infirmary, he found Minerva sitting with Alastor Moody, sipping a cup of tea under the watchful and disapproving eye of Madam Soranus.

Moody stood up when he saw Albus enter the room.

"Hello, Mr Moody," said Albus. "Keeping our Miss McGonagall company?"

"Yes, sir," answered Moody. "Thought I'd lend a little moral support."

"Good lad. Minerva, my dear, how are you feeling?" the professor asked.

"Fine now, thank you, sir," she answered.

"Good. Now, if you will excuse us, Mr Moody, I have some things to discuss with Miss McGonagall," Albus said.

"Certainly, sir. Minerva, I'll see you at dinner, then?" asked Alastor.

She nodded assent, and Moody left with the usual spring in his step.

"Alfidia, if you are willing to release Miss McGonagall now, we can both be out of your hair," Albus said with a smile at the dour matron.

"Go on, then," said the mediwitch. "There's nothing wrong with her as far as I can tell."

"Thank you, Madam Soranus," said Minerva. The matron nodded curtly.

Albus took her to his office, then locked and warded the door.

She immediately fell into his arms, saying, "I'm so sorry, Albus! I couldn't stop him . . . I didn't know . . ."

"It's all right, my dear; it wasn't your fault," he soothed, kissing the top of her head.

"But he saw us. In my memory . . . He knows . . ."

"I know. It's all right. I've taken care of it."

She pulled away to look at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I spoke with Tom and ensured that he won't say anything. Nor will he bother you again," said Albus.

"But how?"

"I simply reminded him of the penalties for unregistered and unauthorised Legilimency," Albus replied, not wanting to tell her the entire truth of his conversation with Riddle. "I doubt he'll want to risk a few years in Azkaban just to harm you or me."

"I don't know . . ."

"Trust me, my love. He will say nothing."

Minerva sensed there was more to the story than Albus was sharing with her, but she didn't press him.

"Are you certain you are all right?" he asked, drawing her to a chair and motioning her to sit, taking the chair next to her. "Legilimency can be quite an unpleasant experience for an unwilling subject."

"It was horrible," she said, her voice shaking. "He was inside my head, and there was nothing I could do about it. I tried to shut him out, but it was so painful...like a physical sensation. I feel like I want to *Scourify* my mind."

"Yes, I remember the feeling well from my training."

"I don't know how you could study a spell like that," said Minerva. "It's so awful."

"It can be used for good, in the right hands. If you train as an Auror, you may be asked to learn it. You will certainly be required to learn its counterpart, Occlumency."

"Occlumency, yes, but I will *never* use Legilimency on anyone, no matter what the cause."

Albus kissed her and said, "I hope you never have to, my dear. It isn't a pleasant experience for anyone involved when it is used on a hostile subject."

"Have you ever used it against someone's will?"

"On a handful of occasions, when the Wizengamot authorised it. I hope never to have to do so again," Changing the subject, he said, "We need to discuss what we are going to tell Madam Claymore and the others about what happened today."

"Gods, I had forgotten!"

Albus told her, "Tom has already had his interview. On my instructions, he told them that he attempted to cast a Confundus Charm and found himself locked with you for a few moments until Professor Merrythought ended the spell. You will say that you cast a wordless Confundus at the same time, which resulted in the effect everyone witnessed."

"Will they believe it?" she asked.

"Oh, I think so. I am the only person here trained in Legilimency, so I was, I believe, the only person to recognise it as such."

"You are brilliant," she said, kissing him, feeling far better about things than she had an hour ago.

"We'd better go see Madam Claymore," said Albus, breaking the kiss. "And you don't want to be late for your dinner date with young Mr Moody," he added.

"Dinner date? Oh, you mean Alastor. He's really a friend of Einar's." She added, "He spent a week with us in Caithness last summer."

"He seems to be quite smitten with you. Not that I can blame him, of course."

"I don't think so. He's a terrible flirt, but he's like that with all the girls," she said dismissively. "In any case, he's only fourteen."

"I see. Not nearly old enough for a woman of the world such as yourself."

"Oh, stop it," she said, hitting him playfully on the arm, "or I shan't kiss you for a week."

"Oh, really? Well, then, I should take my fill now." He pulled her close and kissed her soundly.

At that moment, near the dawn of their relationship, Minerva felt that he could do anything...protect her from anything. She knew, even then, that it was a childish notion, but she couldn't help it. She was blinded by the strength of her feeling for him, and for that thrilling moment in time, it was enough.

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter 18 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

It was decided...by Headmaster Dippet, who wanted to be shut of the whole episode...that the final duel between Minerva McGonagall and Tom Riddle would be considered a draw, the first in the history of the Inter-House Duelling Championship.

When this was announced at dinner that evening, there was a round of boos, the loudest emanating from the Gryffindor and Slytherin tables. Neither of the two duellists said much about it. Both Minerva and Tom stuck to the story Dumbledore had supplied them with, Minerva answering her housemates' enquiries in curt one- or two-word sentences, Tom with winning modesty and sincere-seeming regret over the unfortunate incident.

Dumbledore watched them both out of the corner of his eye as he chatted with Flitwick and Professor Merrythought about the unusual outcome of the match. After dinner, Albus invited Flitwick for a drink in his chambers before the latter left for London, and Flitwick readily agreed.

As they sipped their glasses of Ogden's finest, they talked of this and that, and, of course, the match. Filius remarked on the quality of the duellists he had observed during the weekend, and Albus asserted that it was rather a shame it ended as it had.

There was a brief silence before Filius said, "It was good of you to cover for the boy, Albus. But it makes me wonder, were you the one who taught him Legilimency?"

It was a tribute to their long friendship that there was no judgment or accusation in his voice.

"Legilimency?"

Filius chuckled. "Come now, Albus. I may not be a Legilimens, but I've seen it done. The fact that you were the one to stop things just confirmed what I was beginning to suspect at the time."

Albus sighed. "I didn't teach him, no. He claims to have learnt it from books."

"Books alone? Preposterous," said Flitwick.

"Perhaps. Although he is an extraordinarily talented and intelligent young man. He admitted to practicing on the Muggle children he lives with during summers."

Flitwick pursed his face in distaste. "Gods! I can't even guess how many years in Azkaban that would get him. Does the boy know what a big favour you did him?"

"I daresay he does. Although I suspect he doesn't appreciate being in my debt," Albus told Flitwick, who frowned at the statement.

"What do you mean?"

"Tom Riddle and I are not on good terms. He is aware of my mistrust of him."

"Mistrust? But why?" asked Flitwick.

"I believe he is becoming enamoured of the Dark Arts. I am afraid he's heading down the same path as another brilliant young man of my acquaintance did."

The statement was greeted with a moment of silence from Flitwick.

"But he's just a boy," he said finally.

"Yes. But I believe him to be a dangerous boy. I have suspicions about some of his more nefarious activities, but no proof."

"Such as?"

"I shan't repeat them, Filius. Not without evidence. Let us just say that I intend to keep a close eye on young Tom Riddle," said Albus.

"If you believe him to be dangerous, why did you protect him today? Why not let the Ministry have at him?"

Albus took a minute before answering his friend's question without looking directly at him. "It was not Tom Riddle I was protecting."

"Miss McGonagall?"

Albus nodded.

Filius considered the possible implications for a moment, then chose his question carefully, "Why would the boy want to use Legilimency on her?"

"I don't know," replied Albus. "But he has shown a great deal of interest in Min...Miss McGonagall. Whatever is between them...if anything is...I doubt she would want it made part of a Ministry investigation."

Albus hated lying to Filius

Flitwick looked at his friend, not saying anything. There was something Albus was not telling him, but Filius knew from experience that his old friend was a man who kept his secrets close. There was no point in pressing, and Filius disliked unpleasant conversations enough to avoid them unless they were absolutely necessary. He decided that this one wasn't.

After an uncomfortable minute, Flitwick said, "Well, I best be getting along. Thank you for a most enjoyable weekend. It may not have turned out exactly as we expected, but it certainly was exciting!"

"I'll walk you to the Apparition point," offered Albus, retrieving his cloak.

"It isn't necessary, but I'd be glad to have your company for a few more minutes. It really has been far too long."

"Agreed," said Albus. "We must try to remedy that in future."

"Indeed. In these troubled times, we must all cherish our friends," said Filius.

/***/

Tom Riddle sat brooding in the Slytherin common room and tried to calm his mind as his housemates jabbered and yammered about the day's events.

Had the Legilimency been a mistake?

It hadn't been planned, that was certain. Tom had intended only to disarm Minerva, but when he had seen the trick she had played on him, he had become nearly blind with fury. He had wanted to curse her, to hurt her, but his sense of self-preservation had kept him from doing it in front of an audience. His invasion of her mind had been an almost automatic response to his intense desire to attack Minerva.

And it had felt so good! Forcing his way into her consciousness had been much more satisfying than the times he had slipped so easily into the minds of the children at the orphanage. They had felt like pats of butter, offering no resistance, no friction against which to test his will. Minerva had fought him, and breaking through her barriers had been like a burst of beautiful colour that he felt rather than saw. He was beginning to realise how much pleasure was to be had in the act of violation.

He had sped through the superficial thoughts and memories that appeared at the surface of her mind. He had been bored by their utter banality, sifting through her deeper thoughts and emotions to try to find those connected with her secret project with Dumbledore. What he had seen when he found them was completely unexpected and ignited a white-hot fury in him at the same time it excited him beyond almost anything else he had experienced.

How could she let that old coot fuck her?

The image of the old wizard's face, grimacing in ecstasy as he huffed and puffed on top of her, still turned Tom's stomach even hours later.

Dumbledore had taken her virginity as easily as Tom himself had stolen trinkets from his dorm-mates at the orphanage. The old fool hadn't even bothered to collect her blood, as Tom would have done, the blood from that particular source having magical properties of which even ancient Muggle cultures were aware, however foolish their attempts to channel them. What Tom could have done with it! There were any number of Dark or Dark-ish charms and potions that called for the blood of a deflowered virgin, spells and potions enumerated in the books he had procured from both the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts library and from his clandestine trips to Knockturn Alley. He could procure such a substance from any number of willing...or truthfully, unwilling...witches, but he suspected that the potency of the virgin-blood's magic would correlate with the magical strength of the witch from whom it came. In that respect, Minerva was nearly irreplaceable.

When the Legilimency connection with Minerva had been broken, Tom had been elated as well as angry. Here at last was something he could use against that meddlesome old fool...maybe even get him sacked...and that he might use to bend Minerva to his will where his charm had failed.

But he had not counted on Dumbledore's willingness to drop his vaunted scruples to threaten Tom into silence. He had expected the old man to slink around him in watchful and disapproving silence, just as he had during the Chamber of Secrets affair. In retrospect, Tom supposed he should have seen it coming, given that the professor had proved surprisingly flexible in his personal morality where his protégée was concerned.

So Tom had acquiesced. He had told the Headmaster and Madam Claymore the story Dumbledore had concocted for him. That had been the easy part; he had no desire to submit to a Ministry inquisition over his Legilimency. What had been harder was restraining himself from going to Dippet...who doted on him...to tell him what he had discovered in Minerva's mind. He believed the Headmaster would have forgiven him his failure to inform anyone of his hidden skill, particularly when confronted with his Deputy's lechery.

Tom was certain that Dippet would have wanted to forestall any scandal and would likely have pushed Dumbledore out quietly, leaving Tom free of the old man's breathing down his neck. He didn't believe Dippet would have expelled Minerva; allowing her to sit her N.E.W.T.s and finish school would have been too good an incentive for her to keep quiet. Armando Dippet was a fool in some respects, but he understood how to play the political games necessary to keep Hogwarts' reputation...and budget allocation...intact.

But Tom had to admit that Dumbledore had frightened him. Before his foray into Minerva's mind, he would not have believed the man capable of the kind of violence he had threatened. Now, however, Tom had a new and grudging respect for his professor. Who would have guessed what darkness was concealed beneath that benign, hail-fellow-well-met demeanour?

And Minerva . . . Tom certainly was surprised at her wantonness. Not only had he seen what she had done with Dumbledore, but he had also sensed her emotions about it. She had opened her legs to the old man, and she had loved it! Tom, like many others, had dismissed her as a cold fish, especially given her seeming immunity to his considerable charms. Now that he had discovered otherwise, he was even more anxious to get under her skin and into her knickers. With Dumbledore watching over her, however, it would be nearly impossible. He would need to think about how to use his newfound information to persuade her to join her power to his, willingly or unwillingly.

It would require even more careful planning than he had thought. He knew that he was not yet powerful enough to confront Albus Dumbledore directly and would not be for a long time.

Fortunately, Tom Riddle was good at waiting.

/***/

At the conclusion of their tutorial the following Tuesday, Albus took Minerva's arm as she was gathering her books to leave his office.

"Just a moment, my dear."

She turned back to him, a questioning look on her face.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, fine. Well, frightfully busy, what with N.E.W.T.s coming up in less than two weeks, but other than that, I'm fine. Why?" she inquired.

"You seem distracted."

"As I've said, I'm quite busy."

"It's nothing to do with what happened at the duel?" he asked.

She thought for a few moments before answering. "I don't know. It threw me, I suppose."

"Naturally," he said. "And Riddle, has he bothered you in any way?"

"No. I've barely seen him, except at meals, and then it's from a distance," she said. "Why, do you think he'll try to do something?" she asked anxiously.

"I don't think so, but I expect you to tell me if he gives you any trouble at all."

"I will," she said. After a moment, she asked, "Shall I still come on Thursday?" She wasn't sure if things had changed between them since Tom's discovery of their affair.

"Do you want to?"

"Of course."

Albus smiled at her warmly. "Then come."

She would have liked to kiss him then, but that would have violated their agreement to keep their tutoring sessions separate from their more personal relationship. Instead she slipped out the door and disappeared down the corridor.

/***/

It was just her luck, Minerva thought, that Riddle was on patrol that Thursday evening. She was just turning the corner into the corridor near the Defence classroom when she saw him appear at the top of the staircase at the opposite end. She stopped for just a moment, startled, before resuming her previously brisk pace.

As Tom passed her, she saw the smirk on his face and felt her own get hot. Just as she was about to descend the small staircase that led to the alcove that held Albus's office, she heard Riddle say, "Enjoy your *tutorial*, Minerva."

When she got to Albus's office, she was shaking. As soon as he opened the door, she stepped in, closed it behind her, and pressed herself hard against him, pulling his head down to kiss him deeply.

"Well, good evening to you too," he said when they finally broke the kiss.

She smiled sheepishly in response. "Sorry. It's just that I've missed you."

"You need never apologise for greeting me that way, but I must ask how you could have missed me when you were sitting in my classroom only this morning?"

She shrugged as they walked hand-in-hand to the door to his private quarters "You were Professor Dumbledore this morning. I was missing Albus."

"Ah," he said, shutting the door behind them. "I'm sorry if you feel I ignore you in class. It's simply easier for me to remain professional if . . . well, in truth, if I don't look at you too much."

"Oh, I understand completely," she said, taking a seat on the settee near the fire.

He noticed that she wasn't looking him quite in the eye, but he said nothing. He went to a sideboard and brought over a tray with two wine glasses and a bottle, and set it down on the table next to the settee.

"You had mentioned that your father was having a hard time getting wine. I thought you might enjoy a glass or two of this...it's a 1929 Yquem. Do you like Sauternes?" he asked.

"I don't know that I've ever tasted one," she told him. "They're sweet, aren't they? My father tends to drink dry wines."

"Yes, it is quite sweet, but I think you'll find it's not cloyingly so. Good Sauternes...and this is a very good one, by the way...has been described as 'nectar of the gods'."

"It sounds heavenly, Albus, but are you sure you want to open it now?" she asked, her brow furrowing.

"Oh, yes," he answered. "You've been working very hard, and I think you deserve a treat." He magicked the cork out and poured two small glasses of the deep-gold wine. He handed her one as he joined her in front of the fire.

Her eyes widened slightly as she took a sip, and he smiled knowingly. "Good?" he asked.

"Albus, this is wonderful! I don't usually care for sweet wines, but this . . . !" She took another sip and said, "Thank you for sharing it with me."

"It is all the sweeter for the company," he said, and she had to stop herself from rolling her eyes.

When they had both finished their wine, he re-corked the bottle and removed the glasses to the side table.

"I'm only allowed one glass?" she asked, teasing.

"For the moment," he replied, gathering her in his arms. "I thought we might need refreshment again afterwards."

"After what?" she asked with put-on innocence.

"After I thoroughly ravish you," he murmured, his face buried in her neck.

"Mmm," she purred. "Please do, Albus. Thoroughly."

So he did.

She left two hours later, after they had cleaned up and shared another glass of the exquisite Sauternes. He stood at the door of his office, watching her dart down the corridor, the customary books under her arm in case she met anyone on the way back to her dormitory.

When he was back in his quarters, he uncorked the wine bottle and poured himself another small glass. Despite the pleasures of the evening, Albus was slightly tense. Perhaps Minerva's unwonted skittishness had rubbed off, he thought.

He was no fool. He knew what was troubling her, and it wasn't her N.E.W.T.s. The possibility of discovery had been an abstract concept when they had first embarked on their affair, but it had now become a reality...not once, but twice.

Two people, aside from himself and Minerva, now knew about them. And another almost certainly suspected. Filius was no fool. Albus was certain his friend would not say anything, and he didn't believe Aberforth would either, despite his animosity. Riddle was another question entirely. Albus believed he had frightened the boy into silence for the time being, but Tom was nothing if not devious. If Riddle could find a way to use his discovery against them, Albus was under no illusions about what would happen.

There was no denying that their liaison was becoming more and more dangerous; the longer it went on, the greater the likelihood that it would be discovered. The right, the honourable thing to do, he thought, would be to break it off before the damage was irreparable.

The thought clawed at him as he sat drinking the wine. He poured himself one more glass...emptying the bottle...and drank it down entirely too quickly. As the alcohol spread its delicious warmth through his body, he was able to keep the thought at bay.

Tomorrow, he thought as his eyes fluttered closed. He would think about it tomorrow.

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter 19 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

On Thursday, 1 June, Minerva sat her first N.E.W.T.s...Charms and History of Magic...and for the next six days, Albus saw nothing of her other than at meals in the Great Hall.

After the conclusion of her last exam, the Defence Against the Dark Arts practical, the following Tuesday, she was utterly exhausted and completely exhilarated. Moments after Examiner Lestrangle had dismissed her with a "thank you" and a reassuring wink, Minerva practically skipped out of the Great Hall and headed directly for Professor Dumbledore's office.

"Enter," came the voice behind the door when she knocked.

She stepped into his office and closed the door behind her, leaning against it. "Finished!" she announced.

"Congratulations, my dear!" he said. "How do you think it went?"

"All right, I think. The Arithmancy exam was a bugger, though. I'm sure I mucked up the Chaldean calculations in one section; I forgot about the differences in Imperial and Post-Achaemenid Aramaic," she said glumly.

"Poor Darius must be spinning in his grave."

"Don't tease, Albus. Besides, my stupidity may just have lost you your Galleons, don't forget."

"Don't call yourself stupid, Minerva. At least not in front of me," he said. Brightening, he added, "I happen to know that you got through Transfiguration with flying colours; Madam Marchbanks came to visit me after the exam and said she hadn't seen such an impressive student since . . . well, since me."

"Really? She said that?"

"Oh, yes. I told her, of course, that it was all down to my extraordinary teaching skills."

"Of course," Minerva said with a smirk. She opened her bag and began to retrieve her books in preparation for their lesson.

"Not today, my sweet," said Albus. She looked up questioningly.

"You have been working entirely too hard. I think the completion of your N.E.W.T.s calls for celebration, don't you agree?"

"What exactly did you have in mind, Professor?" she asked with a knowing smile.

"Step into my private quarters, and we can discuss it."

He knew this was wrong, all wrong. He had decided that the best course of action would be to break it off with Minerva before things got too far out of control.

In the days in which he had seen so little of her, he had promised himself that he would do it after her N.E.W.T.s. It had been almost easy to think of it then, when she wasn't sitting in the front row of his classroom twice per week nor looking up at him expectantly from the chair in his office after one of her transformation exercises. Now that she was standing in front of him, her eyes glimmering with happiness at finally having the weight of her exams off her shoulders, and...he hoped, despite himself...at being with him again, he found it impossible to consider hurting her, even if it was for her own good.

Give me chastity and continence, but not yet, he said to himself with a pained smile.

Albus Dumbledore, like Augustine of Hippo, would come to be venerated in his later years. Unlike Augustine, however, he would make no confession of his youthful follies. Some sins he would ultimately expiate in a fashion that would have pleased the saint; others would remain unaccounted, except in the memory of the woman who loved him.

He did not want to hurt her, no. And he needed a respite from the tension that had been creeping over him in recent weeks. There would be no harm in allowing them another few days of joy, would there?

Soon, he thought.

When they stepped through the bookcase door into his sitting room, Minerva noticed what looked like a strange type of wireless set on a side table.

"What's this?" she asked. "I wouldn't have taken you for an aficionado of *Witching Hour*."

"You are very nearly correct. It is a Muggle wireless," he told her.

"Why do you have a Muggle wireless set in your sitting room?"

"I am keeping an ear to the developments in the Muggle war."

"Developments?"

"Today, my dear, the Allies began their invasion of Europe," he answered, a small, private smile playing across his face.

"Invasion? But, Albus, that is wonderful news!" she exclaimed. "Isn't it?"

"Oh, yes. Very good news indeed. From the early reports, the British and American airborne divisions made successful landings around Caen and neighbouring villages. They met with surprisingly little in the way of armoured resistance."

She noticed the small, knowing smile again.

He said, "And Allied naval forces have been landing on the beaches of Normandy since early this morning. There is still heavy combat on several of the beaches, but the Allies appear to be gaining significant ground. It is very good news, Minerva. Very good." This time, he smiled broadly as he took both her hands and drew her into a tight embrace.

When they broke, Minerva surveyed his face for a few moments. "Albus?"

"Hmm?"

"How did you know that there would be 'developments' in the Muggle war?" She had her suspicions, of course, but she didn't really expect him to tell her anything.

"Lucky guess?" he offered.

"Of course," she said sardonically.

Weeks later, when Minerva heard more detailed accounts of the Normandy Invasion, she would hazard a guess...correct...that the diversionary tactics the Allies had employed had benefitted from magical involvement. Still years later, she would discover that Albus and Filius Flitwick had cooked up a way of charming "dummy" ships, aircraft, and even tanks, which were deployed by the Allies around the Pas de Calais to convince the Germans that the invasion would begin there. German soldiers and commanders alike would always swear that they had seen the craft move about as if in tactical manoeuvres and that actual, moving men were operating and working around these craft. It was put down to the stress of combat.

"Would you like to have a listen?" Albus asked.

"Oh, yes, please! But I thought Muggle electronics wouldn't work here. Too much magical energy or something."

"That is true, as a rule. However I find that there are advantages to being me," he said with a rather beguiling smirk as he waved his wand at the strange-looking box.

A voice suddenly filled the room with American-accented English:

"...common cause with the enemy and so betrayed their country will be removed. As France is liberated from her oppressors, you yourselves will choose your representatives and the government under which you wish to live.

"In the course of this campaign for the final defeat of the enemy, you may sustain further loss and damage. Tragic though they may be, they are part of the price of victory. I assure you that I shall do all in my power to mitigate your hardships. I know that I can count on your steadfastness now no less than in the past. The heroic deeds of Frenchmen who have continued the struggle against the Nazis and their Vichy satellites, in France and throughout the French Empire, have been an example and an inspiration to all of us.

"This landing is but the opening phase of the campaign in Western Europe. Great battles lie ahead. I call upon all who love freedom to stand with us. Keep your faith staunch...our arms are resolute...together we shall achieve victory."

The flat-sounding accent of the American was then replaced by the clipped, English tones of a BBC announcer:

"That was General Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces, speaking to the citizens of occupied France. We are informed that the King will address his subjects in just a few minutes, and we will broadcast His Majesty's speech to you as it happens . . ."

"Albus," said Minerva, a frown furrowing her pale brow, "The Muggle-borns...they will want to know about this." She added uncertainly, "Do you think they might be allowed to hear their king's address?"

He took each of her hands in his and kissed them. "That, my dear, is a lovely idea. I'll ask the Headmaster right now." He hesitated, then added, "Perhaps it would be best for you to wait in my office while I Floo-call him."

"Of course," she said and disappeared through the door.

In truth, Albus was slightly ashamed that he had not had the idea Minerva had suggested. He had been so wrapped up in his own part in the war effort and in his thoughts about Minerva that it simply hadn't occurred to him that others in the castle might benefit from information about the Muggle war.

A few minutes later, Headmaster Dippet's voice rang through the castle.

"Your attention, please! I have been informed of an important development in the Muggle war in Europe: The Allies have today launched an invasion into occupied France. Those wishing to hear the address by the Muggle king of England should report to the Great Hall immediately."

Minerva and Albus hurried through the castle, Albus clutching the Muggle wireless set under his arm. When they arrived in the Great Hall, a group of about twenty students was milling about nervously. Not all, Albus noted, were Muggle-borns. In addition, Professors Burbage and Merrythought were standing together near the High Table, talking quietly to one another.

Albus set the wireless down and spoke. "As Headmaster Dippet announced, the Allied invasion of Europe has begun. This is very good news, not only for those of you of Muggle heritage, but for all the free peoples of Europe."

Without further comment, he waved his wand at the wireless, and the BBC announcer's voice came through, startling some of the collected students. After a few moments, a baritone voice began to sound, oddly halting on the first sentence, then gaining strength, although its cadence was still strangely slow and deliberate.

"Four years ago, our nation and empire stood alone against an overwhelming enemy with our backs to the wall, tested as never before in our history, and we survived that test. The spirit of the people, resolute and dedicated, burned like a bright flame, surely, from those unseen fires which nothing can quench . . ."

By the time the king finished, many of the assembled students were weeping. Minerva was standing next to a small first-year Ravenclaw who was trying bravely and vainly to control his sobs. The boy turned a tear-stained face to her and whispered, "Me dad was RAF. He was shot down over France during the German invasion."

Minerva didn't know what "RAF" or "shot down" meant, but she took the boy's hand and gave it what she hoped was a reassuring squeeze.

As the strains of "God Save the King" began to emanate from the wireless, a small chorus of voices joined from the Great Hall. When the song ended, a voice Minerva couldn't identify shouted, "God save the King!" She thought it an odd expression...the Muggle monarch was not in any danger as far as she understood...but it obviously meant something to the Muggle-borns, as the phrase was echoed back enthusiastically.

After a few minutes, Albus told the assembled group, "Thank you all for coming. We should clear out of the hall now so that the house-elves can prepare for the evening meal."

As the students filed out, Professor Merrythought approached Albus, saying, "Why do I suspect this was your idea rather than Armando's?"

"Actually, I must confess that the idea came from Miss McGonagall," Albus said. "I was listening to the wireless when she came for her tutorial, and she suggested the Muggle-borns might want to hear their king."

"Smashing idea, Miss McGonagall," said Professor Burbage, who had joined the small group. "Makes me wonder why you didn't do a N.E.W.T. in Muggle Studies."

"I really would have liked to, Professor," answered Minerva. "But I'm afraid it just didn't fit into my schedule."

"That's a pity," said Burbage. "It would be wonderful to have at least one pure-blood in the class. It would set an important example in these troubled times. In any event, I'm very pleased you thought of the Muggle-borns today. It shows the proper spirit. How is your brother, by the way? He's in France now, isn't he?"

"Yes, Professor, at Beauxbatons."

"Good thing they're in the south...far from all the fighting," said Professor Merrythought.

"Yes, we're very thankful for that," replied Minerva.

"I have high hopes for him," said Burbage. "He was my best student last year."

"Einar is very interested in Muggles," said Minerva.

Professor Burbage smiled approvingly as she and Professor Merrythought took their leave.

When Albus and Minerva were alone, he said, "I'm sorry we didn't quite get our celebration."

"It's all right. This was more important," she answered.

"It really was very kind of you to think about the Muggle-borns, Minerva," he said, looking at her with great affection.

"You know, I hadn't really thought about what the Muggle war must mean to them until now. It was always a sort of abstract idea to me, even when I read my father's letters about his German friends and what they've endured," she said sombrely. "I'm rather ashamed of that now."

She was thinking of the little Ravenclaw and wondered how many other students had lost family in the Muggle conflict. Whatever the number, she realised how little it was acknowledged in the wizarding world.

Albus said, "Our isolation here at Hogwarts can be both blessing and curse. We feel protected from the upheavals of the Muggle world at large, but we are much more intertwined than many of us would care to admit. We cannot...we must not...ignore the wider world. The fact that you seem to understand this, Minerva, despite your pure-blood upbringing, speaks very highly both of your innate intelligence and of your father's teaching. It gives me hope that we may yet prevail over the forces of bigotry and hatred."

Nobody else will ever make me feel this way Minerva thought. *Like nothing truly terrible could happen when I'm with him.*

"We still have an hour and a half before dinner," she said. "Plenty of time to finish our tutorial."

A few minutes later, as he undressed her, he told himself, *Not now. But soon.*

Chapter Twenty

Chapter 20 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

Two days later, something happened that forced Albus's hand.

When Minerva went to breakfast Thursday morning, Albus wasn't at the High Table. It was unusual, but not troublingly so; one or another of the staff would often miss a meal or two, and Albus more frequently than most, given his involvement in matters beyond Hogwarts' walls.

The fact that he was not at lunch was worrisome, but Minerva did not become concerned in earnest until she opened the door to the Transfiguration classroom to find not Albus, but Professor Dippet standing in front of the large, black chalkboard that graced the front of the room.

"Good afternoon, Miss McGonagall," said Dippet when she stepped into the classroom, the first to arrive, as usual.

"Good afternoon, Professor Dippet." After depositing her books on her desk, she said, hoping her voice showed no more than appropriate concern, "I hope Professor Dumbledore is not unwell."

"Not at all, Miss McGonagall. He was called away on urgent business, so I will take his classes for the day."

"I see." She couldn't resist asking, "Will he be back tomorrow, then, sir?"

"I do not know when Professor Dumbledore will return," Dippet answered crisply and turned to the chalkboard, indicating that he did not intend to discuss the matter further with her.

Minerva spent the remainder of the class in speculation...*pointless*, she chastised herself...about where Albus could have gone and why he didn't inform her first.

Not that he has to tell me where he's going she thought. I'm not his keeper. Or his wife.

For the first time anyone could remember, Minerva McGonagall had trouble with a Transfiguration.

Minerva blushed bright scarlet when her mouse turned not into the graceful bird that was required by the exercise and that everyone expected to be soaring triumphantly around the classroom moments after she lifted her wand, but into a strange, feathered hybrid with whiskers, a moist, pink beak, and a long tail that kept it from taking flight despite the mottled-brown wings that had appeared on its flanks.

The Headmaster and the other students stood with mouths agape as the poor creature flapped helplessly, its tiny paws scrabbling in the air every time the useless wings pushed its misshapen, brown body up off the surface of the desk. Minerva felt tears prick at her eyes when the half-mouse-half-bird launched itself off the desk only to plummet to the floor, defeated by the laws of physics, much as its enchantress had been by the laws of Transfiguration.

Minerva scooped the tiny, quivering thing from the floor and held it out to Professor Dippet, who quickly turned the creature back into the mouse it had been. When the creature continued to shake and tremble, Minerva asked the Headmaster's permission to take it to Professor Kettleburn to see if it could be mended.

"Ah, Miss McGonagall," Kettleburn said, shaking his head. "I'm afraid the wee thing has fractured its spine. There isn't much I can do to help; it's not a magical creature, and besides, my healing spells wouldn't be much use. The kindest thing would be to put the poor creature out of its misery."

When the young Care of Magical Creatures teacher saw the tears escape from Minerva's eyes, he added kindly, "I'll see that he doesn't suffer any. Don't fret, now."

"May I watch?" she asked.

Professor Kettleburn nodded. He knew that, unlike a few other students he could name, she wasn't asking out of morbid curiosity about the process of killing. She felt miserably responsible for the creature's plight; the professor could sense it coming off of her, and although he wouldn't wish her any suffering, he was pleased to see it. It signalled a healthy respect for non-human creatures of which Silvanus Kettleburn heartily approved. It was a sentiment he tried to instil in all his students, but he was often prickled by the unpleasant thought that if they didn't have it by the time they got to his outdoor classroom, they never would, no matter what he did.

"Would you like to hold him?" he asked Minerva.

"Yes, please, sir."

She felt nothing, surprisingly, when the life passed from the mouse the moment the professor's wand touched its fur. "Is it . . . gone?" she whispered.

"Yes, Miss McGonagall. And you see? It was as I said. He didn't suffer any. He went gentle as you please," Kettleburn answered.

"Thank you, sir," she whispered, and gingerly placed the lifeless creature into the professor's meaty hand.

As she turned to go, he said, "Try not to be too hard on yourself. Sometimes death is unavoidable. It isn't your fault."

But she couldn't help feeling responsible. Later, she would reflect that the little mouse was the first casualty of her war.

/***/

A sense of foreboding enveloped Minerva as she walked down the short corridor toward Professor Dumbledore's office. She didn't expect him to be there for their Thursday evening tryst, but as she had heard nothing from him, she decided to go at the appointed hour anyway.

She was not surprised when there was no answer to her knock.

When she returned to her dormitory, she opened her trunk and retrieved the book of poetry he had given her when they first started their affair. She opened it, and her heart sank a little when she was confronted with the blank page that should have contained the night's entry.

Where was he?

Professor Dippet had said he didn't know when Albus would return, but neither did the Headmaster appear overly perturbed at his Transfiguration professor's absence. Surely, if Albus were in trouble or worse, Dippet would have been more agitated when Minerva asked him about it. Wouldn't he?

She opened her Charms textbook, intending to re-read the chapter on advanced anti-Muggle charms, but when she found herself reading the same sentence for the third time ("*Muggles are notoriously unobservant of signs of magic surrounding them and will attempt to invent 'rational' explanations for phenomena they cannot otherwise explain*"), she gave it up as a bad job. She re-packed the large, heavy textbook in her trunk and rummaged around before she found the miniature volume she was looking for.

With a tap of her wand and a whispered, "*Sicut Erat*," the tiny book grew until the title was clearly visible on the spine: *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*. She needed something more engaging than Charms theory to take her mind off her worries.

She briefly considered going down into the common room to read but decided she preferred solitude. She didn't want to run the risk of having to make small talk with her fellow Gryffindors. She settled down on her bed to read.

The next morning, she woke to find she was still in her clothes, but someone had thoughtfully covered her with a blanket and drawn the bed curtains. She joined her dorm-mates in the morning rituals of washing and dressing, and went down to breakfast.

Minerva's heart sank when she saw the empty chair at the High Table.

She had pushed her eggs and toast listlessly around her plate for a few minutes when the morning post arrived. A tawny owl swooped down over the Gryffindor table and dropped an envelope into Minerva's lap, perching on the edge of the table to wait for its reward.

"Miranda, can I cop a tiny bit of your banger for the owl? I didn't take any, and I'd hate to waste an entire sausage I'm not going to eat," she asked the third-year sitting to her right.

"Of course, Minerva," said the girl, cutting a slice off her sausage and dropping it onto Minerva's plate.

"Thanks," said Minerva and held the morsel out to the owl, who hooted its appreciation, took the offering in his beak, and flew away, presumably to enjoy it in the privacy of a nearby tree.

Minerva wiped her fingers on her napkin and plucked the envelope from her lap. The seal was blank, but when she broke it open, she couldn't resist emitting a sigh of relief when she saw the loopy handwriting gracing the parchment. It looked as if it had been hastily scrawled.

I am sorry to have left without a word to you. I was called away suddenly to attend my brother, who was injured early yesterday morning.

Please do not worry. I am well, and my brother appears to be on the mend.

There was no return address and no signature.

As relieved as Minerva was to hear from him and to know that he was well, she was worried. Not only about Aberforth's mysterious injury, but also at the terseness of the note. It gave no indication of the gravity of Aberforth's condition nor of when Albus might be returning to Hogwarts. She knew intellectually that Albus had to be circumspect, in the event the letter was intercepted or fell into hands other than Minerva's, but she couldn't help being slightly disturbed by the coolness of its tone.

There was nothing for it but to wait and hope he would be back soon.

/***/

"Gah! Those Blackrobes couldn't kill me, but are you trying to finish the job?"

Aberforth was complaining bitterly as Albus applied the salve to his burns, which meant, Albus thought, that the injured man's condition had improved significantly since the previous day.

The fact that Aberforth had only said Albus's name but issued no epithets when the latter had arrived at St Mungo's after receiving the owl notifying him of his brother's injury had shocked him more than seeing Aberforth's physical injuries.

The explosion that had destroyed Aberforth's shop and the flat above it had resulted only in several broken bones and some fairly extensive, but thankfully superficial, burns over the man's body. The bones had been healed, but the burned top layer of skin would take several weeks to finish sloughing off to allow healthy, fresh skin to emerge from beneath the charred flesh that spotted Aberforth's back and arms.

"I am sorry, Aberforth. I know it's uncomfortable; I'll try to be more gentle," said Albus as he smoothed the foul-smelling ointment over his brother's back. As much to distract Aberforth from his discomfort as to get information, Albus said, "Tell me again what you remember about the accident."

"You've heard it once, and I went through it about five times with the Aurors," said Aberforth. "I'm not going over it again."

"I'm just wondering if there's something we missed, something that might have tipped us off that they were planning to strike," said Albus, his voice low to avoid being overheard by the ward's other residents.

"Something I missed is what you mean, isn't it? Surely the great Albus Dumbledore would never have been so stupid as to get himself nearly blown up by a bunch of Blackrobes," said Aberforth.

"No, Abe. There's no reason you should have been expecting an attack. You wouldn't be a target if it weren't for me; I'm the one who should have warned you to be vigilant," said Albus.

"Leave off the self-pity, Albus. I'm the one lying here in the bed with a crispy arse." After a minute of uncomfortable silence, Aberforth added, "Anyway, this time it really isn't your fault. Like as not, they really were after me, and not just to get at you."

"How so? Why would they be after you?" asked Albus, puzzled.

"I might've thrown one of 'em out of my shop. Mebbe insulted his mother's honour, too," said Aberforth with a satisfied smirk.

"What happened?"

"One of 'em came sniffing around, asking questions that got a little too pointed, if you take my meaning."

"About what?"

"Come off it, Albus, you know damn well what. It's no secret my last name's the same as yours. Anyway, I told him to piss off and stay out of my shop. He didn't like it much. Called you a 'Muggle-lover' and a 'half-blood', said his 'friends' had some pretty interesting plans for Muggle-lovers and such once they were in control of things."

"I'm sure they do. Go on," urged Albus.

"Yeh, well, I told him that if what I heard about his mum was true, he shouldn't be so sure of his own blood status."

"Did you know the man?"

"Enough to know who he was. Went to school with his mum and dad, and a couple of right brown trouts they were, too."

"So you think the Blackrobes staged the explosion in retribution for you insulting his mother?" asked Albus with some amusement.

"Nah. I'm not so daft as all that to think I'm so important," Aberforth said. "I'm just saying it was a side benefit."

Albus sighed. "You need to pick your battles, Abe."

"Oh, I do, Albus. I do," Aberforth replied, looking at his brother, challenge in his stare.

Albus looked away first. "We need to discuss what we're going to do when you get out of here," he said.

"What 'we'? I'll go to Godric's Hollow until I can organise a job and scrape together enough to get another flat."

"You're going to need someone to tend to your burns; you can't reach your back by yourself, and the ointment needs to be applied by human hands, not magic. And unless

you have some money stashed away somewhere that I don't know about, you'll need some for food and other necessities," said Albus.

Aberforth scowled. "I'll manage. Don't you worry about me."

"Why don't you come stay with me for a while, just until you're back on your feet? I have room."

"Out of the question," said Aberforth. "Hated that place the four years I was there as a student, don't imagine it'll have grown on me much since then." He added with a nasty gleam in his eye, "Besides, where would you take your girl? Can't exactly take her to the pub for a pint and a quick one, now can you?"

"That's not a concern," said Albus coolly.

"She might disagree with you there."

"Can't we be civil about this, just for the time being? You need help, at least for now. I am in a position to provide it, but I can't run off to Manchester or Godric's Hollow every day to look after you. In the current climate, it isn't safe, and besides, I can't spare the time. If you're close by, I can see to your burns and anything else you need, and on days I can't come, I can easily arrange for someone else to do it in my place," said Albus.

Aberforth was quiet, and Albus knew he was struggling to accept that he'd have to depend on his brother for a while.

"All right. But not Hogwarts. We'd kill each other like as not if we had to share living quarters, and where would the wizarding world be then? I'll stay in Hogsmeade, if you can arrange a room somewhere." In a low, gruff voice, he added, "I'll pay you back for any expenses once I'm gainfully employed again."

Albus nodded. "I'll ask around in Hogsmeade. I should be able to arrange something by the time you're released."

"Sooner the better. This place gives me the ab-dabs."

/***/

Albus returned to Hogwarts early Saturday morning, resolved once more to end his affair with Minerva.

The attack on Aberforth had been a sobering reminder of the dangers faced by anyone close to him. He and Minerva had been unreasonably lucky in so many ways, he thought. It was clearer than ever that expulsion from school and the ruin of her reputation was the least of what might face Minerva if her relationship with him were discovered. As much as he loathed the idea of hurting her, the thought that she might be in real, physical danger because of him was intolerable.

I have been incredibly selfish, he thought. How could he have taken up with Minerva...allowed himself to fall in love with her...when he was far from a free man? He couldn't afford the luxury of close relationships, and certainly not with a young girl who had no other experience of love and what constituted a normal relationship. Experience had taught him that it was the innocent that suffered most from their association with him.

And Minerva was certainly innocent, he thought, despite her initial pursuit of him. Eighteen or not, she was a child, and a sheltered child at that. Of course, she had been very clear about what she wanted and quite clever and persistent in going about getting it. And she really was extraordinary in so many ways. Despite the differences in age and experience, they were remarkably compatible; he had felt that almost from the beginning of their acquaintance. It was rare to find a mind that was as sharp and inquisitive as his...the last time had been . . . no, he wouldn't think about that.

It was just his dumb luck that such a mind would be housed in an attractive young woman who was his student. Unfair, really. He had been unable to help falling in love with her.

No, that's an excuse, he corrected sternly. *We always have choices.*

Even if he could not have prevented his feelings, he certainly possessed the ability to control his own actions. Turning her away at the beginning might have hurt her, but what he was about to do would cause her far more pain.

Albus felt as if he had taken a Bludger to the solar plexus when he saw her face at lunch. She looked so happy, and he knew it was at least in part because he had returned. He allowed himself to smile at her briefly and felt slightly nauseated when he saw her return the smile, knowing that he would likely be granted few of them in the future.

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter 21 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

Minerva approached Albus's office door with a new feeling: trepidation. The events of the past weeks...Tom Riddle's discovery of their affair, Aberforth Dumbledore's startling admonition about her lover, and her dawning realisation that Albus was more deeply involved in two concurrent wars than she had allowed herself to believe...had shaken her out of her complacent happiness, replacing it with a nagging anxiety she couldn't suppress.

And now this business with Albus's brother.

When she arrived at Albus's door, the trepidation had been replaced by foreboding.

Stop it, Minerva, she told herself. This nervousness was irrational. *Albus is fine. We're fine.*

Her worries evaporated when she saw his dear, handsome...to her, anyway...face when he opened the door.

"How is Aberforth?" Minerva asked as soon as the door was closed behind her.

"He is recovering well," answered Albus.

"I'm very glad. Can you tell me what happened?" She was unsure if it was overstepping to ask.

"His shop was blown up. It was the Blackrobes...Grindelwald's supporters."

A cold fist gripped Minerva's heart.

Blackrobes? After Albus's brother?

The sudden realisation that Albus was in real, physical danger, probably every day of his life, broke through her consciousness in a way that hadn't happened before...she hadn't let it. But now the brutal fact would not be ignored. Albus was not invincible.

"My gods! Was he badly injured?"

"A few broken bones, now mended, and some burns, which will take some time to heal, but heal they will." After a pause, he added, "I will need to look after him for a time. He has nowhere to go. The shop was his livelihood, and he lived in the flat above it."

"I'm so sorry." She moved to set her books down at the table, but Albus put a hand on her arm, stopping her.

"Why don't we move into my private quarters?"

The sense of foreboding increased. Albus sounded grave, which was understandable given what had just happened, but Minerva felt certain it was not just the attack on Aberforth that was bothering him. Nevertheless, she kept her voice steady.

"All right."

When they were seated on the settee in his sitting room, he took her hands in his. "Minerva, we cannot continue this."

She felt her heart seem to shoot upward into her throat, but she kept silent and waited for him to continue.

"It was selfish and unfair of me to embark on this relationship with you. Not just because of our positions, but because it puts you in jeopardy. I am more involved than you realise in the war...both wars...and it is unsafe for me to form close attachments with anyone. Those known to be close to me are likely to become targets, and I could never forgive myself if anything happened to you because of our relationship."

"I don't care about the danger..."

"But I do. I cannot do the work I must do if I am concerned about what might happen to you. I must be free to focus."

"I see. And I am a distraction," she said stonily.

"You are by far the nicest distraction I've ever had..." Albus began, but Minerva was having none of it.

"Don't patronise me, Albus. Just don't."

He looked pained as he said, "You're right. I'm sorry. I'm afraid I'm not very good at this."

She swallowed her heart and smiled at him wanly. "Neither am I. I've never been left before. . . That is what you're trying to do, isn't it, Albus? Leave me?"

"Not leave you, Minerva. Just . . . protect you."

She was relentless in her pursuit of clarity. "By ending our relationship."

He let out a deep breath. How like Minerva to want to put concise words to it. "Yes."

"Are you doing this because of what happened to Aberforth?" she asked.

"Not precisely. I knew some time ago that we could not continue as we were. I just didn't have the courage to do what I needed to do. The attack on my brother shocked me out of my complacency, I suppose. It reminded me of what happens to people near to me."

"And what is that?" This was cruel, and she knew it. She hated herself for it.

"They suffer."

"And suppose I tell you that I will suffer more without you? Would that change anything?"

I am not begging . . . I will not beg she told herself sternly.

"No," he answered.

She sat looking at him, her eyes clear and dry. Then she asked him the question he dreaded most...the one he had known she would ask: "Do you love me?"

He gave her the answer he had rehearsed. "I care for you, Minerva. Very deeply. That's why I have to do this."

He was somewhat surprised that she didn't call him on his perseverating. She was silent for a few more moments, then she told him, "I love you. I always will. You need to know that."

"Minerva, you are so young. I know you think you love me, but you..."

She interrupted angrily. "Don't presume to tell me how I feel, Albus. I may be young, I may be inexperienced, but I am not stupid. I know my own heart." Her face was flushed now. She added, "I am not saying I will never fall in love with anyone else."

She didn't know if she had said it to wound him.

He ignored the stab of pain her words shot through him. "Of course. I hope you do, Minerva."

Touché, she thought.

He continued: "I shall always cherish what we've had together. And I hope in time you will find someone worthy of your love. Someone who can give you everything you want."

"Oh? And what is that?" How she hated the sarcasm that had crept into her voice, but she couldn't seem to help it. It was like a toxin she had to expel from her body.

He said, "I don't know."

"But you know you can't give it to me."

Stop, Minerva. Just stop.

"I don't know much lately, it seems, Minerva," he said with a sigh so deep it seemed to rock him physically. "But I cannot continue putting you at risk...that I do know.~~will~~ not."

"And I have no say in the matter?" she asked, trying to keep the petulance out of her voice. She felt like a child arguing with a parent, and it was a feeling she loathed.

"Not in this, no. I'm sorry."

They sat for a few moments, not speaking, while her heart cracked and fractured as he watched.

"And after the war?" she asked softly. Her anger seemed to have evaporated all at once, and he desperately wanted it back. It was better...anything was better...than the pain in her voice.

"We have no way of knowing how long that will be," he answered.

"I realise that. But if I come to you when it's all over, will you see me?"

"Of course." He didn't add, *If I'm still alive*. "I hope always to be your friend, Minerva."

There seemed to be nothing more for either of them to say.

Minerva stood and went to the table to retrieve her books. "I'm afraid I don't feel up to our tutorial today, Professor." She took the books and turned to him. "Shall I come back on Tuesday?"

"I don't think that would be wise. You are quite ready to continue your Animagus studies with Professor Falco," he said. "You should be proud of yourself, Minerva," he added.

"I am. Thank you." The anger was back, thank Merlin. She would be all right. Of course she would.

She reached the door, opened it, and before stepping through it, she turned and said, "See you in class, Professor."

When she was gone, he stood for a few seconds, not moving.

I am a damn fool.

He hadn't thought it would hurt this much.

He resisted the almost overwhelming urge to fetch a bottle of whatever was closest and get stinking drunk.

/***/

"Well, when are ye going to introduce me to this Professor Dumbledore of yours?" Thorfinn McGonagall asked his daughter as they moved into the tent that had been erected on the grounds for the leaving reception.

The lump that seemed to have taken up permanent residence in Minerva's throat since the previous Saturday jumped a little at his name. "In a bit. I thought you'd already met him, though; weren't you at Hogwarts together?" she asked.

"Oh, aye. But he was a few years behind me and in a different House. We hardly knew one another, and I'd like to meet the man properly...give him my thanks for taking such good care of my daughter. Isn't that him over there?"

"Yes, I think so." Minerva didn't move. She knew it was him, of course. She could sense him like heat, knew where he was in the room even when she wasn't looking at him.

"Well, come on, lass . . . let's go say hello." Thorfinn walked purposefully over to where Albus was talking with two parents, Minerva following along, hot panic rising in her chest with every step closer to her erstwhile lover.

When Albus spied Minerva and a man who could only be Thorfinn McGonagall heading his way, he gripped his goblet of mead a bit tighter as he continued his conversation with Mr and Mrs Vance.

The Vances politely made room for the new arrivals, and Mr Vance finished by saying, "It was a pleasure to meet you, Professor Dumbledore."

Albus responded automatically, "The pleasure was mine, Mr Vance. Both meeting you and your charming wife, and having Miss Vance as a student. If I don't see her, please wish her all the best on my behalf."

The Vances nodded their appreciation and moved off, leaving Albus, Thorfinn, and Minerva in a small, uneasy circle.

"Professor Dumbledore! I'm Thorfinn McGonagall, Minerva and Einar's father. I've been anxious to meet the man my daughter's been talking about for the past seven years," Thorfinn said, extending his hand and grinning briefly at Minerva, who returned a tight-lipped smile that didn't include her professor.

"It's an honour to meet you, sir," returned Dumbledore, taking the proffered hand and shaking it. "I have you to thank for providing me with the brightest pupil it's ever been my privilege to teach."

Minerva still didn't look at his face.

"Och, Minerva's wits are all her own doing; I just helped polish them up a bit," said McGonagall. "And I hardly know how to thank ye for all ye've done for her. Ye've gone above and beyond to help her with her studies, and I appreciate it."

It was on the tip of Albus's tongue to say it had been his pleasure, but he realised Minerva might take it to mean something he didn't intend, so he merely said, "No thanks are necessary, Mr McGonagall. Am I right in believing you tutored Minerva yourself before she came to Hogwarts?" He forced himself to glance at Minerva, who appeared

to be looking right through him.

"Aye, me and her grandmother. We took it up between us to teach both children ourselves. I'm fortunate to have had the time and resources to devote to it. Not every father or mother is so lucky."

"No." Thorfinn McGonagall's awareness of his good fortune, and his refusal to take it for granted, had been passed down to his children, Albus thought. If only more pure-blood families had the McGonagalls' perspective, there would be far less strife in the wizarding world. However, he changed the subject, saying, "I believe you and I were at school together, were we not?"

"Aye, but I'm surprised ye remember. I was two years ahead o' ye, and a Ravenclaw. And not nearly as bright and popular as Albus Dumbledore."

"Wizard chess champion, weren't you?"

"Ye have a prodigious memory, Professor Dumbledore! I'm proud to say I've passed on the knack for it to both my children. But it's fortunate for Minerva she got her mother's athletic talent; I can barely mount a broom wi'out falling off," McGonagall said with a laugh. "I'm afraid Einar's inherited my lack o' talent there."

"I'm sure you underestimate him," answered Albus. "He may not follow in Minerva's footsteps in Quidditch, but it's my understanding he's quite a duellist. And of course, he's an excellent student."

"Kind of you to say so. I am proud of my boy too. I'm looking forward to having him home this summer. Especially as it looks like I'll be losing my lass to the enticements of London," McGonagall said, looking at Minerva.

"Ah, yes, her continued Animagus training," said Albus.

"Aye, and she has ye to thank for that too, I understand."

Albus bowed his head in acknowledgement, and McGonagall continued, "And now that she's been admitted to the Auror training programme, I have little hope of seeing her until Christmas, if then."

"Oh? I didn't know you'd been accepted, Minerva," Albus said, turning to her. "Congratulations."

"Thank you, sir. Your letter of recommendation, and Professor Merrythought's, of course, were a great help."

"You'll begin training right away?" he enquired.

"Yes, sir. With the war, I think they're quite anxious to get all the interns into the programme as soon as possible."

"Indeed." He didn't trust himself to say more. He hoped that as a trainee, Minerva would be far from the front lines of the war, but given her talent and ambition, he didn't hold out much hope that she'd stay in the relative safety of the Auror office long before being placed more directly in harm's way.

"Well, we'd best let ye go. I'm sure ye've many other families who want to shake your hand. Again, I thank ye, Professor Dumbledore," said Thorfinn.

"It was a privilege, Mr McGonagall." He turned to Minerva. "I wish you all the best, Miss McGonagall. In everything."

"Thank you, sir."

Her father shook Albus's hand again and turned to go, an affectionate hand on Minerva's arm. She pulled away and looked at Albus's face for the first time since the awkward meeting began.

"Goodbye, Professor Dumbledore."

As she walked out of the tent and his life, he wondered if he'd ever see her again.

~END OF PART I~

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter 22 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

PART II

19441950

Here are seen the wave-echoing shores of Naxos,

Theseus, aboard his ship, vanishing swiftly, watched

by Ariadne, ungovernable passion in her heart,
not yet believing that she sees what she does see,
still only just awoken from deceptive sleep,
finding herself abandoned wretchedly to empty sands.

Gaius Valerius Catullus ~Carmen 64 ("Of the Argonauts and an Epithalamium for Peleus and Thetis") (52-57)

"Vous n'avez vu personne?"

"Non, personne."

"Et des animaux? Avait-il des loups, peut-être? Des corneilles?"

"Corneilles?"

"Oui. Quelqu'une . . . inhabituelle? Étrange?"

"Que voulez-vous dire? Je n'ai vu personne . . . jusqu'à ce qu'ils ont commencé à tirer sur nous . . . que dites-vous, 'des animaux'?"

The young woman was becoming agitated by Minerva's questions. This was going nowhere. Minerva gingerly blotted the injured woman's clammy forehead with the cloth she had conjured, then wiped away the blood that had run into the woman's eyes, saying, "Rien. Rien. Calmez-vous, mam'selle. Reposez-vous. L'aide médicale sera ici très peu de temps."

Minerva tried to stand, but the woman grasped her wrist with a trembling hand.

"Avez-vous de l'eau? J'ai très soif . . . je vous en prie . . ."

Minerva hesitated, not knowing if water would harm the injured woman. Looking at her, the witch decided water would not change the outcome for this poor young Muggle, and said kindly, "Bien sûr. Un moment . . ."

She turned away from the woman and drew her wand, conjuring a small tin dipper and whispering, *"Auguamenti,"* to fill it with cool water. She knelt by the woman and held the tin to her lips, supporting her head gently.

When the young woman had drunk, Minerva laid her back, and the woman whispered, "Merci . . . vous êtes un ange . . . un ange de ciel . . ."

Hardly an angel, thought Minerva.

With all her magic, she had nothing to save this young woman's...this girl's...life nor even ease her pain. Had the young woman's injuries been from a hex or curse, Minerva might have been able to buy her some time with her rudimentary knowledge of healing spells. But she had never seen this kind of injury before. The woman's torso was riddled with small, starburst-shaped holes, black around the edges of the wounds, and her pallor told Minerva that she was bleeding internally. An eerie whistle every time the woman inhaled or exhaled told an even more dire story.

"Mam'selle?" Une tendresse . . . dernière? Entendriez-vous . . . ma confession?"

Minerva was confused. Had the woman been with the Germans? A collaborator? She knelt by the woman's head once again and bent her ear to hear the whispered words.

"Je confesse . . . à Dieu . . . tout . . . puissant . . . je reconnais . . . devant ma soeur . . . que j'ai péché . . . en pensée . . . en parole . . . par action . . . et . . . par omission . . ." the woman murmured, pausing to take a wheezing breath between every other word, and Minerva realised she was praying.

". . . oui . . . j'ai vraiment . . . péché . . . C'est pourquoi . . . je supplie . . . la Vierge Marie . . . les anges . . . et tous les saints . . . et vous aussi . . . ma soeur . . . de prier . . . pour moi . . . le Seigneur . . . notre Dieu."

When the woman's face relaxed a bit, Minerva knew she was finished.

"La paix soit avec vous." It was all Minerva knew to say. The young woman suddenly grasped her hand and turned terrified eyes to Minerva as her breathing became more laboured, with a terrible liquid sound. A small bubble of blood expanded and retreated in the woman's left nostril with each breath, and Minerva had to force herself to keep looking at her face.

Minerva desperately wished she knew of some way to help this young woman, the only one left alive when she had arrived on the scene of the massacre. If only she knew some prayers that might ease her on her way...she was obviously a Catholic, like most of her compatriots. Something occurred to Minerva, and she began to sing quietly:

"Lux æterna luceat eis, Domine,

Cum sanctis tuis in æternum,

Quia pius es.

Requiem æternum dona eis, Domine,

Et lux perpetua luceat eis,

Cum sanctis tuis in æternum

Quia pius es."

By the time she had finished the final, sombre notes of Mozart's last work, the woman's chest had stopped moving, and her eyes were fixed on Minerva's face.

Minerva gently placed the woman's hand by her side, stood, and after looking around, Disapparated as quietly as she could.

/***/

"It was an ambush. There was no sign of magical involvement; all the wounds appeared to be of Muggle origin," Minerva said without emotion as she gave her report describing the immediate aftermath of the massacre of thirty-five fighters of the French Resistance near the waterfall in the Bois de Boulogne.

The Resistance and their Magical allies had long suspected there was a spy among the Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur. FFI efforts to help secure the liberation of Paris had been sabotaged time and again, and this last betrayal seemed uncanny in its prescience, given the speed and absolute secrecy that had surrounded the operation to transport weapons for the liberation efforts. Hidden among the weapons consignment had been several Portkeys, originally intended to transport important figures to key

locations around Paris when the time for the final ouster of the German occupiers came.

Minerva had been dispatched as soon as news of the massacre had come in to the French Ministry-in-exile. She had been selected, she guessed, because, as a mere trainee (*and a woman*, she thought bitterly) she was expendable. She happened to be in Metz with a group of Auror-trainees who were tracking low-level targets in Grindelwald's Blackrobe cabal. The trainees were there because the Auror ranks were stretched nearly transparent with the wars, Muggle and Magical, coming to culmination in the bloody summer of 1944. Minerva alone among the group spoke good enough French to go to the Bois by herself. Moreover, the leaders didn't want to risk any important assets, as they didn't expect any information was to be had; immediate reports were of a total annihilation of the young FFI agents. If Minerva were captured, there was nothing important she could reveal to either the Blackrobes or the SS, even under torture.

She continued: "When I arrived, there was one survivor, a woman. She was unable to tell me anything other than that they were ambushed."

"What happened to her?"

"She died in the field shortly after I arrived."

Hildebrand Abbot sighed. "Thank you, Auror-trainee McGonagall. You did well."

The director of the Auror training programme had been beyond irritated that one of his best recruits had been used in this pointless and dangerous way. But he couldn't say no to Monsieur Chemoins, who was the head of intelligence for the Free Magical French.

"Thank you, sir. If that's all, I'll go ahead and file my report."

He gave a curt nod, and she turned on her heel and left.

/***/

Minerva sat writing at her desk in the small tent she shared with the two other female Auror-trainees, stopping to stretch her cramping fingers. She ought to get one of those new Dicta-Quills, she supposed, but she hadn't had any time to shop before her deployment, and Merlin knew when she'd next be in Diagon Alley.

At first, she and her fellow interns had been excited to finally get out of the classroom and into the field, but they soon realised that hunting Dark wizards, in this instance, meant many hours of tedium punctuated by occasional bouts of sheer terror.

Minerva herself had been both excited and annoyed at the sudden call to pack up and head to France. She was as pleased as the others to get into the field at last, but she was frustrated at the interruption to her lessons with Professor Falco. One of the benefits of the long training period required of Aurors was supposed to have been that she would be in London long enough to complete her Animagus training.

Professor Falco had turned out to be very different than she had expected. He was a strict taskmaster, but he had a wicked and irreverent sense of humour, and he took great pleasure in teasing Minerva about her seriousness and primness. He had been delighted with the progress she had already made under Professor Dumbledore's tutelage, and they had been talking about attempting full transformation, but then the order to go to France had come. Transformation would now have to wait.

She finished her letter and sealed it with her wand, enclosing it with the official communiqué to the Ministry. They would, she hoped, forward her letter on to her family in Caithness. She couldn't write much, of course...nothing that might give away her location or their mission...but she wanted to reassure her father that she was safe and well and let him know how to write back through the Ministry.

Two weeks later, she was sitting in the small canteen tent when the Auror in charge of their little group called to her across the tent.

"Oi, McGonagall! Got a letter here for you."

She practically jumped up and ran to where the man was standing holding an envelope with her name on it.

"Thanks, Auror McKinnon."

When she got back to her table, she tore the envelope open and greedily devoured the note with her eyes.

3 September 1944

Castle Isleif

Caithness, Scotland

Dear Minerva,

I am so very glad to hear from you, my darling girl. You can imagine how surprised I was when I received your note a few weeks ago that you were being deployed, and how concerned I was...we all were...about your safety. I understand you can give no details, but it means the world to me, Einar, and your gran to know that you are well and that you are thinking of us. You know my heart and thoughts are with you every moment of the day, and I take comfort in the fact that you have a good head on your shoulders, a quick wit, and a ready wand, and I can only hope that these will see you safely through whatever it is you are called to do.

We are all well here in Caithness. It has been a warm summer, and the selkies have been at their mischief again. Einar and I have had to rescue four fishermen between us, and getting an Obliviator up here each time to take care of them afterwards has been quite a challenge; the Ministry is keeping a fair tight rein on their personnel, as you may imagine. I've been half tempted to take care of it myself. (Now, don't go sending any Howlers to your old da; I haven't actually done it.)

Einar was off to Hogwarts two days ago, and your gran and I are feeling rather old and lonesome. I had a letter from him today, and he's as fine as a fiddle. One bit of news that may interest you: Einar tells me they have a new Transfiguration teacher. He says the new teacher (I can't recall her name and can't be fussed to find the letter) was introduced at the Welcoming Feast with nary a word about where Professor Dumbledore has gone. I imagine it's to do with the war. There's been nothing about it in the Prophet, so there you have it. Of course, it's possible he's sitting right there with you, wherever you are, in which case, the joke's on us.

I'll close now but will write again tomorrow, now that I know how to get a letter to you. Take care of yourself, and always remember how much I love you.

Your loving,

Da

Albus was gone from Hogwarts? The idea both frightened and intrigued her. Her father was most likely right; he was probably off on some war-related mission. While she was terrified of the danger he was almost assuredly in, she couldn't help thinking they were somehow together in this fight, both in this war. She forced herself not to wonder if she might run into him.

The summer had passed in a blessed blur. After only one week's rest at home in Caithness, she had moved to London to begin her Auror training and to continue her Animagus lessons with Professor Falco. If she thought she'd been busy at Hogwarts, it was nothing compared to the constraints on her time when June rolled over into July, then to August, when the call-up had come. She didn't mind at all. She was never one to sit around, and besides, it kept her from dwelling on things she couldn't

change.

Only at night, when she lay alone, first in her narrow bed in the tiny London bedsit she had leased, then in the even narrower camp bed in the tent in the countryside of Lorraine, did she allow her thoughts to wander over her former lover. Then she permitted herself only a narrow menu of them: Where was he? What was he doing? Was he well? Did he ever think about her? She didn't allow herself to ponder this last too long.

Now she knew where he *wasn't*.

Please, keep him safe, she prayed to gods she didn't quite believe in. *safe*, she prayed to gods she didn't quite believe in.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter 23 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

Albus Dumbledore was jolted from the first sleep he had had in more than twenty-four hours when the train he was on lurched to a sudden, screeching stop. His travelling companion shot him a brief worried look. They had arrived near the border between France and Germany just outside Strasbourg, and the train had been halted so that soldiers could check the identity papers of the passengers.

Albus gave the Muggle a brief, reassuring smile. The papers the Ministry of Magic had provided for both of them had passed muster when they had each arrived in occupied France, and Albus had no reason to believe they would not do so now.

He glanced out the window and saw a group of soldiers stepping up to board the train. It looked like nothing unusual, and he sat back in his seat. A few minutes later, the compartment door slid open, and two soldiers entered.

"Ihre Papiere, bitte?" the baby-faced soldier requested politely. Albus estimated him at no more than fifteen.

"Bitteschön," Albus replied, holding his and Smythe's papers out for inspection.

"Danke." The young soldier took them and passed them to the older soldier, who peered at them closely, then at the two men sitting quietly before him.

"Ich hoffe, es ist alles in Ordnung, Herr Leutnant?" Dumbledore asked pleasantly.

The soldier examined Albus's face for a few moments before answering. "Ja, alles in Ordnung."

He handed the papers back, and the younger man gave a polite nod of his head before they left.

Albus hadn't realised he had been tense until the compartment door swung shut, and his shoulders relaxed.

"How long do you reckon until we get to Munich?" asked Smythe.

"Four or five hours, I'd guess. As long as we're not stopped again."

"Try to have a kip, then, Morgan," Smythe advised. "You didn't get much before we stopped."

"Mmm," was all Albus would commit to. The train still hadn't started up, and he'd be on alert until it did. Moreover, the stifling July heat made it hard to sleep comfortably, especially in constricting Muggle attire.

Albus had met the man he knew as Gordon Smythe in a small café near the Gare de l'Est in Paris the day before. He'd spied the man at a corner table, reading a day-old copy of *The Daily Telegraph*, as the Minister had told Albus he would be.

Albus had walked up to the man and introduced himself as Llewellyn Morgan, and the two had taken a meagre lunch, talking of things of little consequence. They left the café together and went to a hotel not far from the station and went up to Smythe's room, Albus casting a number of anti-eavesdropping charms after having checked for signs of devices, magical or Muggle, that might allow their conversation to be overheard. Anyone seeing the two of them going in together would likely think them a couple of poofs off for an afternoon shag, as the hotel was quietly notorious as a trysting place, which was why it had been selected.

They went over the plans in detail, making sure each man had memorised their cover story. To casual enquirers, the two would be business associates...British ex-pats living in France...travelling to visit some of Munich's dozen-odd breweries in hopes of starting their own Bavarian-style brewery operation outside Paris, a city currently teeming with young German soldiers yearning for a little bit of home.

Albus was never to learn what Smythe's role in the Muggle war was; he was only under instructions to see that the man got safely to Munich, where they would part ways. The paths of the Muggle and wizarding wars had overlapped, and the chaos that had enveloped much of Eastern Europe as the Muggle dictator's megalomania and lack of military prowess slowly strangled his ambitions had displaced thousands of wizards and witches as well as millions of Muggles, and it had provided Gellert Grindelwald and his supporters with new opportunities to attack the stability of wizarding society in the region. Nevertheless, the governments of wizarding Europe had been reluctant...rightly, Albus thought...to intervene in Muggle affairs, except where they had the potential to significantly affect the wizarding world. And of course, Gellert Grindelwald had his own plans for Muggles...plans that could only be aided by an Axis victory in the Muggle war. The mad Austrian Muggle had provided a blueprint for the mad Swiss wizard. Albus wondered if Gellert saw the irony in it.

Albus had not been surprised when Minister Greengrass had essentially ordered him to go into the field to find Gellert Grindelwald. He had known he would eventually be called upon to do it, and he was quite ready, although he had been dreading it. He told himself that he had hesitated only because he wanted the Ministry's backing before setting out on a mission with such potentially far-reaching consequences for the international wizarding community, but that was only partly true. When he was completely honest with himself...lately, only when in his cups, it seemed...he admitted that the other reason was that he dreaded seeing Gellert again. Dreaded it like the dragon pox. He was not terribly afraid of being killed...a distinct possibility...but he was very much afraid of the temptation.

Albus had been so close to losing himself with Gellert all those years ago, and it had turned out that the price of saving his own soul had been shockingly high. Seeing Gellert Grindelwald again would bring those long and carefully sequestered memories flooding inexorably to the fore again. Memories, Albus allowed himself to realise only on those dark, Firewhisky-soaked nights that followed the Minister's summons, that were not all bad.

Gellert had been preternaturally seductive for a seventeen-year-old. Albus had been drawn to the younger boy like a Niffler to gold, starving for affection, understanding, and the thrill of being challenged by a nearly matched intellect after weeks of mouldering away in Godric's Hollow with only a fractious adolescent and a damaged, vague child for company. No amount of tea and talk with his sympathetic and learned neighbour, Bathilda Bagshot, could pierce the loneliness and, it must be said, the resentment that had been simmering within the breast of the brilliant and naïve eighteen-year-old Albus Dumbledore by the time Bathilda's young nephew had come to Godric's Hollow.

It had been all too easy, Dumbledore recalled ruefully, for Gellert to convince him of the rightness of his dreams of wizard supremacy. Albus's anger had finally found a focus, albeit one he would not have admitted, even to himself. Those Muggle boys . . . if not for their stupidity...their *bestiality*...Ariana would have been whole, his mother and father would have been alive, and Aberforth would not have been the quiet, seething mass of dependence he had become. And Albus would have been free to pursue his brilliant destiny. If not for those Muggles . . .

And then it had all come crashing disastrously down around him, and in the space of only ten minutes, he had lost everything he loved.

Albus had spent the decades since Gellert avoiding temptation, travelling, burying himself in academic research and study, and finally taking refuge at Hogwarts. He had thought himself safely cloistered, far from serious temptation then, but Minerva had put paid to that pleasant delusion.

He had had lovers after Gellert; they had all been women, and women with whom he could never have fallen in love. That had been a conscious choice on his part. Falling in love with Minerva McGonagall had come as a shock. In addition to the almost comical banality of a middle-aged teacher panting after his nubile, teenaged student, Albus had been troubled by the nagging feeling of familiarity his longings had brought with them.

There had been one night...that terrible, endless night after Minerva had left Hogwarts and Albus Dumbledore forever...during which he had downed almost two-thirds of a bottle of Ogden's and had finally fallen asleep only to dream of Gellert for the first time in years. In his whisky-fuelled stupor, Albus had seen the young man Gellert had been...all corn-silk blonde hair and cherry lips and old, old eyes...and had been seized with such joy. Dream-Albus had run to embrace him, even as he knew he should pull his wand and destroy the young man who would grow into the greatest threat the wizarding world had ever seen, and as he stroked the beautiful hair and kissed the downy cheek of his boyhood love, he had found his fingers running through tresses that were raven-dark. When he pulled back to look at the face of his dream-love, he had found it was Minerva's. Except the eyes...those remained the same pale, piercing blue, and far too knowing for the fresh, pretty face of the eighteen-year-old girl man-Albus loved.

"Minerva?" he had asked fearfully, and she had answered by pulling his face close for a kiss that seemed to last for ages. As he had kissed dream-Minerva, he had opened his eyes and found, to his horror, that he was looking into the soft, unfocussed, sea-blue eyes of his sister.

He had woken with a shout on his lips and an erection in his pants, which shamed him as much as the first one he had gotten when the then-youthful Madam Soranus had run her wand over his groin during his physical in his second year at Hogwarts.

The next morning, Albus had poured the remainder of the bottle of Ogden's down the loo and delivered the two unopened ones that sat in his liquor cabinet to a happily surprised Horace Slughorn. Albus promised himself he would never drink anything stronger than wine or ale again.

Albus's mind wandered over this terrain as he sat in the railway car that would deliver him to confront the mistake he had made in his youth...the mistake that had led him to everything that had come after.

He was pulled abruptly from his sleepy ruminations when a sudden whiff of magical energy penetrated his consciousness. He was immediately on the alert. He and Smythe had taken the Muggle train to avoid detection by the Blackrobes, who, the Ministry knew from intelligence reports, were monitoring all magical means of transport into and out of the country. Even Apparition wasn't safe, as there were spots all around the border set up to detect any significant magical activity. Gellert was obviously expecting him.

The presence of another witch or wizard on the train was not troubling in itself; wizarding folk sometimes used Muggle forms of conveyance, especially in troubled times when wizarding methods could prove dangerous. No, what bothered Albus was that he hadn't detected this presence before, which meant that the witch or wizard in question had most likely boarded the train at their current stop rather than at a proper station.

Albus focussed his energy on Occluding. A strong shield would dampen, but not eliminate, the reverberations of his very strong magical signature that would be detectable to any skilled witch or wizard who was on the alert for them. He put a hand on Smythe's arm, and when the man looked at him questioningly, he whispered, "Stay alert. If anything happens, keep your head down and follow my instructions to the letter, understood?"

Smythe nodded curtly.

Albus opened the book he had in his hands...*The Hotel Majestic*...and signalled to Smythe to do the same. Although ostensibly focussed on the novel, Albus kept watch on the corridor through the compartment window out of the corner of his eye. The soft *thrum* of magical energy increased until Albus heard the footsteps in the corridor. He saw the figure outside the compartment as it moved past, then stopped and turned back. Albus saw the triumphant flash of the wizard's eye through the compartment door window and drew his wand as the door began to slide open. He allowed the wizard to take a half step into the compartment before he cast his *Petrificus Totalus*, simultaneously barking to Smythe, "Get down!"

The other wizard's half-cast *Avada Kedavra* bounced harmlessly off the seat next to Albus, its watery, blue-green light rapidly evaporating in the aftermath of its caster's fall.

As Albus pulled the Petrified wizard into the compartment, he told Smythe, "Take a look in the corridor, see if anyone's there."

"No one," reported Smythe a moment later and moved to help Albus lay the immobile man on the seat. Albus searched the wizard, who was wearing the uniform of a Muggle SS officer, and removed a card identifying him as "Prüss, Gunther, Obersturmführer". Albus took the man's wand and handed it to Smythe.

"Keep this safe; don't try to use it."

He pointed his wand at the man and cast: *Mutatio Librum*!

"Christ on a cracker!" exclaimed Smythe as he stared at the compact, black volume that had, moments ago, been the fake SS officer.

Albus picked up the book and said, "You've never seen magic before, I take it?"

"No," replied Smythe still staring at the space the book had occupied on the seat. "Well, that is . . . I saw that fellow...your Minister...come into the PM's office via the fireplace, but that was nothing like this."

Albus nodded and said, "I need you to understand something, Smythe: what I have done is considered unethical in my world. We don't go around changing people into objects willy-nilly. If these were normal circumstances, I merely would have incapacitated the man and delivered him to the proper authorities, but these are hardly normal circumstances, as I'm sure you'll agree."

"Too right," said Smythe. "So what do we do with him . . . it . . . him?"

Albus handed the book to his companion. "You're going to take this with you, and if and when you get the chance, you're going to get it back to your people with the wand and instructions to turn it over to our Ministry."

"Why me? Why not you?" said Smythe. It was not a complaint, merely a question.

"Because you have a better chance of surviving to do it than I do."

There was a moment of silence, then Smythe said quietly, "All right, Morgan." Looking at the book, he chuckled and said, "It had to be a Bible."

"Why?"

Smythe looked at his companion and said, "I'm an atheist."

The two men exchanged grim smiles, then sat down as the train began to squeal to complaining life.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter 24 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

All the world was pain.

When Minerva became aware of being alive, the agony that was the only thing that existed focussed her mind in a way that none of her Animagus or other magical exercises had ever done.

After a few moments...or hours, or days...in which pain was entire locus and purpose of her existence, she became aware of a voice, but she couldn't make out whose it was or what it was saying. Then something moved, and there was more pain, and she knew nothing else for a time.

A new voice eventually wormed its way into her consciousness, and after a few seconds, Minerva found she could understand some of the words.

". . . transport . . . unstable . . . bleeding . . ."

She forced herself to open her eyes and was immediately blinded by the sunlight. When she closed them, she heard the voice again.

"Whoa, whoa . . . stay with me, McGonagall . . . open your eyes . . . come on . . ."

She felt a hand at her cheek, lightly slapping it, and she opened her eyes again, wanting to tell her assailant to stop it . . . to let her sleep . . .

"There you are . . . good girl . . ."

Minerva found herself looking into the dirty and worried face of Senior Auror Greg McKinnon.

"We're getting you out of here, McGonagall . . . just hang on a little longer, right?"

"What" she tried to say. Was that her voice?

"Don't try to talk. Do you remember the attack? Blink your eyes once for yes, twice for no."

Minerva thought.

Attack?

She remembered sitting in the tent, listening to McKinnon give instructions . . . what were they? She panicked for a moment when she realised she didn't remember what they were. She tried to sit up, but the pain slammed her back down before she had moved more than an inch.

"Take it easy. I'm not surprised if you don't remember anything. Blink once for yes, twice for no: Do you know who I am?"

She blinked.

"That's good. Very good. Now, in case you haven't figured it out...no you don't! Stay with me, McGonagall!"

Minerva felt more light slaps against her face.

She had tried to close her eyes again, but that made him shout. She decided to try to keep them open . . . anything to keep him from shouting and slapping her.

He said, "In case you haven't figured it out yet, you were attacked, and you're injured, but we're working on getting you out of here."

Suddenly, an image came to her: crouching in a small trench with Johnson, watching a group of Blackrobes . . . then running . . . then a blast of light . . . then . . . then . . . But try as she would, nothing more would come.

"Johnson . . ." she croaked.

"Quiet, McGonagall. Most of the others are accounted for, and it looks like you got the worst of it. But you're going to be fine. And anyway, Bones looks worse...you'll be able to compare scars," said McKinnon, giving her what she decided he believed to be a reassuring wink.

Another Auror, whose name Minerva couldn't remember, joined McKinnon, who was kneeling over her.

"Okay, we're ready with the Portkeys, but we've only got three, and they're not that strong. Who goes first?"

McKinnon replied, "You take McGonagall here with Bones. They're priority one-A. Tell them she's had fifty millilitres of Blood Replenishing Potion. Bones hasn't had anything but a compression bandage on her face. Watch her neck. Looks like she took the brunt of it to the head. Send Finnegan with Potter and Barnes, and Jones goes with Corner and McLaggen."

"Yes, sir. What about the bodies?"

Bodies?

"Leave them."

The new Auror looked at Minerva, saying, "Don't try to move. I'll be back in a tic, then we'll be off."

True to his word, he was back a minute later, Levitating another person Minerva didn't recognise in front of him, laying him or her down next to Minerva.

She realised who it was when she heard the voice complain, "Screw you, Prewett . . . I could've walked."

"Boss's orders, Bonesy. And stop moving so much unless you want to finish breaking your neck."

Minerva couldn't turn her head, but out of the corner of her eye she was able to see Amelia's shoulder, which was covered in blood.

"Amelia?"

"Yes. Is that you, Minerva?"

"Yes."

"Thank Merlin. I thought you were dead when that tree hit you."

Tree?

"How are you?" Minerva finally managed to wheeze, and it was agonising.

Minerva heard Amelia give a short, snorting laugh. "A bit better than you, I'd say . . . although my vision isn't so great at the moment. You're not going to die on me, are you McGonagall? Decent tent-mates are hard to come by."

Amelia's presence and her familiar banter were comforting, although Minerva wished she could see her friend and find out how badly she was injured. If she was being sent . . . wherever they were going . . . along with Minerva, she had to be worse than she sounded. Because Minerva wasn't at all sure she wasn't going to die.

I can't die. Da would be so upset. And I'll never see Albus again . . .

Forcing herself to keep her eyes open despite the glare of the sun and the seductive call of sleep and blessed oblivion, Minerva tried to speak more to help her stay alert, but found she had little breath. She tasted blood in her mouth.

Panic threatened, and she grasped for something to focus on to keep calm and alert.

Pain. Focus on the pain. Where is it coming from? Inventory of systems . . . What was the mnemonic? 'Sir, my cunt is nearly ready . . .'. . . Skeletal, muscular, circulatory, integumentary, respiratory . . . What's next? . . . 'It expects . . . Immune, excretory . . . It expects . . .'

But she couldn't finish it. Besides, she couldn't isolate where the pain was coming from because it seemed to be coming from everywhere . . . it seemed to be coming from the air around her . . .

The Auror was back.

"All right, ladies, we're ready to go. Bonesy, take hold of this. McGonagall, I'm going to put your hand on the Portkey . . . you just hold on, all right?"

Minerva felt something hard and smooth at her fingers and closed them around it. She felt cold, strong fingers wrap around hers.

"Okay . . . activating the Portkey now . . . we go in five . . . four . . . three . . . two . *hold on!*"

The tug took what little breath Minerva had left away, so she didn't know if she was screaming aloud or not, and by the time the Portkey had delivered her to the Hôpital Magiques-Malades St-Peregrine, she had lost consciousness again.

When Minerva awoke again, it was dark, and she had no idea how much time had passed since the forest. She blinked several times and found she was able to move her head without agonising pain. There appeared to be four beds in the ward, all occupied. She thought the person in the bed next to hers was Amelia, but she couldn't be sure without closer inspection.

She was enormously relieved to find that most of the pain seemed to be gone, although she didn't test the theory by trying to move. She realised with disgust that she was afraid. When she finally worked up the courage to try to sit, she found she was Stuck to the bed. Someone didn't want her moving about, and at the moment, she was happy to oblige.

A few minutes later, a mediwitch came in and went to each of the beds in turn, waving her wand over the prone forms, then making notes in a small notebook that hovered beside her.

When she got to Minerva, she exclaimed, "Ah! Vous avez réveillé! Dites-moi, Mademoiselle McGonagall, comment vous sentez-vous?"

Minerva's brain felt sluggish, and she had trouble understanding the mediwitch's question. "I'm sorry . . . I don't . . ." she said.

"Oh, I am sorry, Mademoiselle . . . I forgot you are English. I asked 'ow you are feeling? Do you 'ave any pain?"

Minerva didn't correct the woman to tell her she was *not* English, thank you very much. "I feel much better, thank you. I'm not sure about pain . . . I haven't been able to move yet."

"That is very good, mademoiselle. You are not to move yet; that is why there is a Sticking Charm on you." She ran her wand over Minerva three times slowly, then, nodding with satisfaction, made her notes and walked out the door, saying, "I will send your 'ealer in to see you soon, mademoiselle."

When the Healer came in, he looked very pleased to see her awake and alert. "Well, Mademoiselle McGonagall! Your friends will be very glad to know you are awake!"

"My friends?"

"*Oui*. The gentleman who brought you and another one 'ave come by two times to look in on you and Mademoiselle Bones."

Minerva tried to remember . . . Oh! The Auror who brought them here and . . . who was the other? Auror McKinnon? Most likely.

"Can you tell me what happened to me?"

"I do not know 'ow you were injured, mademoiselle. Possibly you were caught in the Muggle fighting? We 'ave quite a few witches and wizards 'ere who 'ave been injured by that way."

"I meant, what were my injuries?"

"Ah, yes. Well, you 'ad several broken ribs and a punctured lung. You also 'ad a tear in your liver, and two smashed vertebrae. You are very lucky to be alive, Mademoiselle McGonagall."

"Yes, thank you for saving my life. How long will I be here?" she asked, not quite knowing where "here" was.

"Well, we 'ave repaired the lung and the liver, and we were able to re-grow the vertebrae. Your ribs will take a little longer to 'eal, and we want to make certain your spine is fully 'ealed before we let you go 'ome."

"Thank you, monsieur. Do you think you could release the Sticking Charm now? I promise not to move too much."

He gave a quick nod of his head and waved his wand, releasing her and saying, "I will give you something for pain now."

When Minerva started to remonstrate, he cut her off, "No, mademoiselle, please do not argue. You feel well now, but believe me, the pain will return when the potion you 'ad before wears off. I do not want you to injure yourself further by moving about because of pain."

Minerva dutifully swallowed the dropper-full of potion the Healer gave her.

When he had gone, she heard Amelia's voice from the next bed.

"Minerva, you're awake."

"Evidently."

"Thank Merlin. I didn't think you'd ever wake up," Amelia said, sitting up and looking over at her friend.

"Why? How long was I out?"

"I don't know exactly because they put me out shortly after I got here, but it's been two days that I know of."

"Two days!"

"Yes. Amazing, isn't it?"

Minerva gasped when she looked over at her friend, who chuckled at the reaction.

"I look a sight, don't I?"

"No, it isn't that . . . it's just . . ." The truth was that Amelia did look frightening. There were heavy bandages all around her head, and a large gauze dressing covered her left eye. Below the bandage resided a mass of cuts and bruises that made the left side of Amelia's face look like a grisly porridge.

"Don't lie to me, McGonagall, I know what I look like."

"You look like someone who's been in a fight."

"And lost."

"Did we lose?"

"How much do you remember?"

"Not much," admitted Minerva, although fragments of the incident were coming back.

"We were tracking a group of Blackrobes in the Ardennes. We figured they were hiding out there because of all the Muggle activity around. Anyway, something gave away our position, and they attacked. We were outnumbered, but we did manage to get three of them...bagged one myself," Amelia said with pride.

She continued, "Then the backups came in...McKinnon and the rest...and the Blackrobes must've panicked, because they started to run, and one of them used a *Bombarda* that uprooted a bunch of trees. You took a huge branch right in the belly, and I got nicked by a bunch of the debris. That's the long and the short of it."

"Was anyone killed?"

"We lost Johnson and O'Connor in the field. Everyone else is all right, says McKinnon," Amelia replied soberly.

The two women were quiet for a minute, then Minerva asked, "Are you all right, Amelia?"

"Oh, sure. They said the branch cracked my skull, and that's why they're keeping me here for a few more days, but I suspect it's just because that Froggy Healer likes to look at my tits."

"Well, we know that's not why they're keeping me. Not much to look at there."

"It's quality, not quantity, McGonagall. That's what counts," said Amelia. "Take it from a connoisseur of tits."

Minerva laughed, which hurt her ribs.

"Oh, sorry, Minerva," said Amelia when she saw her friend wince.

"It's all right. It's good to laugh."

"Anyway, it looks like we're both going to heal up fine. Except for my eye . . ." Amelia said.

"What about your eye?"

"Gone."

"What?"

"Now, don't get your tartan in a tangle, Miss McGonagall, but yeah, they couldn't save it. They say I can get a magical replacement when I get back to Mungo's. They won't do it here because they don't have a good supplier, and anyway, it will take a lot of therapy to get used to it. What do you think . . . should I get blue, or something else? Maybe green like yours. Might be fun to have a mismatched set . . ."

Minerva knew from Amelia's rapid-fire speech that she was putting up a brave front. Not that Amelia wasn't brave...she was that in spades...but Minerva was certain that her friend was worried that the loss of an eye would knock her out of the Auror programme for good.

She smiled at Amelia's banter, but inwardly she wept for her friend. Amelia had worked long and hard for her spot in the programme, and even harder once she was in. She was older than the other recruits because when she had applied right out of Hogwarts, they weren't taking witches.

So Amelia had decided to make herself a nearly irresistible candidate. She had spent two years studying with the best duelling master and Dark Arts scholars she could afford while working in a Diagon Alley apothecary. Then she had taken a year at the Salem Witches' Institute to study international magical law, selling the small house her grandmother had left her to finance her studies.

When she had come back to England, the situation on the Continent had escalated enough that the Auror programme was taking any comers who could meet the stringent requirements, regardless of gender.

She and Minerva had been assigned to a tent with Elizabeth Barnes, the only other female trainee. As the only women in a traditionally male field, they banded together, but Amelia and Minerva had become especially close. Minerva admired Amelia for her determination and liked her for her ready wit and her piercing intelligence.

"Maybe you can get an eye for each mood . . ." Minerva said, following Amelia's cue. If jokes were reassuring to her friend, then Minerva would joke.

Minerva and Amelia were both released two days later, and Auror Training Programme Director Abbott came to collect them.

"You'll come back to the office for debriefing," he told them. "Then I'll have someone Apparate you back to London."

When both women started to argue that they were perfectly capable of Apparating on their own, Abbott put up his hand, saying, "Enough. Auror-trainee McGonagall, Auror-trainee Bones, you *will* follow orders."

When they finally arrived at the Ministry in London, Minerva was surprised and delighted to find her father waiting for her.

As soon as she had stepped into the Auror Department office, Thorfinn pulled her into a tight embrace that hurt her still-sore ribs.

"Da, let go . . . you're hurting me!"

He released her, then wiped a large handkerchief across his face. "Och, I'm sorry, Minerva. I just couldn't help it. I'm so glad to see ye in a single piece."

Minerva put her arms around him, saying, "I'm glad to see you too. I've missed you terribly."

"Are ye really all right, Minerva?"

"Yes, Da. I'm just still sore is all, and they want me to have a rest before coming back."

"An' that ye will. I'm here to take ye home, and under strict orders to keep ye quiet for a month."

"A month!"

"Aye, and no complaints from you, lass. That Abbott fellow said he'd have me up on charges if I let ye go before you're fully healed, and I intend to take him at his word."

Out of the corner of her eye, Minerva caught sight of Amelia looking slightly uncomfortable.

"Oh, Da . . . I'd like you to meet Amelia Bones. Amelia, this is my father, Thorfinn McGonagall."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir," said Amelia.

"The pleasure is mine, Miss Bones," said Thorfinn. "Minerva's written to me about ye."

"Oh, dear," said Amelia.

Thorfinn laughed. "Not to worry, Miss Bones. Minerva thinks the world of ye."

"And I of her, sir," replied Amelia.

At that moment, the door opened, and an elegantly dressed witch with blonde hair and eyes the unusual shape and colour of Amelia's came in.

"Oh!" she said, clapping her hand over her mouth when she saw Amelia.

"Now, Mum," tutted Amelia. "Don't make a scene. My face will heal, my hair will grow, and I'm getting a brand new eye out of the bargain."

"I'm sorry, Amelia . . . it's just a shock," said the woman, moving to embrace her daughter.

When they broke, Amelia said, "Mum, this is Minerva McGonagall and her father, Thorfinn."

"Elisabeth Bones," said Madam Bones, offering her hand to Thorfinn, who shook it. "Delighted to meet you."

The four talked of this and that for a few minutes before going their separate ways.

That evening, after a long, celebratory dinner with her father and grandmother, Minerva was heading up to bed when her father said, "Nice family, those Boneses."

"Yes. I've really come to care for Amelia. She's become a good friend."

"Have you met her father?" asked Thorfinn, a bit too casually for Minerva to believe it was an idle question.

"No. I believe he died a few years ago. Why?"

"Oh, no reason. I just thought we might invite Amelia and her mother up for a weekend sometime."

"That would be nice, Da," Minerva said. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Minerva. Sleep well, my darling girl," he said, kissing her forehead.

Minerva climbed the stairs with a wry smile on her face and gladness in her heart at being alive and with the people she loved.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter 25 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"We think he's using a magical fortress under the Zeiss Optical factory...the one in Schandauer Strasse...as a headquarters," said Fassbaender.

"It would make sense," Aegeus Shackbolt said. "It would be fairly easy for his men to come and go without attracting much notice.

"I concur," said Albus. He waited while Fassbaender translated into German for Weiss, who passed the information on to Wronski in Polish.

Albus had arrived in Dresden two days earlier, after receiving intelligence that the beautiful Saxon city was Grindelwald's likely location. It fit: the city was an active communications and rail centre, with several factories on its outskirts and enough military activity that the coming and going of Grindelwald's foot soldiers would not be remarkable.

Moreover, thought Albus, the rich history, culture, and Baroque beauty of the city would have appealed to the Gellert he knew. All in all, it would make an ideal spot from which to birth a new world order.

The tiny, ad-hoc band of fighters that had joined Albus had been selected by leaders of several European wizarding governments from among their various elite law enforcement corps. It consisted of six fighters in addition to Albus: one English, one French, two German, one Polish, and one Czech. They were selected for their duelling skills, demonstrated judgment, and ability to keep cool under extreme stress. In addition, none of the group tended to be showy with their skills, and none was especially well-known in the wizarding world. Except Albus, of course.

He was uncomfortable at being the de-facto leader of the group...he was not a military strategist...but everyone present knew that it would ultimately be down to a duel between him and Grindelwald, and that meant he called the shots, for better or worse. The other fighters would be responsible for ensuring Albus got where he needed to go and that he would be relatively unmolested once he got there. He hadn't thought much about getting back.

"I think we should watch the area for twenty-four hours," Albus said. "Try to pinpoint how they're getting in...assuming they've got anti-Apparition wards on the place."

Once again, Fassbaender translated. Before translating for the Pole, Weiss said something back to Fassbaender in German, and Albus nodded.

"Weiss says she's already sussed out the exterior of the place," Albus reported to the Englishman and the French fighter, who didn't speak German. "She's seen what she thinks are Blackrobes coming and going from the entry that adjoins the pedestrian bridge."

Weiss relayed the conversation to Wronski.

It was a highly inefficient method of communication, thought Albus, but Babel fish were extremely hard to come by, and they didn't have the resources to keep them alive in the field, in any event. Thank Merlin Jeek spoke English and German, as none of the others had any Czech.

The group determined to keep another watch on the area for the evening and following day.

Twenty-four hours later, Shackbolt, Fassbaender, Weiss, Wronski, and Delacroix were all dead, and Albus was waiting to become so.

It had gone well until the bombs started falling.

Jeek and Delacroix had been able to Imperius a pair of Blackrobes into dismantling the protective charms that hid the entryway to Gellert's bunker. From there, it had been an easy thing to Stun and disarm anyone coming in or going out...the frozen bodies were stacked on a factory pallet and covered with a heavy oilcloth tarp "borrowed" for the purpose...until the way seemed clear enough to launch an assault.

Five of them had gone in: Jeek and Shackbolt, then Albus, flanked by Wronski and Fassbaender, whose job was to protect Albus until he got to Grindelwald. There had been fewer than ten Blackrobes in the room, and the duelling between them and the five fighters had taken less than two minutes to play out, with most of Gellert's men falling to Shackbolt or Jeek, while several made what they doubtless thought would be an escape, only to be felled by Stunners from the waiting Weiss and Delacroix.

Gellert Grindelwald was nowhere to be found.

Albus advised them to keep their wands at the ready, then he cast a series of complex spells with incantations in languages none of the others recognised...Aramaic and Ancient Greek, as it happened...and suddenly, there Gellert was.

He looked very much as he had when Albus had loved him. Older and thinner, to be sure, but still Gellert and still beautiful. Albus knew that the same could not be said for himself.

"You've come to me. I always knew you would," Gellert said in lightly accented English, his lips just as red and full, teeth just as white and even as Albus remembered them.

"No," Albus replied. "I've come *for* you. There's a difference."

"Always the pedant," replied Gellert, "and always so disappointing."

Albus felt the other fighters move in behind him and put his hand up to stop them, silently willing them not to get too close. "Will you turn over your wand? You are quite outnumbered," he told Gellert.

"So it would appear." A sudden flash from Gellert's wand, and the two fighters on either side of Albus burst in a cloud of dust. "But the odds are looking better for me now, no?"

Albus cast to deflect Gellert's next spell, and all at once, they were duelling.

Ropes of fire, whirlwinds of malevolent gas, hissing snakes made of acid...it was all the remaining fighters could do to protect themselves from the onslaught of spells coming from both men's wands. It seemed to go on and on, with neither wizard gaining the advantage. When the ground began to shake under their feet, they assumed it was a spell, or a series of them.

After a seeming eternity of casting, dodging and helpless *Protego*-ing, Shackbolt and Jeek heard the ceiling above them begin to collapse, bringing burning beams and other material down into their midst, and they realised that something else was at work here. Grindelwald apparently realised it too, as he was struck by one of the beams and had to take a moment to extinguish the fire that had caught on his sleeve, crying, "*Was ist das Teufel?*"

The momentary distraction was enough. Albus gathered his strength and magic and cast a Petrification hex that exploded through Gellert's powerful shields, which came apart in shimmering bands of multicoloured light and floated to the ground among the cinders. Gellert's wand flew from his hand to Albus's as the Swiss wizard's face fixed itself in the grimace of outrage and disbelief that all despots surely wear when they finally fall.

At the same moment, the remainder of the ceiling collapsed, a large wooden beam hitting Shackbolt squarely on the head, caving it in, and trapping Albus by the leg.

Albus shouted at Jeek, "Take him! Go! Now!" As Jeek tried without success to Levitate the beam from him, Albus continued yelling, "Forget me! Take Grindelwald! Don't let him get away!" He knew that if he were to be killed or fall unconscious, the power of the hex would fade, allowing the still-conscious Gellert a chance of escape. "Go now! Now!" The walls of flame seemed to be closing in around them, and Jeek looked torn between following orders and rescuing his comrade.

Albus grabbed him roughly by the trouser leg. "The others are dead, Jeek. If he escapes, they will have died in vain. Take him!"

Jeek moved quickly to Grindelwald, and Albus saw him remove the stopwatch from his pocket. He watched as the young man, his eye still glued to Albus's, grabbed hold of the Petrified wizard, then depressed the button to activate the Portkey. Five seconds later, they were gone.

Albus prayed to whoever might be listening that the international magical law enforcement agents waiting on the outskirts of Strasbourg would be there to take custody of the fallen Dark wizard. He also prayed that they would not kill him on the spot.

As he felt the searing heat of the flames closing in, Albus grasped Gellert's wand and cast a Shield Charm. It would protect him from the flames, but he knew his air would eventually run out, and with the fire consuming the atmospheric oxygen, he would be unable to draw any from the air around him into the bubble created by the shield. When his oxygen ran out, he would lose consciousness, then the charm would fail, and he would be consumed by the flames.

So he waited to die.

He turned his head and saw Aegeus Shackbolt lying dead a few feet away. Albus was glad he would not be the one to deliver the news to the Unspeakable's young wife...new to England, Albus knew, and now with no family save for her infant son.

Such a waste. And unnecessary if he hadn't been too much a coward to have faced Gellert down when it first became apparent that he was gathering followers.

And in the end, seeing Gellert again hadn't been nearly as hard as he had thought it might be. If he had felt any small twinge of regret at having to duel him, it had been effectively obliterated along with Konstantyn Wronski and Renate Fassbaender when Gellert had cast the first spell. Gellert was beautiful and brilliant, and a killer of innocent men and women. Albus could not forget it, nor that but for the grace of God, or Merlin, or dumb luck he might have been huddled down in the bunker with Gellert, planning the enslavement of millions. But for Ariana.

Albus looked at the wand in his hand. Was it the Elder Wand? The Deathstick? Maybe. He felt nothing. And for it and the other Hallows, he and Gellert had been willing to kill. Gellert had surely done so, and Albus had no doubt that he would have followed Gellert to the ends of the earth in his quest.

But for Ariana. Her death, as accidental and meaningless as it had surely been, had been his salvation.

And now he would finally die, with the putative Hallow in his hand. It was fitting somehow, he thought.

For a time, the pain in his leg kept him alert, but eventually he began to feel dizzy, whether from pain or blood loss or lack of oxygen, he didn't know. As he drifted along at the very edge of consciousness, he thought of the people he loved: his mother and father, Ariana, Aberforth...even Aberforth...and Minerva. Their faces danced and blended in his mind's eye as he faded out of being.

/***/

Albus became aware of a clanging sound that echoed in his head and made his eyes snap open. There was light shining through a grey haze, and he began to cough weakly as he inhaled soot and ash.

Then there were voices: "*Vorsicht!*"

"*Sind Sie fertig da drüber?*"

He tried to shout, but his mouth was dry and full of acrid-tasting dust. After a minute or so, he finally managed to make a weak sound.

"*Ich glaube, ich habe etwas gehört. . .*"

"*Wo?*"

"Von dort!"

Albus heard some crunching noises, then a face appeared at the periphery of his vision.

"Becker! Hier drüben!"

A man crouched down to Albus and wiped some soot from his eyes and nose, then put his head down to listen at his chest.

"Schnell! Wir haben einen Überlebenden!"

A second man joined him, and they conferred for a few moments before each grasped the end of the beam that had trapped Albus and lifted it off him. Albus thought at first they must be wizards using a charm, until he realised that what had been a large beam, at least fifteen feet in length, had been burnt away until only about three feet of it remained lying across his trapped leg.

Pain struck with ferocious intensity a moment later, and Albus howled.

"Immer sachte. Wir kümmern uns um Sie. Alles wird gut"

He howled again when the man picked him up and slung him over his shoulder. As they trudged through the debris and out into the open, Albus thought he must have been hallucinating.

The entire city...what he could see of it...was a smouldering ruin.

Men and women were using shovels to stack burned corpses in grisly piles near the side of what once must have been Schandauer Strasse, and the porcine odour of scorched flesh hung thickly in the sooty air.

Albus squeezed his eyes shut, willing himself not to believe what he had seen.

What in the name of heaven and hell had happened here?

Later, in the makeshift hospital outside the ruined city, he would scarcely believe what he heard. A series of British and American bombing raids had dropped more than 3,500 tonnes of incendiary bombs on the city over two days.

Albus closed his eyes and willed himself not to dream.

As the days wore on, he became a minor celebrity among the hospital's inhabitants, thanks to his mysterious and miraculous survival and the surprising speed with which his mangled leg seemed to heal. When he had first arrived, the kind but harried physician who had examined him had told him gravely that it was likely the leg would be lost, but when two days later, the bones appeared to be falling back into place of their own accord, the doctor was baffled but ultimately too busy to worry about it. In the end, Doktor Friedmann was forced to chalk it up as a mystery never to be solved, although in later years he would often think back on his strange English patient and wish he had been able to investigate the matter fully. It would have made an interesting case report at the very least.

Despite the oddities of his survival and recovery, in a city with tens of thousands dead and injured, and innumerable missing, it was easy for Albus to lie low. The people who cared for him accepted him as "Llewellyn Morgan", Welsh-English businessman, discovered among the ruins of the Zeiss Optical factory and without family or friends back home to worry about his whereabouts. Most were kind and caring, despite his nationality and the horrors his countrymen had visited upon them. For his part, Albus was courteous and grateful, and he amused the staff and other patients with his earnest attempts not to manhandle their language.

Doktor Friedmann released him three weeks later, with a crutch, the shake of a baffled head, and good wishes. Frau Vogel, who had served as his primary nurse, kissed him on his clean-shaven cheek and slipped a few Reichmarks and a packet of cigarettes into his coat pocket.

With that, Albus hobbled his way through what remained of Dresden's streets and disappeared into the shell of a burnt-out house to begin the journey home.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter 26 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"Oh, lass," he said. "It's all right to grieve for him."

Minerva and Amelia were having breakfast at the small table in their flat when the owl bearing the morning's *Daily Prophet* tapped on the window.

"I've got it," said Amelia, rising and going to the window. "Throw me a bit of your toast, eh?" Feeding it to the owl, she said, "There's a good bird. Off with you, now."

She shut the window and unrolled the paper, scanning the front page.

"Merlin's beard!"

Minerva put her toast down. "What?"

When Amelia said nothing else, her eyes racing across the page, Minerva said, "What is it?"

Amelia looked up at her. "They've caught Grindelwald."

"When?" asked Minerva, rising.

"Yesterday. In Dresden."

"Who got him?" Again, there was no response from Amelia, and Minerva moved towards her to grab the paper.

Amelia batted her hand away. "Just wait, I'll let you read it ... just let me ... says he was brought in by a Czech Auror. There was a duel, and... oh, no!"

"What?" asked Minerva, alarmed.

"A bunch of Aurors were killed ... nobody we know. Oh, wait, Shackbolt, wasn't he Department of Mysteries?" Her eyes went back to the paper. "Oh, Merlin ..."

"*What?*" Minerva asked yet again.

"Dumbledore's missing," Amelia said, still reading. "Apparently, he duelled Grindelwald and managed to disable him, but the building was on fire, and he made the Czech leave before he got out. When they went back, they... Minerva?" She had looked up from the paper to find that her friend had gone white as parchment. "Are you all right?"

"Fine ... yes ... I ... go on. What else does it say?"

Amelia looked back to the paper. "They sent someone back to look for him, but the whole city had been burnt down. Damn! Do you suppose the duel did that?"

"I ... I ... No. I don't think so."

"No, you're probably right." Reading on, Amelia said, "They didn't find Dumbledore. Most of the bodies had been cleared away, so there was no way to know if he was dead. Damn. That would be an awful thing, though. He was a great man."

"Don't!"

Amelia looked up at her in shock and put down the paper. "What is it, Minerva? You're really scaring me."

"Just ... don't talk about him as if he's dead. We don't know that."

"Oh, Minerva. I'm so sorry. I forgot he was... is your mentor."

"Yes," Minerva said faintly. "I ... let's clear up. We'll be late." She began scooping up dishes from the table as Amelia watched her warily.

When she had deposited the dirty dishes in the sink, Minerva raised her wand to *Scourgify* them. Both women jumped when the dishes exploded.

"Bloody hell! Minerva, are you hurt?" Amelia rushed to the tiny kitchen where her friend stood in shock with bits of egg dripping from her cheek.

"No, I'm fine. I don't know what happened. I just ... I just ..."

Amelia took Minerva's wand, grasped her hand, and led her back to the sitting-room sofa. She conjured a handkerchief and dabbed the egg away from Minerva's face and dressing gown.

"You're in shock," she said.

"No, I'm fine."

"You've said that several times, but clearly you're not. Look at you, you're white as Abbott's moustache and shaking like a firstie facing a Boggart."

"It's just a surprise, is all."

"I know. Why don't you sit here, and I'll fetch you some more tea."

"We'll be late."

"Never mind about that," Amelia said. "Besides, I'm guessing today will be like a bank holiday around the office."

"But we should get in. There will be things to ... briefings ..."

"Yes, and we'll get there, but you need some tea first."

While Amelia made tea, Minerva scanned the newspaper. On the front page, there was...unusually...a Muggle photograph of the burnt-out city. The accompanying article said little more about Albus other than that he had gone to Germany with a group of international fighters to find Gellert Grindelwald and that only the one man had apparently survived the ensuing duel. The fire, the article said, was the result of a raid on the city of Dresden. The Muggles had somehow made explosions that had created an enormous conflagration. Not much else was written about it, which Minerva found extraordinary, given the level of destruction that was apparent in the photo.

He couldn't have survived that. No one could.

She slammed the paper down and attempted to control her breathing, using a tactic she had learnt in what little training the fledgling Aurors had received before being sent into the field. By the time Amelia returned with the tea, Minerva was outwardly calm again.

The two young women drank their tea in silence, Amelia watching Minerva, noting how her friend's hands shook as she raised the teacup to her lips. She sent Minerva to use the shower first while she cleared up the tea things.

When the bathroom door shut behind her, Minerva sat on the toilet lid and put her face in her hands.

He isn't dead.

The phrase kept repeating itself in her head, even as the rational portion of her mind told her otherwise. If he wasn't dead, where was he? And how could anyone...even Albus Dumbledore...have survived the kind of fire that the photo in the newspaper suggested had occurred?

He cannot be dead. I'd know.

She told herself firmly to stop it, stood, stepped into the shower, and turned on the cold tap. The sudden burst of frigid water did its job, shocking her body and her mind

firmly into the here and now. By the time she got out, shivering and nearly blue, she thought she was ready to face the day.

As Amelia had predicted, there was a distinctly celebratory air around the Ministry. People walked around with smiles on their faces, and nobody seemed to want to stay in his or her office but milled about, exchanging thoughts and theories on what had happened and what would happen next. The Auror corps, including the trainees, were called to a meeting just before the lunch hour.

Marius Edgecombe, the head of the Auror Office, spoke to the assembled group.

"As you all know by now, Gellert Grindelwald has been apprehended. He's being held in a secure location by IMLE forces and will stay that way for a good long time. The situation on the Continent is still highly unstable, thanks to the ongoing Muggle war, but I think it's a good bet that none of you will be called over there in the foreseeable future. His followers seem to have gone to ground, and I have assurances from the Minister that every effort will be made by the various European governments to round them up and contain them. We'll be doing the same here, and it's likely the majority of you will be spending some time on that over the next months.

"We can't predict precisely what will happen, of course, but if I had to guess, I'd say we can expect things to settle down considerably. As you all know, Grindelwald's Blackrobes were most active in Eastern Europe, and we've been relatively fortunate to have had only a limited number of attacks here. Nevertheless, I expect every one of you to exercise constant vigilance. Followers of the Dark Arts never go away and never stay quiet for long. The fall of one Dark wizard only postpones the rise of another. It's our job to ensure he...or she...never finds a foothold in Britain.

"Now, I'd like to take a moment to give thanks and to remember all the brave fighters who lost their lives to help ensure this day would come. There are too many to mention them all by name, but I ask you all to please bow your heads and give them silent thanks, especially those who died in the final confrontation: Renate Fassbaender, Greta Weiss, Konstantyn Wronski, Aubert Delacroix, and our own Aegeus Shackbolt and Albus Dumbledore."

There was a murmur at this last, and Minerva's belly clenched. She was thankful that the group had bowed their heads for a moment of silence, giving her time to focus once again on diaphragmatic breathing to calm herself.

When the moment was over, someone in the middle of the group asked Edgecombe, "Sir? Is it true? Is Dumbledore dead? The papers only said he'd gone missing."

Minerva saw Amelia glance at her and dropped her eyes to avoid looking at her friend.

Edgecombe answered, "That's correct. Dumbledore is listed as missing. They found no trace of him at the site of the duel, and, as you know, the entire city has been destroyed by Muggle fighting. The lone survivor of the duel...other than Grindelwald...told us Dumbledore had been trapped and that the building was afire. The man barely made it out with Grindelwald in tow, said the heat and the smoke nearly killed him before the Portkey activated. Given that report, I think it is reasonable to assume that Dumbledore was among the casualties. Unfortunately."

There were a few more questions, but Minerva didn't hear them. She had manoeuvred her way quickly and quietly through the group and dashed for the loo. She slammed the cubicle door behind her, turned to the toilet, and vomited.

Amelia found her there several minutes later by peeking under the doors until she came upon the cubicle where Minerva still knelt. She said nothing when Minerva emerged, but handed her a handkerchief and a cup of water she had conjured.

Minerva managed to get through the rest of the day by going numb and staying busy. When she got home, she left a note for Amelia, telling her she was going to make an early night of it. She shut herself in her tiny bedroom and got out the charmed volume of poetry Albus had given her. The words barely registered in her brain, and she focussed on his still-familiar, loopy handwriting. She knew his hands had not held actual quill to this journal, but she ran her own hands over the pages anyway, seeking a glimmer, a hint...anything that would connect her to him. She wished she had some token, some physical reminder of him.

The one letter he had written her when he had gone to care for the wounded Aberforth, along with the school-related notes from him she had been keeping since her fifth year at Hogwarts, were locked in a charmed box in her old room at her family home.

She decided she'd visit Caithness for the weekend. She craved the warmth and comfort of her father's presence and the reassuring familiarity of home. Moreover, she needed to be far from London and from the office, where the talk would be of nothing but Grindelwald's fall and all that had accompanied it.

Shivering with the February cold, she pulled the bedclothes around her but didn't bother lighting the fire. She felt spent and unable to manage even the simplest spell. Before she drifted into a troubled sleep, she wondered if she'd manage to Apparate without Splinching. For a fleeting moment, she wondered if she cared.

~oOo~

Something was dreadfully wrong with Minerva.

Thorfinn McGonagall knew his daughter well, and though she denied it, he could see how distressed she was. It was there in the way she would suddenly start talking when he caught her chewing a fingernail or looking gloomy, it was there in the way her words would suddenly trail off mid-sentence, and, most of all, it was there the way she would change the subject whenever Grindelwald's capture entered the conversation.

She was upset about Dumbledore, of course. The man had been an important influence her life, although Thorfinn guessed he hadn't realised just how important. It didn't occur to him that her feelings might have been deeper than she'd let on until he returned from his afternoon walk...on which Minerva had declined to join him...to hear the faint sounds of singing from the music room. When he approached the room, he could hear Minerva through the partially closed door, singing an old song and accompanying herself with halting chords on the piano:

"He's brave as brave can be,

He wad rather fa' than flee;

But his life is dear tae me, send him hame, send him hame.

His life is dear tae me, send him hame.

"He'll ne'er come ower the sea, Willie's slain, Willie's slain,

He'll ne'er come ower the sea, Willie's slain.

He'll ne'er come ower the sea,

Tae his love and ain country;

This warld's nae mair for me, Willie's gane, Willie's gane.

This warld's nae mair for me, Willie's gane."

Thorfinn had been about to go in, but when he saw Minerva bury her head in her hands, he stepped back from the door, not wanting to intrude on his daughter's obvious grief.

After dinner, Minerva excused herself and went to her room rather than sitting up with her father and grandmother. Morna MacLaughlin gave her son-in-law a weighty look. "That girl isn't eating enough to keep a bird alive."

Thorfinn sighed. "I know. I don't know what's wrong. She won't tell me."

"It's a boy, I'll warrant. A broken heart always put me right off my food. Morrigan too. I think she lost a stone waiting for you to finally make up your mind to marry her."

Minerva had never been mad for the boys, to her father's profound relief. He knew she'd gone to the Hogwarts Yule Ball with one of her classmates in her fourth year and had stepped out with another in her sixth, but neither of these romances...if that's what they had been...had come to anything serious, as far as Thorfinn knew. Einar's friend had seemed smitten with her during the week he had stayed with them, but he was younger than Minerva and not a boy Thorfinn thought would be attractive to his serious daughter.

He wondered now if Minerva had developed feelings for her Transfiguration teacher. She wasn't the type to have schoolgirl infatuations, but Thorfinn thought it would not be entirely unlikely if his daughter had fallen a little in love with the man who had been her mentor for seven years. Dumbledore's intelligence would definitely have appealed to her, and his manner was certainly chivalrous and charming. No, Thorfinn thought, it wouldn't be at all unlikely.

An unrequited infatuation followed by the untimely death of the object of Minerva's affections...that might be an explanation for her melancholy, he reasoned. As painful as he knew it must be for Minerva, Thorfinn would be relieved if that was all that was troubling her. His daughter was a practical, resilient girl, and the shock of Dumbledore's death would wane eventually. It wasn't as if she had lost a husband or a fiancé.

He went upstairs and knocked on her bedroom door, and, after a moment, she bid him enter.

"What are you reading," he asked, quirkling his chin at the book she had obviously just put aside.

"Idylls of the King."

"Tennyson, eh? I didn't think you much liked poetry."

"It's grown on me, I suppose."

Thorfinn sat down on the bed next to her. "I'm worried about ye, lass. Your gran and I both are."

"I'm all right, Da."

"I don't think ye are. Ye don't eat, you've barely spent any time with me...I'm not complaining; it's just an observation...and ye seem so unhappy. Will ye tell me what's ailing ye, Minerva? I'd like to help, if I can."

"It's nothing, really, Da. Just a great deal going on at work, and I haven't got as far as I'd like with Professor Falco. That, and the winter doldrums, I suppose."

"Work should be settling down some, now that Grindelwald's followers are all in hiding. We have your old friend Dumbledore to thank for that, don't we?"

Minerva blinked several times, and Thorfinn knew he had hit on the true reason for her troubles.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Oh, lass," he said. "It's all right to grieve for him."

He watched her lose the struggle to keep the tears from falling, and he wanted nothing more than for her to come into his arms and let him hold her as she cried, as he had done when she was a small child, but she just held herself stiff and still as she wept, and he felt powerless to help her.

He put an arm around her shoulder and drew her to him, saying, "There now. Let it all out."

When she finally calmed, she said, "I'm sorry."

Passing her a handkerchief, he said, "Not at all. He was your friend. It's only right ye should cry for him."

"My friend, yes."

"I'll have Glynnie bring ye up a tray." When she started to protest, he said, "I'll not have ye starving yourself, Minerva. That'll do nothing for ye but make ye sick."

"All right. Thank you, Da."

He kissed the top of her head and left.

When the door had closed behind him, Minerva withdrew the sheaf of Albus's notes from under her pillow. Silly, she knew, but she had read through each one several times, running her fingers over the parchment, imagining his fingers moving across it as he wrote her name. She drew his final note to her cheek and held it there for a moment.

It wasn't much, she thought, but it was all she had left of him. She still could not quite convince herself that he was never coming back, that she would never see him again.

When the knock came, she quickly gathered the notes, dropped them back in the small box, and shut the lid before she said, "Come in."

The door opened, and an elderly house-elf came in bearing a tray with warm milk and some fruit and cheese.

"Will this suit, Mistress Minerva?" the elf asked.

"Yes, Glynnie, this will be fine, thank you."

When Glynnie had gone, Minerva put the box in her wardrobe in the specially charmed compartment. She went to the tray and looked at the food. She had no appetite, but she forced herself to drink the milk and eat a bit of the cheese.

So her father knew she loved Albus. She had been a fool to think she could hide it from him...her father, who knew her better than anyone else did. It was clear he believed nothing had come of it, that it was just a schoolgirl crush. She almost wished she could tell him that it had been so much more than that, but of course, that would be foolhardy. Thorfinn was a liberal and understanding man, but Minerva knew his understanding would only go so far. Not that he could do anything to Albus now, but she didn't want her father to think badly of him.

She wished...oh, how she wished...that there was someone she could talk to about Albus. It was almost as if their affair had never happened, as if she had dreamt the whole thing. Over the past months, she had barely allowed herself to think about him. Now that he was gone, she could think of nothing else.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter 27 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"Both of you were recently reborn out of the ashes. You should have a great deal to talk about."

"You simply must go, Albus. You do not wish to appear churlish, do you?" said Perenelle Flamel.

"No," Albus said, sighing. "I don't. But I don't relish the thought of a Ministry ceremony, and certainly not a ball."

"It is tradition, my friend," said Nicolas. "It has been tradition as long as they have been awarding Orders of Merlin. Besides, people need a celebration now. It has been a long, dark period, and you can hardly blame them for wanting to kick up their heels a bit."

"No, I suppose not."

Albus had been trying to stay out of the public eye since returning to England. He had holed up in Godric's Hollow and sent an owl to Minister Greengrass, letting him know that he was alive and well and would provide a briefing on Grindelwald's capture at the Minister's convenience. Not ten minutes later, the Dumbledore cottage was full of Ministry officials and, to Albus's disgust, an official Ministry photographer snapping pictures every blasted moment. The following day, the little village had been inundated with well-wishers and reporters, at which juncture Albus had simply slipped out into the garden and over the small fence to Disapparate.

He was grateful to his old friends Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel for agreeing to shelter him in their small home in Devon. The Ministry's owls found him, but thus far, no one had sussed out his whereabouts, thank Merlin.

Now, the Ministry was insisting on this bloody awards ceremony and, worse, a celebratory ball in his honour. All Albus wanted to do was go back to Hogwarts and get on with the business of forgetting things.

"Good, now that is settled, who is going to accompany you to the ball?" Perenelle asked.

"Accompany me?" he asked, taken aback.

"Yes, of course, *chéri*. You will need a companion; it is *de rigueur*, and besides, if you show up without one, every eligible witch in Britain will attempt to stake a claim to you."

Yet another reason to dread the ball, thought Albus.

"So, who is it to be?" asked Nicolas with a merry twinkle in his eye. "As my beautiful wife has said, you have your pick."

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Albus. His mind settled, momentarily and unbidden, on Minerva, but he dismissed the notion, of course. After his return, he had asked after her obliquely, taking the head of the Auror Office aside and enquiring after the welfare of the recruits. He had heard, he said, that there had been injuries.

When Edgecombe had replied that, yes, there had, in fact, been casualties among the trainee Aurors, Albus's heart had seized up. He had not begun to breathe again until Edgecombe mentioned that the three female recruits had all acquitted themselves surprisingly well in the field...so well, in fact, that the Auror programme was considering revising its stance on admitting women permanently.

So Minerva had survived the war.

Eventually, Albus asked Galatea Merrythought to accompany him to the ball, but she...rather rudely, he thought...laughed at the notion.

"Oh, Albus! Merlin love you for asking, but I'm afraid I couldn't stomach a Ministry event. All those toffs! Oh, I do feel for you, my dear fellow. But it's the price of becoming a hero."

Albus winced at the title, and Galatea, who didn't miss much, noticed. "Face it, Albus: that's what you are, whether you like it or not. Now, if you want my advice...and even if you don't, I'm going to give it...make sure the woman on your arm is attractive enough for people to assume you are a couple. Otherwise, you'll have women falling all over you. Some still will, of course, but they'll just make themselves look foolish."

"I suppose you're right, as usual," he said. "But I do wish you would consider coming with me. It would be nice to feel I have a friend in my corner."

"I'm too old; people would assume you had brought your dear old auntie." She patted his arm reassuringly. "Try not to fret, lad, it will be fine. How many of these functions have you been to, anyway?"

"A few," admitted Albus. "But never as the sole guest of honour."

"Find yourself a plausible lady friend and try to have a good time," said Galatea. "In fact, find yourself *area* lady friend and *do* have a good time. I swear, you've been like a monk up here at Hogwarts. Time to live it up a bit, eh?"

"We shall see."

Albus's thoughts strayed briefly to Minerva again as he wondered if she would be at the ball and if so, with whom. He had to stop himself from owling the Minister's secretary to find out if the Auror-trainees would be in attendance. If Minerva were there on the arm of another man, he would simply have to bear it.

In the end, Albus asked Cressida Burgess, an old friend from his days working with Nicolas Flamel, to accompany him to the ball. She had been an apprentice and had done some work with Albus on the chemical properties of gold. They had been lovers for a brief span of time until Cressida had left her alchemy apprenticeship for a more promising career as a Healer, and the two had parted amicably.

Nicolas had told Albus where to find her...working as a private Healer in Edinburgh...and she had been surprised but delighted, or so she said, to hear from Albus again.

As he dressed for the ball, Albus heard a voice calling from his sitting room and went to investigate.

Nicolas's voice was coming from the fireplace. "It is all right to pop through, my friend? I have something to show you."

"Certainly, come on through."

Nicolas arrived in a flurry of soot and stepped out of the fireplace, brushing ash off his robes. "This Floo needs a good cleaning, my boy," he said. "I never cared much for it as a mode of transportation. Terribly inelegant. Well! Don't you look fine!"

"Thank you. I decided to order some new robes for the occasion. Not too showy?" he asked, turning this way and that to give his friend a good view.

"No, no, not at all. The blue suits you nicely. Cressida will be most impressed," said Nicolas. "Now, I shall not keep you, but I have a little surprise I wanted to give you, to wish you luck tonight." He held up what was obviously a cage, covered with a gold cloth. He withdrew the cloth to reveal a tiny bird covered in pin-feathers with an enormous gold beak and deep-black eyes that seemed to be peering thoughtfully at Albus through the bars of its cage.

"Got him in al-Qahira during my trip last week," said Nicolas. "The *hem-netjer* was beside himself. He said the bird had been plucked nearly bald by black-marketeers. He was trying to mend him, but the bird would not eat properly. The little fellow seemed to take to me, so the *hem-netjer* gave him to me. Perenelle and I have been caring for him, and he seems better, but I do not think the seaside air agrees with him. His feathers always smell mouldy."

At this, the bird gave an indignant squawk and nipped at the bars of the cage.

"And as you see, I am a bit out of his favour. I do not think he liked the feather-grow treatment I gave him."

Albus was astonished. "Is he a phoenix?"

"Indeed, he is! And a beautiful one, too, aren't you my friend?" Nicolas said to the bird, who chirped his agreement. "I've no idea how old he is, of course. He burnt only two days ago."

"This is a lovely thought, Nicolas, but phoenixes are rare and very valuable. Are you certain you wish to part with him?"

"Oh, yes," said Nicolas. He leant close to Dumbledore and motioned him to bend down so he could whisper in his ear. "To be honest, he is a bit more trouble than Perenelle and I want to take on at our age. I have been up every two hours to feed the poor thing after his rebirth. Also, Perenelle said she thought you needed a friend up here at Hogwarts. Said you have been looking a bit ... how did she put it? Forlorn."

Albus bent down to the cage. "Hello, there. How would you like to stay here with me in beautiful Scotland? I can't promise you a lifetime of adventure, but I guarantee you'll be safe and warm, and no one will ever pluck your lovely tail feathers."

The bird gave a silvery trilling sound, which Albus took to signal his agreement.

"There, now. It is settled," said Nicolas, setting the cage down on Albus's table.

"I cannot thank you enough," Albus said. He felt drawn to the bird, and its brief song had given him a momentary feeling of warmth and belonging that he realised he had sorely missed since ...

"It is our pleasure. I know he will have a fine home here." Nicolas cocked his head as he looked at his friend. "You know, you have a lot in common."

"How so?"

"Both of you were recently reborn out of the ashes. You should have a great deal to talk about."

With that, Nicolas bowed his head at Albus, stepped back into the fireplace, and was gone.

~oOo~

She could barely see him, seated as she was at one of the tables farthest from the dais. But she could feel him the way she could feel the rain when it was about to fall on a humid summer's day. She squinted over the heads of the other attendees and was just able to see his right side, his hand toying with his goblet as he listened to the Minister drone on about his, Albus's, accomplishments.

She had an unobstructed view, however, of the woman seated next to him. She was blonde and tall, and looked to be in her early-middle years, although Minerva couldn't be certain without a closer inspection. The woman smiled and applauded at all the right moments.

Minerva hated her.

When the speeches were finally over, and Albus had graciously but briefly accepted his Order of Merlin, First Class, the small orchestra struck up a rolling waltz, and many of the attendees took to the floor.

"Would you like to dance, Minerva?" asked Douglas McLaggen, who had accompanied her to the ball.

Minerva glanced across the table at Amelia, who raised an amused eyebrow at her. Minerva gave her a stern look and replied to her escort, "That would be lovely, Douglas, thank you."

Once on the dance floor, Minerva kept an eye out for Albus but couldn't see him among the swirling bodies. When the waltz ended, the orchestra launched into a slower tune, and Douglas was obviously at a loss.

"Do you want to ... um ... or should we ..."

Minerva took pity on him. "Do you want to get something to drink?"

"Yes, sure," said a relieved Douglas. He saw her back to their table, where Amelia was arguing heatedly with a Junior Auror. When Minerva sat, Amelia turned to her.

"Minerva, will you please tell this *dolt* that my aim is *exactly* as good as it's always been?"

"The bar's not too high, then," said her sparring partner and escort, Gareth Prewett, and Amelia punched him on the shoulder.

"Ouch, Bonesy! Not so hard!"

"If I were you, Gareth, I'd keep the conversation to gossip about your fellow Aurors. Much less risk of bodily injury that way," Minerva said.

"On that note, ladies, I think I'll join Doug at the refreshment table," Gareth said, rising and following the other young man.

Minerva sat down next to Amelia, scanning the dance floor for any sign of Albus and his lady friend.

"So," said Amelia leaning toward her, "I hear your dad's taking my mum to the Muggle symphony tonight."

"Yes, I think Da mentioned it in his last letter."

"What do you suppose the odds are on him giving her a good shag afterwards?"

"Amelia!" cried Minerva, scandalised.

"What? Don't you want them to have a good time? Besides, Mum could use it. Maybe it'll get her off my back for a change. Fusses over me like a mother Jobberknoll. You'd think I was two, not twenty-four."

"She's just worried. She needs to fuss because she almost lost you."

"Your dad came closer to losing you, and I don't see him Flooing you every five minutes to ask how you are."

"Da's not a fusser," said Minerva, shrugging.

"Lucky you. Anyway, I hope your dad gives her a reason to fuss over him for a while."

Minerva was spared the trouble of making a retort when Douglas and Gareth arrived with the drinks.

"Who's the bird with Dumbledore," Gareth asked.

"I don't know," said Douglas. "You're the eyes and ears of the Auror Office; why don't you try to find out?"

"Don't need to," replied Gareth. "It'll be in the morning's *Prophet*. Nice looking. Got an eyeful at the refreshment table. She dropped her wand. Lovely assets."

"Let's dance," said Minerva.

A somewhat surprised Douglas led her out to the floor and began to move her about in time to the Latin beat of the music.

She danced with him through the next number until she finally spied Albus dancing with his date about ten feet from her. The woman was indeed lovely, and nausea rose in Minerva's belly as she watched them surreptitiously: Albus holding her waist, Albus bending slightly to whisper something in her ear, Albus laughing at something she had said.

He gave no indication that he had seen Minerva...no subtle nod of the head, no tiny smile, not even a glance...and she wondered if it was deliberate or if he truly didn't know she was there.

The number ended, and Minerva excused herself to go to the toilet. She felt her cheeks heat up as she walked directly past where Albus and his friend were still dancing together. She willed him to look at her but had no idea whether or not he had. Once in the loo, she splashed a bit of cold water on her face and waited until the flush had faded from her cheeks before venturing out again.

When she returned, Albus wasn't there.

"Shall we sit?" she asked Douglas when she reached him.

A few minutes later, she saw Albus again, standing on the periphery of the dance floor, talking with a small group of admirers.

"I feel like dancing a bit more," she said, standing and offering her hand to her bewildered escort.

"Your wish is my command, milady," he said, and lead her to the floor.

She managed to manoeuvre him to the side where Albus stood. As she danced, she had to force herself not to glance at her erstwhile lover. When she finally gave in, he was looking at her. He immediately looked away, and she wanted to scream. When the music slowed, she pulled Douglas closer, pressing her breasts against his chest, moving her cheek to rest against his. The young man's hand moved slightly lower on her waist, and she hoped savagely that Albus could see it.

When she finally was able to glance over to where he had been standing, he was gone.

After another hour of listening to her friends with half an ear and glancing around the room to locate Albus, she was exhausted.

Her friends were surprised when she interrupted their conversation to say, "I'm quite tired. Douglas, would you mind seeing me home now?"

There was a brief silence before he stood, saying, "Of course."

They said their good-nights and stepped out into the crisp night.

"Would you like to walk a bit, or would you prefer to Apparate directly home?" he asked.

"I think I'd like to go directly, if you don't mind."

"May I?" He offered her his arm for a Side-Along Apparition.

"If you haven't been drinking too much."

"Only one glass of wine after dinner. On my honour as an Auror-trainee, I swear I won't Splinch you," he said, and she allowed his arm to snake around her waist.

A moment later, they were standing in the backyard of the small building that housed the magical flat Minerva shared with Amelia.

Douglas didn't release her immediately.

"Well ... good night, Douglas. I had a lovely evening."

He answered by pulling her close and kissing her gently. She allowed this, then when he broke the kiss and opened his eyes, she disengaged herself from his embrace.

"I'm sorry, Douglas. I can't."

"Oh," he said. "I'm sorry if I overstepped."

"No, no," she said. "I probably gave you the wrong impression. I like you very much, Douglas, but it isn't possible. I'm sorry."

He smiled at her. "No harm done. Still friends?"

"Of course."

"All right, then. I'll walk you to the door."

He did so, and she offered him her hand. He took it, and instead of a shake, he gave it a gallant kiss.

"See you at the office, McGonagall."

"Yes."

When Minerva got into the flat, she changed out of her gown and lay down on her bed, not even bothering to clean her teeth.

She was furious. Furious at Albus for not deigning to speak to her all night, furious with the woman he had been with simply for existing, and most of all, furious with herself for feeling as she did, and, not least, for using Douglas McLaggen in the way she had. She had not intended it; she liked McLaggen and valued his friendship. It was a stupid and childish way to behave, and she had done it out of jealousy.

She had been so elated...and very nearly fainted...when she had opened her morning paper several weeks ago to find a photograph of a tense-looking Albus surrounded by reporters and attempting to answer the questions they were obviously pummelling him with. She was dizzy with it, and it took her a few minutes to calm herself enough to read the accompanying article explaining his mysterious absence and subsequent return to England. She had wept when she read of his injury and of his description of the destruction of Dresden.

She had tried not to hope he might come looking for her.

When Edgecombe had told them that the entire Auror Office, including the trainees, were to be invited to the ball celebrating Albus's Order of Merlin, she had been beyond excited. Surely she would have the chance to see him and to speak to him! Even if it were just a brief exchange between old friends...and really, she didn't expect any more than that...it would be like water to a man dying of thirst. All the reserve and self-discipline she had exercised over the past year where Albus was concerned had flown away at the prospect. She had allowed herself the tiny hope that, now that the war was over and she was no longer his student, he would seek her out...would come for her...and it had taken root whether she wanted it there or not.

But he had ignored her. Hadn't even attempted to speak with her or to acknowledge her existence in any way. And he had been with that woman. Minerva hated herself for her jealousy, but she couldn't stop feeling it. It oozed in through the cracks in her self-control and consumed her. And she had let it rule her that night.

Never again, she promised herself as she wiped the tears from her face with a rough sweep of her arm.

She could not help her feelings, but she would never again allow them to govern her actions.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter 28 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"I've done something stupid."

Damn!

Minerva swore as she bumped and pushed her way through the crowd.

Where is he?

She jostled a path across the street and back, surveying as well as she could among the seething mass of bodies that occupied Trafalgar Square. After a few minutes of being bumped, bruised, shouted at, and having her toes thoroughly trodden upon, she had to admit defeat.

Gone.

She had lost her quarry in the throng that had gathered spontaneously to celebrate the end of the Muggle war in Europe.

Minerva allowed herself a minute to catch her breath, standing among the singing, yelling, and weeping Muggles, shoulder to shoulder with them.

Two spots of colour rose on her cheeks; she was angry with herself for having allowed the wizard to get as far as Trafalgar Square in the first place. He had been easy to follow initially; a hog was an unusual sight on the streets of London, and a hog of his size was not so fast as to be able to outrun Minerva, but he had gone unexpectedly into an alley and then headed down Whitcomb Street, popping into human form as he turned into Pall Mall East and disappeared into the crowd, most of whom seemed to be pushing their way toward the square.

Minerva was already composing her memo to Auror McKinnon in her head when she was struck from behind and nearly fell off her feet.

"Blimey! I'm awfully sorry!"

Minerva turned to see a young man in uniform looking at her apologetically.

"Someone pushed me, and I bumped into you," he said.

She saw his eyes drop briefly down her body then quickly return to her face. She was about to be annoyed when she saw him blush. "That's quite all right," she said. "It's a bit crowded here."

"Isn't it?"

The crowd had pressed in on all sides, and there was no moving, at least for the moment.

"Looks like we're stuck here," the young soldier said. His over-careful cadence made Minerva suspect he had been drinking.

"It would appear so." She didn't want to seem churlish, so she added, "Were you on the Continent? During the war?"

"I was with Monty at the Bulge," he replied. "Bloody freezing it was, too. Oh, sorry ..."

"It's all right," she replied, amused. She had no idea who "Monty" was nor what the soldier was referring to; she had had little opportunity to keep up with events of the Muggle war, save for those that might have an impact on whatever assignment she was working on. The young man was obviously proud of his service, so she said, "That must have been quite something."

"Oh, it was, believe you me. You should have seen those Panzers! When they shot off a shell, it was like the world was ending! And then the Yanks were firing back ... their Shermans didn't have the same firepower, but they got the job done in the end. They got those Rhine monkeys scrambling out of the burning tanks, hands in the air. It was a sight! I felt sorry for 'em though. Lots of 'em injured and most of 'em only wearing light uniforms. It's hot in a tank, see? So they didn't have coats."

"It sounds terrifying," said Minerva.

"A lot of it was. Anyway, it's all over now, thank God," he said, brightening.

As the crowd grew, and the singing and cheering rose, Minerva was surprised to feel a swell of happiness at their joy. Their war was now over, as was hers. She was alive, and Albus was alive, and these Muggles, they were all alive. There was reason enough to celebrate, wasn't there?

The young man was saying something to her, but she could no longer make out his words over the noise of the crowd.

She cupped her palm around her ear and shook her head to indicate that she couldn't hear him.

He leant down to her, and she said, "I can barely hear you, it's so crowded." She was anxious to get out of the throng and back to headquarters.

The soldier moved a bit closer and said, "Want to see if we can get through? I might be able to get you to the other side. It's a little less thick there."

"Yes, all right," she replied, nodding.

"Come on," he said, grabbing her hand.

She had to admit, the man's height made it easier for him to push through the crowd as she followed along behind.

They made their way through the mass of celebrants, and once they reached the far end of the square where there were fewer people, he didn't let go of her hand.

"Where are you headed?" he asked.

"Um, Lambeth."

"All right."

Minerva knew she should tell him, politely but firmly, that she would be fine on her own. She should remove her hand from his, thank him, and head off down the street until she could find a safe place from which to Apparate back to the Ministry.

But some of the giddiness of the crowd must have rubbed off on her, because she didn't want to do any of those things. She wanted to stay there with this lovely young man and let him hold her hand.

So she didn't protest when he led her down an alley off Charing Cross Road then stopped, turned to her, put his hands on her waist, and kissed her.

After a moment, she began to kiss back, winding her arms awkwardly around his neck. They stood that way for a minute, then he broke the kiss to look at her face. Whatever he saw there must have pleased him, because he grinned at her and began to kiss her with greater ardour, pulling her slightly closer. She responded in kind, allowing his tongue to part her lips, pressing hers into his mouth.

It felt strange to be standing there, kissing this clean-shaven young man. Strange and rather nice.

He broke the kiss again and moved her backward several steps until she was against the wall.

She saw two other couples in the alley, and it didn't take more than a glance to know what they were doing.

This is going to happen, she thought to herself and found to her surprise that she wanted it.

Then he was kissing her neck, and his hands were on her, and her arousal grew. Suddenly, the memory of Albus pressing up against her like this in the alley in Tewkesbury flooded her with the echoes of remembered desire.

She moved her hands down the soldier's back to rest on his arse, pulling him up against her, and he moaned. He reached down to find the hem of her skirt and began to pull it up, stopping to meet her eyes and whisper, "All right?"

"Yes," she answered and buried her face against his shoulder, clasping her arms around his back. She didn't want to look at him, attractive as he was. She just wanted to feel...to drown in sensation.

He grasped her right thigh as she hooked her leg around his hip. It took him a minute to unfasten his belt and fly and push her knickers aside.

She closed her eyes, trying to imagine she was back in Tewkesbury and that it was Albus taking her up against the cold stone wall. It felt good, and it had been so long ...

Gods, oh ... a little more ... please ...

Her concentration was broken when he started to murmur.

"Oh, yeah ... nice ... so nice ... that's it ... that's it ... yes ..."

Moving her head, she covered his mouth with hers to stop his words with her lips and tongue, and he kissed back eagerly, moaning into her mouth.

She concentrated on pure sensation, and when her climax came, she nearly sobbed with relief, clutching his shoulders to keep her footing as her knees threatened to buckle with the pleasure of it.

He grunted and let go of her leg, then sagged against her, breathing heavily.

After a few moments, he looked up at her and smiled. "That was very nice."

"Yes."

He leant in to kiss her sweetly, then quickly did up his belt and fly and tucked in his uniform shirt as Minerva re-adjusted her knickers and smoothed her skirt and hair.

She gave him a tight smile, then said, "I should be getting on."

"All right. I'll walk you."

"No, thanks, that's all right. Just see me to the end of the alley, and I'll be fine."

When they re-emerged on the street, he said, "I'd be pleased to walk you."

"Well, it's just that I'm meeting my dad, you see," she lied.

"Oh. Well ... cheers then, I guess."

As she turned to go, he said, "Wait! Um ... what's your name?"

"Miranda."

He gave her his lovely grin again. "I'm Alan. Well, ta, then, Miranda. Hope to see you again sometime."

"Keep well, Alan," she said, then headed off down the street, hoping he wasn't following.

As soon as she arrived at the Ministry, she ducked into the lavatory to clean herself up before she faced McKinnon, who ultimately gave her only a light dressing-down for losing her mark and sent her home.

Later that evening, she sat in front of the small fireplace, a tumbler of cheap Firewhisky in her hand.

The door opened, and Amelia bustled through it, red-cheeked and annoyed.

"It's madness out there! Couldn't find a safe place to Apparate from, so I took shank's mare. All the way from the Ministry! If you're pouring, I'll have one of those," she said, nodding at Minerva's drink.

She flopped down on the settee next to Minerva. She sighed as she took her first sip of the drink Minerva had handed her. "Circe, but that's good. I've never been so glad to be on desk duty in my life. How did you make out with that Animagus git?"

"Lost him."

"Blast! Well, there's always another day." She raised her glass to Minerva.

"Indeed."

Eyeing Minerva as she drank, Amelia said, "You're awfully quiet. Are you just upset about losing the mark, or is there something else bothering you?"

Minerva hesitated. She wanted to tell Amelia about the soldier...she was tired of feeling as if she was hiding things from her best friend...but she wasn't even certain how she felt about the incident.

Finally, she said, "I've done something stupid."

"Minerva McGonagall? Say not so!" Amelia put a hand on her chest in exaggerated dismay.

"Well, I did."

She paused.

"So, are you going to tell me, or aren't you?" Amelia said.

Not quite looking at Amelia, Minerva told her the story of the Muggle soldier and what they had done. When she finished, she gave her friend a sidelong look.

Amelia didn't say anything, so Minerva asked, "Are you shocked?"

"Surprised. It certainly isn't like you."

"No," agreed Minerva. "It isn't."

"You've been under a lot of strain lately. I suppose it's understandable that you might do something a little reckless, now that things have calmed a bit," Amelia said thoughtfully. "Just, please ... tell me it wasn't your first time."

Minerva looked up at that. "No."

Amelia knew better than to press Minerva for any more information on that subject, so she only said, "That's good. And at least you don't have to worry about pregnancy."

The Ministry had insisted on having each of the three female Auror-trainees take a monthly contraceptive potion. The stated rationale was that pregnancy was incompatible with the dangerous nature of the work, but the unspoken reason was somewhat less benign. Everyone knew what befell women unlucky enough to fall into the hands of the small cadres of Dark wizards that skulked about the edges of wizarding society.

"You should really do something about disease, though, Minerva," Amelia said. "I don't know what kinds of things you could get from a Muggle, but if he's a soldier, you don't know what all he might have picked up."

Minerva made a moue of distaste. "I know. Stupid ..."

"Well, reckless, maybe, but hardly an earth-shattering trespass. You can pick up a couple of potions at an apothecary, although I'd recommend going somewhere out of town."

"Yes. I'm off on Saturday. I'll go to Manchester or somewhere. I'll have to look up what I need, though."

"The library at St Mungo's will have the right reference books, and they'll let you in if you're with the Ministry."

"Yes, good idea, thanks."

After a few moments, Amelia asked, "Did you enjoy it at least?"

Minerva was about to be indignant at the question, but she checked herself. This was Amelia, after all, and she herself had shared the story. "Um ... yes ... during. Afterwards, I just felt embarrassed."

"No reason to, really," Amelia said. "It's just sex, and as much as everyone pretends not to, almost everyone does it, or wants to. Including," she added with a wicked grin, "my mum and your dad."

"Merlin, Amelia, did you really need to share that?"

"No, not really," Amelia said gleefully. "But you know, we might end up sisters."

"Well, that's fine, but I really didn't need the image of ... well ... I didn't need to know that." After a moment, she couldn't help asking, "How do you know?"

"Simple deduction. They had a date on Saturday, and I didn't get my daily Floo call on Sunday. Or Monday, or today. So either Mum's too embarrassed to talk to me, or she's having too good a time. Here's hoping it's the latter," said Amelia, raising her nearly empty glass in salute.

"Hear, hear, I guess," said Minerva, weakly following suit.

"It seems I'm the only one not having any luck in that department," said Amelia after she had swallowed her whisky. "This wonky eye certainly isn't helping matters."

"Oh, Amelia," said Minerva, but she couldn't think of anything else to say.

As far as everyone was concerned, Amelia Bones was adjusting beautifully to the loss of her left eye. Upon their return to England, she had been fitted with a magical replacement, and after two months of therapy and hard work, Amelia was able to see with it...the images, she said, were blurry and colours were off...but its appearance was odd. It was grey-blue, like her real eye, but it didn't sit in the socket; it was held against the surface of Amelia's face by a cup attached with straps that hooked around her ears. She and Minerva had tried a series of Sticking charms to try to eliminate the need for the unsightly straps but found that it constricted the movement of the eye too much. In the end, they had settled on Disillusioning the straps, but they were still noticeable on close inspection. Amelia had cut her previously chin-length hair to a very short cut so that it wouldn't catch on them.

She joked about the eye with almost everyone, but Minerva knew it bothered her. Amelia had argued and won the right to continue in her Auror training and worked like a dog to ensure the change in her vision didn't affect her accuracy in either casting or dodging spells; however, she had been removed from any active field duty and placed in the administration section of the Auror office. Her future with the Aurors was murky and uncertain.

To add insult to injury, she hadn't had a date since returning to England, to the best of Minerva's knowledge. Even the woman she had been seeing casually before their deployment the past summer seemed to have disappeared into the woodwork. It wasn't at all fair, thought Minerva. Amelia was beautiful...the eye notwithstanding...and brilliant, and a genuinely friendly and outgoing person; she should be swamped with admirers, at least among the smallish circle of lesbian witches in and around London that Minerva had become aware of.

Minerva, on the other hand, had been asked out more than a few times, and by some rather attractive fellows, but she had no desire for romance at the moment. Or at least, she had thought she didn't. The incident with the soldier made her question that. She had been numb...mostly by choice...since the night of the Ministry ball, but the experience of all those Muggles together...kissing, hugging, celebrating *life*...and the physical proximity of that young man had shaken something loose in her.

Despite what she had told Albus at their parting, she wasn't at all certain she could fall in love with anyone else. Her mind told her not to be silly, of course she could, but her heart said otherwise. But even if she couldn't love another man, it didn't mean she couldn't go out with them ... enjoy them, and yes, maybe even go to bed with them.

She was young and alive, and there was no reason not to enjoy being so. And if her heart still yearned for one Albus Dumbledore, so be it. He had apparently moved on, and there wasn't anything she could do about it.

It was time for her to move on too.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter 29 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"You're the only one who ever saw through me. Everyone else saw only what they wanted to see."

Minerva heard from Albus a month later.

Just as she was sitting down to a celebratory dinner at her family home...a dinner that included her father, brother, and grandmother, as well as Amelia and her mother, Elisabeth...a house-elf scurried into the dining room and dropped a letter next to Minerva's plate with a brief bow.

"Rather late for post," said Morna.

"Who's it from?" asked Einar.

His father gently reprimanded him. "Never mind at the moment. I'm sure Minerva will open it *after* we've eaten."

Minerva slipped the letter into her cardigan pocket. She had recognised the handwriting on the envelope immediately. Her heart was pounding, and she could barely swallow.

Thorfinn raised his glass. "To Minerva: for astonishing us yet again by becoming the youngest Animagus in more than fifty years."

Everyone toasted to a Minerva who was only half paying attention.

Dinner progressed agonisingly slowly, and afterwards, the group repaired to the library for brandy and conversation.

"Do it again," said Einar.

"I've done it three times already," said an exasperated Minerva. "I'd like to have my brandy now."

"Just once more. It's so bloody amazing!"

"Language, Einar," tutted Thorfinn.

"Sorry," Einar said, glancing at Amelia and Madam Bones. "I'm just excited."

"Well, it is quite exciting," said Elisabeth. "I don't believe there's ever been an Animagus in either the Cadwallader or Bones families. "You must be very proud of Minerva."

"Aye, I am," said Thorfinn. "She's worked very hard at this." Turning to Minerva, he gave her a wide grin and said, "Go on, lass ... just one more time, and we'll leave ye alone."

Minerva rolled her eyes, then shifted her focus into herself. A moment later, she was staring at her father's boots and catching the most *distracting* scent of rodent in the room as she switched her tail back and forth.

She popped back into her human form and, ignoring the applause, said, "We've got mice again," at which her delighted father threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"You know, you make a very attractive cat," said Amelia. "I hope this doesn't mean we're going to have scads of toms prowling about the flat at night."

Minerva smacked her on the arm for the remark at the same time Elisabeth said, "Oh, Amelia."

Elisabeth turned to Minerva, saying, "Those markings around your eyes are very unusual; I don't believe I've ever seen a tabby-pattern cat with anything similar."

"No," agreed Thorfinn, "I haven't either. Most interesting."

Finally, the little group broke up and headed up the stairs to their various bedrooms. Einar caught up with Minerva as they headed down the corridor, asking, "So who was the letter from?"

"I haven't opened it yet. And mind your own business."

"Tetchy." Einar headed off to his room.

Once Minerva had closed the door to her bedroom, she broke the seal on the envelope and opened the letter:

15 June 1945

Dear Minerva,

Professor Falco has written to inform me that you have passed your Animagus exam and are now the youngest registered Animagus he has ever tutored. Congratulations!

I know that you worked very hard to achieve this, and I hope you are as proud of yourself as I am of you. I never had any doubt that you would succeed in this, as in anything to which you turn your formidable mind and magic, and I am happy to find my prescience has not failed me. Use your new ability well.

I trust that you are well and happy, and that you are finding your work with the Ministry challenging and interesting.

Warmest regards,

Albus Dumbledore

What upset her most was his signing the note with his full name. It seemed so formal, as though nothing but the most superficial of cordialities had ever passed between them. It was as if, by the stroke of a quill, he was trying to Oblivate her memory of the intimacy they had shared.

What did you expect, Minerva? A mash note?

She wiped her sleeve across her traitorous, leaking eyes.

She almost destroyed the letter, but in the end, she slipped it into the charmed box with all his other notes and the charmed poetry journal she had locked away when she had decided to try to forget him.

After she had readied herself for bed and slid between the sheets, she put out the light and closed her eyes, but sleep eluded her. She briefly considered popping back into her Animagus form. She had found that her thoughts and emotions were blunted even as her senses were sharpened in her feline form. But she knew the dangers in allowing oneself to spend too much time in animal form. Professor Falco had warned, with unwonted sternness, of witches and wizards who had transformed and never come back, seduced, perhaps, by the simplicity of life as an animal or simply unable to retain enough human will and intention to change back. Minerva didn't want to abuse or test the boundaries of her newfound ability the first week after she had registered.

Eventually, she drifted off to sleep and dreamt, against her will, of Albus.

~oOo~

Months passed, then a year, and nothing happened. Minerva and Amelia continued with their training, and Minerva was sent out after several suspected unregistered Animagi. She caught two of the three...including the hog...and sustained a nasty gash in her leg trying to bring in the third. It healed, and she was eventually switched to helping Senior Auror McKinnon track and investigate suspected Dark objects that had been Transfigured. She didn't especially mind the change, because she was allowed to work on McKinnon's research into Transfiguration, which she found increasingly interesting.

Amelia continued to be stuck at a desk, which continued to irk her, but she didn't dare complain; at least she was still technically an Auror-in-training. In the evenings, she and Minerva plotted out what they would do if they ran the Auror Office, which, of course, was never going to happen. Hogwarts had had six headmistresses over its nearly thousand-year history, and the Wizengamot had finally seated its first female member in 1934, but some professions were still held out as the sole province of wizards. There had never been a full-fledged female Auror, and the very name of the elite Hit-Wizard Squad was an indication of the likelihood of Amelia or Minerva getting a toehold there. Running the place was a pipe dream neither would have spoken of to anyone else.

Then in July of 1946, something happened. Minerva returned home from the lab one Sunday to find Amelia in their sitting room dabbing a handkerchief to her good eye.

It alarmed Minerva, as Amelia was as stoical as anyone, and Minerva had never seen her weep. She went to her friend before even removing her cloak and sat down on the settee next to her.

"What's the matter?"

"I just talked to Mum," said Amelia, sniffing. "She's ill."

It was cancer...a legacy from Elisabeth's Muggle mother. Elisabeth had been to St Mungo's and to private Healers, and finally, to Muggle doctors, none of whom could offer much beyond vague assurances that there was "still some hope".

Elisabeth Bones was a practical woman and decided that the taste of false hope was bitter. She resigned herself to death and had told her daughter so.

Amelia later said that it had not surprised her. What did surprise her...surprised everyone, in fact...was that her mother married Thorfinn McGonagall.

It was a quiet affair in the Ministry register office, duplicated in the Muggle register office in Greenwich, where Elisabeth's parents had also been married. Minerva and Amelia were witnesses for both weddings, along with Einar and Amelia's younger brother, Edgar.

Elisabeth confided to Amelia that Thorfinn had asked her several times over the past year, but that she had only relented when she discovered the seriousness of her illness. She wanted no question in anyone's mind that Thorfinn McGonagall was entitled to make decisions for her when the time came. She didn't, she said, want to burden her children with it.

Minerva was both happy and worried for her father. He seemed elated, but the spectre of Elisabeth's death had to be at the forefront of his mind, Minerva thought. He had lost one wife already, and now he was poised...had willingly signed up...to lose another. When she cautiously asked him about it, he told her only that he was delighted to have whatever time was vouchsafed him with Elisabeth Bones-McGonagall and that he was prepared to help her die when the time came. But in the meantime, he said, he intended to make sure she lived.

So Amelia and her brother became part of Minerva's family. In later years, when Edgar married, he would name his first son after himself and his second son after his father and step-father.

The week after her father had married Elisabeth Bones, Minerva slipped away from the office on her lunch hour to try to find a suitable wedding gift for the couple. She was in Flourish and Blotts, browsing the poetry section, when she heard a familiar voice behind her that sent an unwelcome chill down her spine.

"Minerva, what a pleasure."

She turned to see Tom Riddle standing there, a toothy smile on his face and a clerk's tie around his neck.

She was immediately on her guard.

"Hello, Tom," she said, polite but unsmiling.

He moved closer to her, and she had to resist the impulse to take a step back.

He said, "I understand if you aren't exactly happy to see me. I've always been sorry that we didn't part as friends."

"We never were friends," she said.

His smile faltered only slightly, and he said, "I suppose not. But I wanted to be. Truly. I guess I didn't do a very good job of it."

Without another word, she turned back to the shelf she had been looking at and felt him move even closer.

"I've long wanted to apologise to you, Minerva. For what I did during the duelling final. You probably won't believe me, but I didn't intend it. It just sort of ... happened. And then when I saw..."

"I don't wish to discuss this with you."

His voice dropped to a whisper. "I swear I will never reveal to anyone what I know about you and Dumbledore." He put a gentle hand on her arm. "If you just give me a chance to apologise properly."

She turned to face him again. His eyes were full of honest-seeming concern and regret, but she wasn't fooled. She knew a threat when she heard one.

She focused on keeping her voice even as she said, "All right, Tom. What do you want?"

"Have dinner with me."

"No."

"Tea, then."

She sighed. "All right. Tea. I'm off on Saturday. Are you free then?"

"I will ensure that I am. Say, two o'clock at Fortescue's?"

"Not Fortescue's. There's a refreshment room in Victoria Station. Meet me there at two."

The slight quiver of distaste that passed over his lips was gratifying to her.

"Two o'clock," he confirmed with a quick nod of his head.

When she got to the refreshment room the following Saturday, he was already there, although she had come a few minutes early to try to collect herself before he arrived. As she had hoped, it was busy and bustling, and loud enough that nobody would overhear their conversation.

Tom stood when he saw her and moved around the table to hold her chair.

When they had ordered their tea...Tom requesting a plate of shortbread that Minerva didn't touch...Minerva asked, "Well, Tom, what did you want to say to me?" She tried not to sound too peevish; she was nervous about antagonising him too much.

"I just hoped we could clear the air a bit about what happened your last year at Hogwarts," he said. "I truly didn't intend to hurt you in any way. I suppose I was just jealous of Dumbledore. I liked you very much, and I wanted so badly for you to like me too. Looking back, I suppose I tried too hard. I must have seemed pathetic."

"No," she said. "Not pathetic."

Taking her words as a positive sign, he gave her a smile and continued. "I never intended to perform Legilimency on you, Minerva. Never. But when I looked in your eyes during the duel, it just happened."

His tone turned confessional. "I had been working on it secretly, you see. Foolish, I know, but there it is. I was so hungry to learn advanced magic, and I had been trying it over summers for several years. But I didn't have good control. There weren't too many people to practice with. I was just so interested in you and frustrated that you didn't like me."

He paused for a few seconds, gauging her reaction. She was careful not to betray anything by her expression.

He continued, "It's fair to say I was shocked by what I found out. I think you can understand that. I was also angry and jealous. I don't like to admit that to you, but it's the truth. I was angry at him for taking advantage of you like that. And to be honest, I was angry at you for letting it happen. That's why I behaved as I did. I'm not proud of it, and I wish I could take it all back, but I can't. All I can do is apologise and assure you that your secret is safe. I won't betray your trust, Minerva."

She spoke carefully. "I appreciate that, Tom. Thank you for your explanation and apology."

He gave her his dazzling smile and changed the subject. "So, you're working at the Ministry now? As an Auror?"

"An Auror-trainee for another year, yes."

"That must be fascinating."

"It has its moments. And you? What have you been doing since leaving school?" She didn't really want to know, but she felt she should try to keep the interview cordial.

"I've been working at Borgin and Burkes," he said.

She didn't bother asking why Hogwarts's golden boy was working as a clerk in a dingy and disreputable shop.

"Do you still see anyone from Hogwarts?" he asked.

"Only the people in training with me. I didn't know any of them especially well at school, though."

They made more feeble small talk for a few minutes before Minerva found a good moment to excuse herself.

As they parted, Tom took her hand and gave it a squeeze. She had to fight with herself not to wipe it on her robes to rid herself of his touch.

"I enjoyed seeing you again, Minerva. I'm glad we had a chance to clear the air."

She gave him a grim smile and turned to go. He caught her arm, saying, "Do you think I might see you again?"

"It isn't a good idea, Tom."

"Oh. All right. Well, good afternoon, then."

She nodded and walked off. If she had seen the look on his face as he stared after her, she might not have slept as well as she did that night.

~oOo~

Still so haughty.

He wasn't surprised. She had always thought herself too good for him, and now that he was a lowly clerk at Borgin and Burkes, he didn't expect that to change.

He had hoped that the time that had passed since the duelling incident and its aftermath might have blunted some of her animosity, but it clearly wasn't the case.

What surprised him was how much he still wanted her. He had long ago, perhaps as early as his third year at Hogwarts, determined that Minerva McGonagall was the most powerful person he had met, witch or wizard, save for himself and Dumbledore. As his hatred for the old Deputy Headmaster and his outdated and useless scruples had grown, the more firmly Tom had decided he needed Minerva on his side, if only to deprive the old man of her power. Because it would ultimately come down to a fight between him and the old man, just as it had for Gellert Grindelwald. Nobody else had the power, and once Tom had completed his transformation, even Dumbledore would be unable to touch him. Minerva could help him, with her power and her talent for Transfiguration. Tom was drawn to her power like a Niffler to gold. But he wanted her the way a wizard wants a witch, too. Yes, that surprised him. It wasn't as if he were lacking in pleasant female company.

His charm had served as a subtle flyswatter, batting lesser beings out of his way as he moved inexorably toward greatness. He had hoped it might lure Minerva in, but it had never worked on her as it had on almost everyone else. Nor had contrition, a tack he had found worked surprisingly well with adult witches, even after he had hurt them. But not with Minerva, apparently. No matter. He had other tricks up his sleeve.

Redemption, for example. A witch like Minerva would likely find the opportunity to Save Tom Riddle from Darkness almost irresistible. Gryffindors never could pass up the chance at some facile heroics.

And if that didn't work, well ... she was frightened of him, that much was clear. And a bit of sleuthing around had told him that she no longer had Dumbledore to hide behind. He had apparently dropped her like an old slag once she'd left Hogwarts and hadn't gone near her since.

She was vulnerable now, and he would take advantage of it.

~oOo~

Minerva was angry but not surprised when notes from Tom Riddle began to appear, first at the flat, then at her office. They were always brief and complimentary, and always ended with a plea to allow him to see her. She began to return the notes unopened, which annoyed the owls no end.

He accosted her one evening after she had stayed late at the lab, stepping suddenly in beside her as she rounded the corner to head to the Muggle chip shop down the street.

"Tom! You..."

"You returned my owls," he said, not bothering to mask the anger in his voice. "That wasn't very nice of you."

Her heart rate increased as she glanced around the dark and deserted street. Her hand itched to feel for her wand in her pocket, but she kept it relaxed.

"I thought I made it clear that we had nothing more to say to one another," she said.

He caught her arm as she turned to go, but his grip was gentle. "Minerva, *please*. I need you to help me. I think you're the only one who can."

She turned back.

He said, "You're the only one who ever saw through me. Everyone else saw only what they wanted to see."

She said nothing but made no move to go.

"I don't think it will be any surprise to you if I tell you that I've dabbled in the Dark Arts. I was terrified of not fitting in, of having everyone discount me because I came from a Muggle orphanage, and it was such an easy way to win admiration in Slytherin. I was arrogant. I thought I could control it, that I could bend the Dark Arts to my will, for good. But it got perverted somewhere. I suppose it always does. And then it was just hard to make things right again ... to get clean. I'm trying, though. But I need help. I need someone to guide me, to show me the right way to harness my power. You've had help, Minerva, all the way down the line from your family to Professor Dumbledore. I never had that. I was always too proud to ask for it. Until now. So I'm asking: Minerva, please help me."

He was very, very good, and she was almost taken in. When she felt her face relax and tears prick at the corners of her eyes, though, she caught a glimpse of the too-familiar predatory gleam in his.

"I don't believe you," she said.

"Minerva..."

"If you're so anxious to leave the Dark Arts behind, why are you working in a shop that traffics in Dark objects?"

"It wasn't my first choice. To tell the truth, I was offered a position at the Ministry, as a junior assistant to the Minister. But I turned it down. I didn't trust myself to be that close to so much power. The job with Borgin and Burkes was arranged by a Slytherin friend. I didn't really have a lot of options."

"If you are at Borgin and Burkes, Tom, I expect it is because that is exactly where you want to be."

"So you're saying you won't help me?"

"You don't really want my help. I've no doubt you want something, but help isn't it. Either way, I can't give you what you want. Please let me alone."

The change in him was chilling. It was as if a glamour had suddenly been removed from his face, but it was no magic. He looked hard and almost without animation behind his stony features. She could have sworn she saw a red glint behind his eyes.

"As you wish, Minerva. I'll let you be ... for now. But we'll meet again. Count on it."

It was the only thing he ever said that she believed.

Chapter Thirty

Chapter 30 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"There's something hard about her, and that suits me fine. I seem to suit her too. She's a helluva girl."

In July of 1947, Minerva and Amelia became the first two female Aurors since the inception of the programme at the middle of the 19th century. The applause from the invited audience...including Elizabeth Barnes, who had dropped out of the programme due to a serious training injury...at the ceremony was loud and boisterous as Minister Greengrass pinned the official badges on the two women.

Thorfinn McGonagall did not attend the ceremony. He and Elisabeth were in Caithness with a private Healer hired to care for Elisabeth as she lay dying of the breast cancer that was consuming her. Einar, Minerva's grandmother, and Edgar Bones, however, were in lively attendance to see Minerva and Amelia become full-fledged Aurors, and Edgar snapped lots of pictures with his new auto-developing camera. The movement in the images was blurry, but Thorfinn and Elisabeth were very glad to have the photos.

Each of the new Aurors received a licence to use Unforgivable curses and a desk, and on their first official day, Senior Auror Greg McKinnon grinned as he dropped a heavy pile of parchments on Minerva's immaculately clean desk.

"Here you go, McGonagall; let's see how long it takes you to get through these."

"What are they?"

"Cold cases. Your job, *Junior Auror*, is to go through them and find any reference to objects that could potentially have been Transfigured or cursed. Have the list on my desk by the end of next week."

"What about our research?"

"You're on salary now, McGonagall, not stipend. The Ministry expects its money's worth. Your salary pays for grunt work, mine pays for research and field ops."

"But..."

"Take it up with Edgecombe." He lowered his voice a bit and added, "If you still want to work with me in the lab, it's fine; we just need to make sure it's outside official work hours."

The months passed, and Minerva received many such assignments, punctuated with the occasional call to the field to investigate a crime. With the defeat of Grindelwald and the subsequent roundup of his supporters in Britain, the relative calm predicated by Marius Edgecombe had come to pass, and the crimes that were committed didn't generally involve Dark Magic. The few more serious incidents were the province of the Senior Auror corps. Minerva's days of chasing Dark wizards were apparently over for the moment.

Amelia was in much the same boat, but without the added attraction of extra-curricular research to make the drudgery more bearable. She didn't care much for research, in any event. Her outlook brightened considerably when McKinnon recommended she be assigned to assist Marius Edgecombe and Hildebrand Abbott in updating Ministry policy regarding Auror training and operations. It wasn't the field work she had hoped to do when she'd joined the Auror training programme three years before, but she found she liked policy-making. She had a logical, rational mind, much like Minerva's, but she also found she had a knack for understanding the politics underlying law...something that made Minerva grimace in distaste.

~oOo~

Elisabeth Bones-McGonagall died on 2 November 1947. Minerva and Amelia attended the funeral, both white-faced but dry-eyed, and accompanied Minerva's father back to Caithness for the weekend. After seeing her father to bed, Minerva snagged a bottle of good whisky from the liquor pantry and took it to Amelia's room, where the two got rip-roaring drunk.

During the course of their sodden evening, a bleary-eyed Amelia asked, "So, what was it with you and Dumbledore?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean..." she leant in close, peering intently at Minerva "...were you in love with him?"

When Minerva didn't answer, Amelia pressed on. "Are you in love with him?"

"I'd rather not talk about him, if you don't mind," Minerva said with as much dignity as she could muster, given that she could barely sit upright. But it wasn't precisely the truth. Part of her ached to talk about him, but she didn't think it would do her any good to dredge up the old feelings at this late date. As much as she trusted Amelia Bones, she didn't feel right about letting her in on the secret she had kept for nearly four years. And the secret was not hers alone, she reminded herself.

"All right, Minerva. But I'll just say this and let it drop: If you do love him, you should do something about it. You're not his student anymore, so maybe he'd be receptive. You never know."

She took another swig of the whisky, which they were drinking straight from the bottle by this point, and added, "You have to grab your happiness with both hands. That's what Thorfinn and Mum did. And that's what I'm going to do."

"Marlene?"

"Yes, Marlene. Yes, yes, and yes. I'm going to tell her she needs to make up her mind to be with me ... really *with* me ... or to finish it for good. No more silly-shallying...*shilly*-shallying...around."

"What do you think she'll do?"

"Fuck if I know." Amelia collapsed in a fit of nervous giggles. Sobering up a bit, she said, "But she can't live her whole life worrying about what her father will think. I don't care if he wants to be Minister; she has to live life on her own terms."

"What does Greg say?"

"Same as me. He just wants his sister to be happy. And for some strange reason, he likes me."

Minerva smiled blearily at her friend. "Good for you. I hope it works out."

"If it doesn't, well ... better I should know now, don't you think? Give me time to find someone else before I turn into an old hag?"

"You won't be an old hag. Besides, your mum found someone at, what was she? Forty-eight?"

"*Mmm*. So, anyway, I think if you still have a thing for Dumbledore, you should tell him."

"It isn't that simple."

"So you *do* have a thing for him!"

"Please, Amelia. I really, really do not want to discuss it."

"All right. Just... no, all right. I won't say anything else. I swear."

Three weeks later, Amelia told Minerva she was moving out of their flat to move in with Marlene McKinnon.

Minerva, Greg McKinnon, Douglas McLaggen, Gareth Prewett, and a few other friends threw the couple a flat-warming party when they settled into a small walk-up in Marylebone, close to the Healer's office where Marlene was apprenticing after having finished her formal training at St Mungo's.

Minerva didn't regret Amelia's moving out; now that she was drawing a full salary, she could afford the rent on her own, and she had always liked her solitude. She would miss having someone to talk to when she felt like it...which wasn't all that often, when it came right down to it...but she would see her friend every day at the office.

She was happy for Amelia. Happy, and just a little envious. Minerva had only gone out with two people since resolving to move on with her life, and neither liaison had amounted to anything. She was now determined to try harder. The people around her seemed to be pairing off, and although she had no desire to get married or otherwise permanently attached, she envied the intimacy they shared and the sense of belonging that seemed to emanate from Amelia and her other friends who had found companions.

As usual, once Minerva put her mind to something, she was successful.

She finally relented and allowed Douglas McLaggen to take her out. She enjoyed his company, and, eventually, his bed. They were happy until, several months into their relationship, he asked her to marry him. Minerva didn't love him, or at least, not enough to become his wife, and told him so honestly and gently. He accepted it with the philosophical good grace that seemed to come naturally to him, and they eventually parted as friends. She was happy for him when he married another woman eighteen months later, and sent an extravagant gift when their twins arrived the following year.

She fell into a series of casual relationships with men who amused her or interested her intellectually or both. She took a few of them to her bed but none to her heart. Late at night, when she was tired, she wondered how long or how many men it would take to erase Albus Dumbledore from her thoughts as cleanly as he had removed himself from her life.

Minerva surprised herself by agreeing to go out with Alastor Moody, who had started an internship in the Auror office after finishing at Hogwarts. They had been friendly at school, thanks to their mutual interest in duelling and Alastor's friendship with Einar, although the acquaintance had waned when she left Hogwarts. She liked Alastor and had been happy to take up their friendship again when he joined up with the Auror office, and she was happy to go out with him when he finally worked up the nerve to ask her.

Alastor was very sharp, as she remembered, and he had become a rather handsome, if brash, young man, and she found his company surprisingly easy. His directness pleased her, and when he suggested she join him in his bed after their third real date, she surprised him by agreeing without hesitation. He turned out to be as surefooted and direct in sex as he was in everything else, and she appreciated it. Even better, he didn't push her to make more of their relationship than it was.

When she was honest with herself, however, she had to admit that part of his appeal was that his first assignment as a Junior Auror was to liaise with Albus Dumbledore to learn more about the suspected former supporters of Gellert Grindelwald he was assigned to keep tabs on, and the two men had developed something of a friendship that flowed naturally from the mentor-student relationship they had enjoyed back at Hogwarts. Somewhere in the back of Minerva's mind was the hope that Alastor would bring news of their affair back to Albus. She wasn't sure what she hoped it would accomplish, but she wanted to feel some connection with her former lover, even if it was through this most strange intermediary.

Alastor, of course, did exactly that. He was sitting with Albus in the Hog's Head, which they had chosen for their meetings, since Hogwarts students and staff rarely ventured in there, and the patrons tended to mind their own business.

They had concluded their business and were finishing their drinks when Alastor said, "By the way, Professor, I ran into an old protégée of yours at the Auror office a while back."

"Oh?" asked Albus. The Auror office was filled with his former students.

"Yeah, Minerva McGonagall. She's working on tracking unregistered Animagi and helped brief me. She asked after you and said to give you her best."

Albus kept his tone even. "Did she? And how is she?"

"She's grand," Moody said. He added in a conspiratorial tone, "Actually, we've got kind of a thing going, if you can believe it...me with former prefect, Head Girl, and all-around Madam Perfect...I don't know why, but it works. She's not like other girls, all keen for romance with wedding bells in her ears. There's something hard about her, and that suits me fine. I seem to suit her too. She's a helluva girl."

Albus blanched at the thought of Moody and Minerva together. The image of Alastor making love to her that had leapt into his mind made him slightly ill. The thought that she might enjoy it more with this young man than she had with him made him sicker still.

"I've had my eye on her since my third year, but I guess you knew that, didn't you?" Moody said. "I'm ashamed to say it's taken me this long to work up to it," he added with a chuckle. "Worth the wait, though."

Albus felt slightly light-headed. "I'm happy to hear it. Is it serious between you and Minerva," he asked, trying to keep his tone interested but light.

"Yes and no. I like her a lot, and Merlin knows, I ... well, I like her a lot, and have done for a while. But I'm not ready to settle down...wife, kids, all that rot. And she doesn't seem interested in all that either. Got her eye on the ball, I'd say. I heard that one of her old mates from training asked her once. To get married, I mean, and she turned him down. I think she just wants a good time. I mean, *erm* ..." His Irish skin gave away his embarrassment. "We just enjoy each other's company, is what I mean to say."

The images that swam through Albus's mind during Moody's brief monologue were nearly unbearable: Minerva as someone else's lover, as someone else's wife, raising someone else's children ...

A thousand times over the past few years, he had thought of seeking her out. But he restrained himself. It was for the best, he thought, that she move on, find a more appropriate partner. One who would make her happy and give her the things he couldn't: a home of her own, children, a husband who could grow old alongside her. She had protested on occasion during the heady months of their affair that those things were unimportant to her, but she was so young, and perhaps too absorbed in the excitement of their secret romance to be able to make those decisions rationally. The fact that he had abandoned his responsibility to her in one respect didn't absolve him of looking out for her welfare entirely, he had thought at the time, and quite rightly, he now reckoned.

But when he had seen her at the Ministry ball, in the arms of that handsome young man, something had died inside him. They looked so right together. He had gone home, and for the first time, he used his Pensieve to watch memories of himself with Minerva. Every time he saw himself lay one of his large, age-lined hands on her smooth, perfect skin, he had flinched. He had withdrawn from the Pensieve hours later, weeping.

Now again, picturing Minerva with Alastor Moody, he wanted to weep. It seemed right, even in his mind's eye. Both young and strong and beautiful...so right. And he, Albus, was so wrong: wrong for her, wrong to have fallen in love with her, and most definitely wrong to have acted on it as he had. So he would endure. If he had been a religious man, he would have seen it as his just penance.

When Moody had finished his drink...Albus's still sat, half full, on the table...Albus stood to excuse himself, saying he had to get back to the castle. He shook Moody's hand and wished him well. He asked the young man to convey his best to Minerva.

It was, Albus later thought, his luck...good or bad, he couldn't have said...to run into her not two weeks later at the Ministry.

He had recently been appointed to a vacant seat in the Wizengamot and had come to fill out the endless paperwork regarding ethics, rules, and potential conflicts of interest, all to be signed and notarised in front of a proper Ministry functionary.

He was standing alone in the lift when the door opened, revealing a startled Minerva McGonagall. She hesitated before stepping in to join him.

"Well, hello!" he said, realising he was speaking too loudly.

"Hello, Professor Dumbledore." She turned to face the doors rather than look at him and pressed the button for her floor.

"How have you been keeping?" he asked.

"Quite well, thank you. And you?"

"The same. Not much changes at Hogwarts, you know."

"Some things change."

He could think of nothing to say to that.

"I hear Professor Merrythought has retired," Minerva said.

"Yes, a few years ago."

"You must miss her. You seemed good friends."

"Yes. I do still see her occasionally, though."

"That's nice."

The lift stopped at the ground floor, and Minerva stepped out.

He wanted to stop her from going, to take her arm, ask her to join him for dinner, lunch, tea...anything...but he only said, "Well. It was nice to see you again, Minerva."

"Yes," she said with a small, grim smile. "Take care of yourself, Professor." Then she was gone, lost in the crowd shuffling through the atrium.

They wouldn't see one another again for six years.

~ E N D O F P A R T I I ~

Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter 31 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

PART III

1956-1957

Lover, lead forth thy love unto that bed

prepared by whitest hands of waiting years,

curtained with wordless worship absolute,

unto the certain altar at whose head

stands that clear candle whose expecting breath

exults upon the tongue of flame half-mute,

(haste ere some thrush with silver several tears

complete the perfumed paraphrase of death).

E.E. Cummings ~ "Epithalamium"

"I think I might like teaching younger students, and I think I could be good at it."

"Congratulations, Headmaster!" said Caspar Crouch, clapping Albus firmly on the shoulder as the other members of the Hogwarts Board of Governors applauded.

"Thank you, Caspar. And my thanks to all of you for your confidence in me."

"Nonsense," said Crouch, "you've been doing the job for months; it's time we made it official."

After Albus and Crouch had each signed the contract appointing Albus Dumbledore Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the meeting broke up, some of the governors stopping on the way out to offer their personal congratulations, while a few simply filed out, pointedly without comment.

When everyone else was gone, Caspar said, "What would you say to a spot of dinner? My treat. There are a few things I'd like to discuss with you."

Albus agreed readily. There were a few things he wanted to discuss with the Chairwizard of the Board of Governors himself.

The two men talked about several issues concerning both the running of Hogwarts proper and the politics of managing the governors. Albus gratefully accepted Crouch's advice on how to handle the fractious group ("smile and nod a lot when discussing the minutiae" and "it's generally better to ask for forgiveness than permission") and asked him what he thought the odds were on getting Herbert Burke to retire.

"Hmm, that's a tough one, old boy," said Crouch. "But for what it's worth, I'm in your corner on this. Burke is a disaster as a teacher. I had hoped we might get rid of his lovely wife in the next year or so, but she seems intent on soldiering on as a governor until she drops. I suppose it will depend on how attractive we can make the offer. If we were to, say, add a little to his pension...enough to help him get a second home for his retirement...it might fly. All Belvina cares about is his good name and that he's out from under her feet."

"I'll see what I can do with the budget," said Albus. "If I can find enough to sweeten the retirement offer, I'll certainly do it."

An idea occurred to him.

"Perhaps," he said as a smile broke out over his face, "one of my first acts as Headmaster should be to introduce a new honour. Something along the lines of a 'Distinguished Service Award' for staff who have been especially ... distinguished and are nearing the twilight of their careers. Perhaps attach a little honorarium?"

Caspar laughed. "I knew we were right to vote you in, Albus. It's a very good idea, and one that will appeal to Herbert, I think. And, more importantly, to Belvina. Make sure there's a medal... a big one. She likes to trot him out to all those tedious pure-blood functions as her brilliant scholar-husband."

They finished their dinner, chatting amiably, and Albus returned to the castle. He went to the Headmaster's office to collect several items of correspondence and took them back to his quarters in Gryffindor Tower. Since Headmaster Dippet's death two weeks after the close of the spring 1956 term, Albus had been doing both his own job and the Headmaster's. He had not moved into the Head's private rooms, as he had not been officially installed as Headmaster until that very day, although nobody had seriously doubted he would be appointed permanently.

He didn't mind the extra work especially, but as Armando's health had begun to fail, Albus had been afraid he was giving short shrift to both his teaching and his Head of House duties as the responsibilities of the Headmaster fell increasingly on his shoulders.

The first order of business, he thought as he went through his correspondence, would be to appoint a new Head of Gryffindor. His primary candidate was Diophantus Lemmas, who had been teaching Arithmancy at Hogwarts since 1949. The only other former Gryffindor currently on staff was Silvanus Kettleburn. The Care of Magical Creatures professor would have made a fine Head of House...he was certainly kind and nurturing, and level-headed to boot...but his duties to the creatures in his care would make him less available to the students in the castle.

Yes, Albus thought, *Lemmas it will have to be.*

His next task would be to find a new Transfiguration teacher, and it was a chore he dreaded. There were few truly qualified candidates to teach the tricky and dangerous branch of magic. Few people took apprenticeships in the art, as it was not as lucrative as Charms, Potions, or even Herbology; Transfiguration was too theoretical a discipline for any broad or remunerative application. He thought with a shudder of the disaster of a temporary replacement Dippet had had to engage in haste when it had become clear that Albus was needed elsewhere during the last war. When he had returned to his post, he had found the students so dreadfully underprepared that he had cancelled all N.E.W.T.-level classes for the next year in favour of holding remedial Transfiguration courses, a thing he had hated to do, but there wasn't any way those students would have passed the difficult exams, and there had been no good reason to pretend otherwise.

Finally, there was the matter of naming a deputy. This was tied up in Albus's mind with replacing Herbert Burke as Charms master, because he fervently hoped to persuade his old friend Filius Flitwick to take both posts. Aside from the fact that Filius was eminently qualified to teach the subject and had proven skill in teaching, Albus trusted him and felt comfortable sharing things with him that he would be unlikely to discuss with others. That, he felt, was an essential quality in a deputy, not least because, as had recently been demonstrated, the deputy could become Acting Headmaster in the skip of a heartbeat.

Six weeks later, he had achieved all but one of his immediate aims. Diophantus Lemmas was comfortably installed in Albus's old rooms in Gryffindor Tower, and Herbert Burke had been retired with his shiny new award, two hundred Galleons on top of his pension, and much fanfare. Filius Flitwick was welcomed as the new Charms master with less fanfare but greater satisfaction on Albus's part. He had also agreed, albeit somewhat reluctantly, to serve as Albus's deputy.

The first task Albus set Filius was to advertise for a Transfiguration teacher and to sort through any applications that came in, weeding out the poor candidates before passing the ones with potential on to the Headmaster. Advertisements were duly placed in the *Daily Prophet*, *Transfiguration Today*, and, in flurry of optimism, the *European Journal of Transfiguration*.

Two days after the first advertisement had run, Filius came to Albus's office bearing a small stack of parchment. Albus's eyes lit up expectantly.

"So many responses already!"

"Yes. And of them," said Filius, withdrawing a single sheet from the stack, "only one that's worth your looking at."

Albus's face fell. "That bad?"

"Worse. Not a single one of them has a mastery in Transfiguration, and this one," Filius said, shaking the parchment, "is the only one with any relevant teaching experience. One or two others had their names on some journal articles, but none as primary investigator."

"Ah, well. It's early yet. I'll have a look at that one, and in the meantime, let us hope our search bears sweeter fruit."

Over the ensuing days, a few more letters of enquiry and CVs came in, and most were as dismal as the first batch. One, however, caught Filius's eye, and he was surprised by the name at the top of it. He remembered the intense, sharp-eyed duellist with the amazing reflexes from the Hogwarts championship more than a decade past. Remembering also his private speculations at the time, he almost hesitated to include the CV in the small "to-consider" pile he would leave on the Headmaster's desk that afternoon. But hers was the best he'd seen thus far, so he left it on the top of the pile.

When Albus sat down at his desk after dinner and picked up the stack of enquiries, he had to blink several times to convince himself that he wasn't hallucinating.

What he saw on Minerva's CV was remarkable. In the short time since she had left the Ministry, she had built up a solid...no, ~~am~~*ast**onishing*...academic career in Transfiguration.

He had read a few of her papers, of course, and had heard when she had won the Merlin Prize from Mallory College, the small magical college within Oxford University, but other than that, he had avoided following her career. He had let his own academic pursuits in Transfiguration wane, first with the escalation of the Grindelwald situation, then as Armando's health had gradually deteriorated, and more and more of the Headmaster's duties had fallen on his shoulders. He hadn't been to a conference in more than a decade.

The question that was foremost in his mind was: *Why* would Minerva want to give up her promising research career to teach children? He couldn't help wondering if it had something to do with him.

But no. That was nonsense. It had been more than twelve years since the end of their affair, and he knew Minerva had had lovers since. She had not married, true, but looking at her CV, Albus could easily attribute that to sheer lack of time for romance. Moreover, Griselda Marchbanks, who had apparently mentored Minerva through her academic career, tended to fill her lab with women, so perhaps there had been little opportunity for Minerva to have met many men.

What would it be like, he mused, to have her back at Hogwarts? Would it be awkward? He was under no illusion that his feelings for her had entirely vanished, but he

seemed to have settled back into his cloistered shell after years of turmoil and had tried not to think of Minerva McGonagall, mostly successfully. Occasionally, she appeared in his mind, unbidden and without warning, and she featured prominently, he was ashamed to admit, on those occasions when he used his hands to relieve himself of an unwanted erection.

He read over her CV once more. On paper, she was an ideal candidate. It would be unfair not to give her a chance simply because he wasn't sure how her presence might affect him. Unfair to Minerva, and more importantly, unfair to the students of the school.

His mind made up, he took a fresh piece of parchment and his quill and began to write.

~oOo~

Minerva was having breakfast in her small kitchen in Oxford when the owl came. She took the letter it bore and gave the owl a bit of her toast, then, after some deliberation, put the letter down next to her plate and forced herself to finish her meal before opening it.

When she had set down her teacup, she took up the letter and broke the seal.

15 October 1956

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Hogsmeade, Scotland

Dear Madam McGonagall,

I have received your enquiry regarding our recent advertisement for a professor of Transfiguration and would like to meet with you to discuss your qualifications for the post.

Please let me know if you are available to meet in my office at Hogwarts on Friday at 2:00. If this is not convenient, kindly return with your response a list of alternative times you would be available.

I look forward to meeting with you.

Regards,

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster

Minerva smiled to herself. She would have been surprised had she not received a response to her enquiry; she knew her CV was impressive.

When she had seen the advertisement in the *Daily Prophet*, she had thought long and hard about applying for the post. It had been needling around in the back of her mind since reading of the former Headmaster's death several months before. Everyone knew that Albus Dumbledore would be his successor, which meant that Hogwarts would be in need of a new Transfiguration teacher.

Minerva wanted the job. She was tired of working under the nose of Griselda Marchbanks. Griselda was a fine Transfiguration mistress and had been a good mentor, but she directed research with a heavy hand. Minerva had felt stifled lately. She had been able to get some of her pet projects done, but the plain truth was that unless Griselda was enthusiastic, one's chances of getting funded for a project were nil. And one dared not complain too loudly. Academic Transfiguration was a small world, and the word of Madam Griselda Marchbanks was analogous to Mosaic Law.

Minerva had enjoyed teaching and supervising her own apprentices more than she had thought she would. And she had been surprised to discover how much she enjoyed tutoring younger students who came to her for remedial instruction in more basic Transfiguration.

So the Hogwarts post intrigued her. Then, of course, there was the question of Albus. Even after all this time, the notion of being near him again set Billywigs fluttering about in her belly. She admonished herself not to be foolish. She had done fairly well at putting him firmly in her past, especially once she had left the Aurors to pursue her interest in Transfiguration. She had thought she might run into him at one conference or another, but she hadn't, and he hadn't authored a journal article, monograph, or book chapter in ages, so his name had rarely even cropped up, except on a few occasions when Griselda was waxing nostalgic for times and discoveries past.

The fact that Minerva still felt something when she thought of Albus Dumbledore gave her pause. Would being near him again stir that something back into disquieting life? Surely not. Surely, at thirty-one, Minerva was capable of curbing, if not fully controlling, unwelcome emotions. She was not the girl she had been. And she certainly could control her actions.

There was no harm in enquiring about the post, she had concluded. And if she were granted an interview, as she had suspected she would be, she would find out exactly how she felt in Albus's presence once again. If it was too difficult, she certainly didn't have to accept the post if it were offered.

Of course, it was possible that Albus wouldn't want to see her again. That thought had given her only momentary pause as she had fastened her letter and CV to the owl's leg and sent it off to Scotland.

Now, as she looked at the letter inviting her for an interview, Minerva couldn't help smiling. If Albus was comfortable seeing her again, she thought, she could be comfortable. She summoned a quill and some parchment, dashed off a few lines confirming the appointment, then took herself off to the university's tiny owlery to send it.

~oOo~

Nothing has changed.

That was Minerva's first thought upon seeing Albus smiling over at her as she stepped through the door to the Headmaster's office. She felt an old, familiar warmth flood her when she saw his face, and she hoped she wouldn't blush at feeling his eyes on her after all this time.

"Madam McGonagall," said the Headmaster, striding toward the door she had just come through with Filius Flitwick. "It's such a pleasure to see you again!"

Minerva took the hand he had extended, and he clasped his other hand around hers and squeezed it warmly. She ignored the slight thrill this first physical contact in twelve years sent her.

She said, "It's lovely to see you again too, Professor. I was very pleased to get your letter requesting an interview."

"Not nearly as pleased as I was to receive your CV. It is most impressive, what you've accomplished in such a short time." Turning to his deputy, Albus said, "Madam McGonagall, you remember Filius Flitwick, I'm sure. I have been very fortunate in luring him away from private practice to join me here as Charms master and Deputy Head."

"Yes, and I was delighted to hear of his appointment," replied Minerva. "Professor Flitwick was kind enough to escort me from the gate, so we've had the opportunity to reminisce a bit," she said with a polite smile at Flitwick, who returned it.

"Yes, Madam McGonagall's prowess on the *piste* was very memorable, and I've been happy to learn she's been keeping up her skills since then," said Flitwick.

"But not competitive duelling," said Minerva. "Just a bit of fun with friends."

"Well, it always pays to keep in condition," Albus said, "even in times of peace."

Flitwick said, "If there's nothing else, Albus, I'll just leave you two to talk. You can have a house-elf get me if you'd like me to see Madam McGonagall out when you're finished."

"No, no. I'll see her out myself, Filius, but thank you."

"Well, then, it was a great pleasure to see you again, Madam McGonagall."

"And you as well, Professor," said Minerva.

The door closed behind Flitwick, and she and Albus were alone.

There was a moment of silence, then Albus said, "Please have a seat," indicating a pair of club chairs at the side of the room near the great window that looked out over the grounds.

"Would you care for some tea?"

"No, thank you, Headmaster. But please go ahead if you would like some."

It was on the tip of his tongue to say, *Call me Albus*, but he didn't.

"No, not if you don't care for any. Madam Soranus informs me I must lose two stone or she'll have me on a diet of cabbage and rice."

"Madam Soranus is still matron?"

"Yes, although she's been making noises about retiring. I think she was just waiting for Armando to ... well, I think she didn't want to go until there was a change in administration. She's very loyal."

"Admirable," said Minerva.

"Quite." Sensing that it was time to switch to the topic at hand, he said, "Your CV was most impressive. You've made quite a name for yourself in just a relatively few years. Tell me, why did you decide to leave the Aurors?"

"After the war, there wasn't that much to do, quite frankly. The Ministry had taken on all sorts of new recruits, but things died down so quickly after Grindelwald fell...after you defeated him...most of us were stuck on desk duty or doing minor field work. I suppose, when I applied, I had envisioned more challenging work. I thought perhaps I could blaze a trail for women in Magical Law Enforcement," she said with a rueful laugh. "I didn't count on circumstances not living up to my ambitions."

He was smiling, so she continued, "Anyway, I was fortunate enough to become involved in some of the research MLE was conducting in Transfiguration, and I found that more interesting than anything else I was doing. But there wasn't that much of it, and ..." She hesitated for a moment. "Frankly, I didn't care much for the direction some of it was taking. So I decided to pursue further education in Transfiguration."

"I see," said Albus. "And you made quite an impression...the Merlin Prize? Not only is it remarkable in itself, but to win it for basic science is quite unusual. Most of the prizes tend to go to showier papers."

"Is this your polite way of saying my work has no practical application?" she asked with a smirk.

The Minerva McGonagall Albus remembered had suddenly entered the room.

He said, "No, not at all. Just that the adjudicators seemed to have finally recognised the essential importance of basic science when they awarded you...quite rightly...such an important prize. It's been my observation that many of the papers that make a big splash initially fail to deliver on their promise ultimately."

Minerva said, "There is an increasing emphasis on translational research. The journals seem to want things that can be capitalised on immediately...new spells, or new variations of old ones. It's understandable. Aside from the pragmatic aspect, that kind of research can be turned into profits more readily, so the funders like it. But I think it has come at the expense of other research that may move slowly but has the potential for a more lasting impact."

"I see, and I quite agree. Your work on metabolic and cellular effects of Transfiguration being a prime example," he said, goading her slightly.

"Well ... yes," she said. "Everyone wants to find spells that can be useful medically...we'd like to be able to Transfigure a block of wood into a real, functioning leg, for example...but one of the stumbling blocks, in my estimation, is that we simply don't know enough about how Transfiguration affects living tissue. Until we do, anything we attempt to do to the human body with Transfiguration is simply casting in the dark."

"Indeed," said Albus. "Which brings me to the question of why you want to leave Oxford. You seem to have a thriving research programme going there."

She had been ready for this question and answered without hesitation.

"I'm finding it stifling. The kind of research I want to do isn't the kind that gets funding readily these days, and ... well, the truth is that I find I don't enjoy the kind of politicking that one needs to do to get projects off the ground. Madam Marchbanks has been a wonderful mentor to me, but there really isn't a great deal of room for two senior researchers in Transfiguration at Oxford, and I don't see Griselda slowing down anytime in the near future."

"You could find another institution. Or strike out on your own," he said.

"Perhaps. But the other universities are on the Continent or in America, and although I enjoyed my semester at the Salem Witches' Institute, I can't see myself making a life there permanently. And I think it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to set up a private practice. As you know, Transfiguration isn't like Potions or Charms in that respect. There's not much call for private services, and there are only so many people seeking private instruction. I found I very much enjoyed the teaching I've done at Oxford, but I especially liked working with the younger, less advanced students. It was nice to be able to give someone who was struggling both an appreciation for and foundation in the practice of Transfiguration. That's why the advert for this post intrigued me. I think I might like teaching younger students, and I think I could be good at it. I understand that I may not be the most qualified applicant, but I do appreciate your seeing me, Professor."

"I think you could be very good at it, Minerva," said Albus, forgetting his promise to himself to remain on strictly professional terms with her.

"Really?" she couldn't help asking.

"Yes. The post is yours, if you want it."

She was surprised in spite of herself, and could only repeat, "Really?" again, silently chastising herself for her lack of articulateness.

"Yes. Nobody else I've seen is nearly as qualified," Albus said, which wasn't entirely accurate. He hadn't actually interviewed anyone else. In truth, he hadn't quite intended to offer her the post then and there, but the offer seemed to have slipped out. But she was eminently qualified, and he had little doubt that she would fit in well with the

current staff, himself included.

"I ... I don't know what to say ..." she said.

"Then it's probably best to say nothing," he said with a grin. "I'll give you a copy of the contract with all the particulars about wages, benefits, and the like. Take it home. Look it over and let me know if it is acceptable. Do you think you could provide your answer by Monday next?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Wonderful!" he said. "I will look forward to your owl, then."

The two looked at one another for a few moments, then he rose, and she followed suit.

Albus pulled a small sheaf of parchment from a desk drawer and gave it to Minerva. "This is the contract. I hope you find it acceptable. Please feel free to owl me or Filius over the weekend should you have any questions."

"Thank you, Professor, I will." After a moment, she said, "Well, I best let you get on with your day. I imagine a Headmaster has a million things to do on a Friday afternoon."

He wasn't anxious to see her leave but could find no good excuse to ask her to stay.

"I'll see you to the gate," he said, holding her cloak for her, then putting on his own.

When they reached the front gate, Minerva held out her hand, expecting him to shake it, but he took it and brushed his lips across it. "I look forward to hearing from you on Monday, Madam McGonagall."

When she was back on her doorstep in Oxford, Minerva was surprised she hadn't Splinched herself.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter 32 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"I suppose that is rather the Thestral in the middle of the room."

"Professor McGonagall?"

It still sounded strange to Minerva nearly a week after she had officially occupied the title.

"Yes, Miss"...Minerva had to search her mind for the name..."Baddock? What is it?"

"Something's happened to my Transfiguration book."

"Yes?"

"It ... um ... got Transfigured. Into this."

The girl held out a peculiar-looking blob that might have been vaguely square if it could have been said to hold any shape at all.

"I see. And how did it get Transfigured into ... a cushion, if I'm not very much mistaken?" Minerva asked, trying not to smile.

"I was practicing the spell in chapter seventeen...the one for changing books...and I can't get it to change back."

Minerva withdrew her wand, pointed it at the erstwhile book, and said, *Mutatio Caudici!* The strange blob in the student's hand instantly became a copy of *Intermediate Transfiguration* once more.

"Thank you, Professor!"

"You're welcome. But next time, Miss Baddock, perhaps it would be wise to attempt your Transfiguration on an object other than the book in which the counter-spell is found."

The girl nodded sheepishly and turned to go.

"Miss Baddock?"

Emily turned, and Minerva said, "It's a very difficult Transfiguration, you know, changing books. Don't feel too bad about not managing it on the first try. I don't believe

Professor Dumbledore will teach it until the end of the year."

"No, Professor. I've just read ahead a bit and thought I would give it a try. I'm sorry."

"Never be sorry for wanting to learn more. It's an admirable impulse, but do try to exercise caution when moving ahead of your class. A few of the spells in this book can be hazardous if performed incorrectly. Please feel free to come to me if you have any questions about any of them. All right?"

"Yes, Professor. Thank you, Professor!" Emily said, then scurried off down the corridor with her book under her arm.

A voice from behind Minerva said, "An ambitious young lady, Miss Baddock. She reminds me a bit of you."

Minerva turned to see Albus smiling at her with the look of a satisfied teacher.

"You're thinking of the time I Transfigured the entire 'Medieval Potions' section of the library into blank sheets of parchment, aren't you?"

"Have you added Legilimency to your roster of accomplishments?" he asked, and she thought momentarily of their long-ago conversation on the topic. She wondered if he remembered it too.

"No. But it is hard to forget how long it took me to change all those books back."

"It was a long four hours," Albus said. "But instructive for you, I think. By the end of it, you had both mastered the spell and learnt something about controlling your magic."

"Indeed. Although at the time I was furious with you for making me do it all when you could have accomplished it in a few minutes."

"Not as furious as Madam Phalereus. She gave me the gimlet eye for weeks afterwards."

"I don't doubt it. Anyway, I was relieved to find she'd moved on. I didn't relish having her stare me down in staff meetings."

"Yes," said Albus, chuckling. "I was rather relieved myself when she decided to retire."

"I had tea in the staff room with Madam Pince yesterday," said Minerva. "She's quiet...well, I suppose you'd expect that in a librarian...but an interesting woman, I think."

"Yes, still waters and all that. And like her predecessor, she does run a tight ship."

"That's good. Nobody wants a library in disarray."

"Indeed," agreed Albus. "Speaking of tea, I was just coming to find you to invite you for tea in my office this afternoon. I'd like to know how you think your first week has gone."

"That would be lovely, thank you, Professor."

"Excellent! I'll see you at four-thirty, then."

Minerva knocked on the Headmaster's office door at four-thirty-seven, and when he admitted her, she bustled in, saying, "I'm sorry I'm late, Professor. There was a bit of a skirmish near the east staircase, and I stopped to help Professor Slughorn sort it out."

"No worries, my dear."

When Minerva had arrived at Hogwarts the past Friday, she and Albus had still been uncomfortably formal with one another. Over the week that followed, however, they had quickly become more at ease as she worked alongside him in his...soon to be her...Transfiguration classes, and after classes, using what little time he had to spare in going over curriculum and lesson plans. Although they still called one another by their formal titles, he had fallen back into his habit of using terms of endearment when speaking to her. She noticed that he did the same with some of the other witches who had been on staff for some time, but not with the newer staff, like Irma Pince or Frida Thorsun, the Ancient Runes mistress Armando Dippet had engaged the year before his death.

He gestured for her to sit at the small table near the fireplace, and as he poured the tea, adding a splash of milk to hers without asking, she had a moment of overwhelming nostalgia for the afternoon teas they had had together when he was teaching her...the teas that always held the promise of more. She shut her eyes momentarily and gripped the arms of her chair to steady herself, hoping he wouldn't notice.

She smiled at the three lumps of sugar he dropped into his tea as he took the chair next to her rather than the one across the table.

"So, how do you think your first week went?" he asked.

"Well enough. It's a great deal to take in, of course, but it's been most helpful to spend the week observing you. And you've been very kind to go over your lesson plans with me."

"It's my pleasure, my dear. I know it can't be easy to take over classes in the middle of the term using a lesson plan someone else has made. And do feel free to change things if you find they don't make sense to you."

"I will, thank you."

"It's been such a help having you in the classroom this past week. I don't know how I ever managed without you before."

"I'm more concerned about how I will manage without *you* next week."

"Nervous?" he asked, his lips curving upward in a sympathetic smile.

"A bit," she confessed.

"That's quite natural. But I have no doubt you'll do swimmingly. As you do everything else."

She felt the flush rise in her cheeks and felt like a schoolgirl all over again.

He peered at her for a moment, no doubt noticing the blush, before he asked, "And how are you making out at Charity's?"

"Fine. It was good of her to let me the room."

"She's had several lodgers since Charles moved away."

"Charles?"

"Her son."

"Oh. He must be the young man in the pictures in her parlour."

"I daresay he is."

"I didn't see any of her husband," said Minerva. "I assume I shouldn't ask her about him?"

She hoped Albus knew she wasn't being nosy; she just wanted to be certain not to offend her former teacher and current landlady, either by asking or not asking after her husband.

"Probably not," he answered. "In point of fact, she never married."

"Oh."

"Are you surprised?"

"A bit. Oh, not that she had a child out of wedlock...it's hardly unheard of...but it's just that ... well, one doesn't think of one's teachers as having love affairs." She had a sudden, appalling thought. "Unless it wasn't by choice."

"Oh, it was a love affair. An unhappy one, if what little I know of it is any indication. He was a Muggle, and it didn't work out. Charity was left with Charles. And did very well by him, I might add."

"Of course."

"As for teachers not having love affairs," he said softly, "I think you know that's not true."

There. It was out.

"Yes." She swallowed the lump in her throat. "I suppose that is rather the Thestral in the middle of the room. Were you surprised to get my application for the post?"

"Yes. Surprised and delighted. I wouldn't have thought you'd want to work with me after what I did to you."

"To tell the truth, I almost didn't send my enquiry. Not because I didn't want to work with you, but because I wasn't sure you'd want to see me. I was afraid you might think ... well ... that I was chasing you, or some such, after all these years."

"No, not at all."

"Good. And I don't consider that you did anything to me, Albus," she said, using his given name for the first time in twelve years. "If there were ... transgressions ... they were mutual. I have no regrets. I hope that you do not, either."

"No."

"I'm glad," she said, accepting what they both knew was a lie.

Breaking the momentary silence, he said, "Well, I expect your tea has got cold by now. May I?"

"Yes, thank you."

He Vanished the lukewarm tea and refilled her cup, once again adding a dollop of milk.

"I am very glad to have you here, Minerva," he said. "Not only because I think you'll make an excellent teacher, but because I value the chance to win your friendship again."

"You've always had that, Albus."

"Have I? I thought you were terribly angry with me...and rightfully so."

"I was. For a time. But one gets over these things. When you broke with me, you said you hoped always to be my friend. I thought at the time they were just empty words, but as I got older, I understood better. After I got over being angry, being hurt, I found I wanted that too. I've missed you, missed your friendship."

"Have you forgiven me, then, Minerva?"

"There's nothing to forgive. You did what you felt was best at the time. I knew you were trying to protect me, even if I was angry about it."

"Yes, but I should never have acted upon my feelings for you as I did. That was the truly unforgivable thing. Now that you are older...and a teacher...I'm sure you understand that."

Yes, she understood it now.

But she only answered, "As I said, I have no regrets, Albus."

He was close to her, only an arm's length away, looking searchingly at her face, and she felt a moment of panic, imagining him closing the gap and kissing her, so she said, "Anyway, I consider our accounts settled. After all, you have given me a job."

He snapped out of his momentary trance. "And one in which I think you'll do very well, my dear." He seemed relieved at the change of direction. "I hope you don't feel I'm insulting you in keeping my O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. classes this year."

"Not at all. They've begun with you, and with so much at stake for them, I think it makes sense for them to continue with you through the exams."

"That was my reasoning as well," he said. "So, do you have any worries about going solo next week?"

"Some, I suppose. I don't think I'll have any difficulty keeping the younger classes in line, but I do wonder about the fourth-years. They've been with you since the beginning, and I'm sure some of them will resent a new teacher coming in at this late date."

"I think most of them will settle down easily. A few of the boys may test you a little, I think."

"Yes, I expect so."

"Bilius Weasley can usually be counted upon to liven up the classroom, but he's a decent lad and should buckle down for you in time. If he seems especially lively, have him turn out his pockets for you. He finds himself somewhat hobbled without his supply of Dungbombs."

"I'll remember that, thank you."

In truth, she wasn't concerned about the likes of Bilius Weasley. He struck her as a bit of a hellion, but a good-natured one who could be subdued with the arch of an imperious eyebrow. More worrisome was the fourth-year Slytherin, Rabastan Lestranger. She remembered his uncle, Rufinus, who had been at school with her, as one of Tom Riddle's toadies, and the boy appeared to Minerva to be just as unpleasant and disturbing as his uncle. She had caught him staring at her more than once as she

moved through the Transfiguration classroom, and on one occasion, he had caught her eye and given her the most insolent smile, letting his tongue snake out briefly across his lips for good measure. While she wasn't afraid of the boy, she was afraid of the effect he and one or two others could have on her classroom.

Albus seemed to know what she was thinking.

"As for some of the others, I don't think you need worry too much. You are a very powerful, accomplished witch. A gentle reminder of that fact, should things get out of hand, will put them all firmly in their places."

"Thank you, Albus."

He smiled and offered, "More tea?"

She glanced at the Muggle clock on the wall. "Goodness, no, thank you. I'll need to be getting on. I'm meeting a friend for dinner this evening, and I don't want to be late."

She wasn't sure if it was really a frown she saw briefly cross his features or simply wishful thinking on her part, but she immediately regretted her disclosure. She didn't want him to think she had a date.

"Well," he said, standing, "I should let you go, then."

She stood as well. "Thank you for the tea. It was nice to have the chance to talk with you a bit. About everything."

"Yes, it was nice. Shall I walk you to the Apparition point?"

"Thank you, but no need. I'll see you Monday, then."

"Monday, my dear."

When Minerva arrived at the Leaky Cauldron, Amelia was already at a table near the fireplace, a glass of wine in her hand.

They greeted one another, and Minerva ordered a Chablis as the two perused the menu.

"To Professor McGonagall," Amelia said, raising her glass to Minerva.

"Thank you. I still can't quite get used to the title."

The two women chatted, and Minerva told Amelia a bit about her first week. When she voiced her concerns about Rabastan Lestrangle, Amelia made a face.

"A bad lot, that family," she said. "We had his father, Romulus, up on charges for torturing a house-elf a few years back, but he managed to weasel out of it. Nobody would cop to having seen it, even though it got reported."

Minerva gave a glum sigh. Nobody seemed to care much when people mistreated their elves, so it was surprising that charges were even filed against Romulus Lestrangle. It was less surprising that they couldn't find anyone to testify against him.

"Anyway, I'm not looking forward to facing Rabastan and a class full of fourth-year Slytherins first thing Monday morning," said Minerva.

"May I make a suggestion?"

"Be my guest."

"Try putting your hair up."

"What?"

"You know ... schoolteacher style. All that lovely dark hair down your back ... it makes you look young and attractive. You might want to be less so for a class full of teenagers with raging hormones."

"It's a good idea."

"Speaking of young and attractive, is there anyone *interesting* up there at Hogwarts?"

"Oh, Amelia," said Minerva. "It isn't ... I'm not ..."

"What? You haven't had a date since I don't know when. I'm just wondering if there are any prospects up there at that school, since you're going to be stuck at Professor Burbage's place, at least for the next few months. I can't imagine she's got a slew of eligible wizards coming through her parlour on a regular basis."

"No," said Minerva, thinking of what Albus had told her about Charity Burbage earlier. "But don't be unkind, Amelia. It was good of her to offer me the room on short notice."

"Sorry. It's just that I can't help remembering all those boring hours in her class."

"I didn't think Muggle Studies was that dull. And Einar loved it, obviously."

"Oh, I meant to tell you, I ran into your brother the other day in Inverness."

"Did you?"

"Yes. I was up there supervising some trainees who were investigating an accident involving Muggles...nothing too serious, and it looks like it really was an accident," Amelia said when she saw Minerva's worried look. "Einar was the liaison officer in charge of the clean-up. We had lunch afterwards. He sends his love and wants to know when you're coming to see Morrigan."

"He could write to me himself, of course," said Minerva drily. "Anyway, I'll owl him tomorrow. Maybe I can get to Inverness next weekend. Morrigan must be getting big."

"I imagine so. I told him I'd come by next Saturday, so maybe we can go together. Safety in numbers, eh?" said Amelia.

"What do you mean?"

"Babies scare me."

"Oh, Amelia!" Minerva laughed.

"What?"

"It's funny: head of the Auror training programme afraid of a three-month-old!"

"It's just that they're so little, and so moist!" said Amelia.

"Aye, they are that. Saturday sounds fine, but I have to be back by six. I'm on the schedule to attend dinner at Hogwarts that evening. Each staff member has to attend once a week, to give each of the Heads of House an evening free."

"I don't envy you, stuck up there with all those children."

Minerva cocked an amused eyebrow. "Well, I haven't had to change any nappies yet, Amelia."

Their meals arrived just then, and the two witches tucked in.

Between bites of her steak and kidney pie, Amelia said, "You never answered my question."

"What?"

"Are there any interesting men up there at Hogwarts?"

"Not really. A lot of the same from school, actually: Slughorn, Beery, Kettleburn...he was there when you were at Hogwarts, wasn't he?" Amelia nodded, and Minerva continued: "Hagrid and Pringle, of course..."

"Pringle? I don't know him."

"Oh, right, you wouldn't. He's the caretaker. Started in my sixth year, I think. Anyway, he's not my type. The only new fellows I've met are Julian Meadowes, the Defence teacher, and Diophantus Lemmas, who teaches Arithmancy. Oh, and Flitwick."

"Filius Flitwick? The duellist?" asked Amelia, surprised.

"Yes, he's Charms master and Deputy Head...don't you read the *Prophet*?"

"I must have missed that. He reffed one of the duelling matches when I was at school," said Amelia. "Not the year I won, though," she added.

"Yes, he did us three times, I think," said Minerva, the unpleasant memory of her final duelling match at Hogwarts flitting uncomfortably through her memory. "Anyway, he's very nice. I hope to get the chance to do a little duelling with him. Professor Meadowes...he runs the club now...wants us to give some demonstrations."

"You duelling Flitwick? We'd better get back to our Sunday practice, then."

She and Minerva had met on Sundays over the years to spar. Although neither witch had cause to use their duelling skills in their work, both enjoyed the exercise and liked keeping their abilities honed. They had abandoned the practice over the past two months, as Minerva had been working long hours to try to wrap up her work at Mallory College before starting at Hogwarts.

"I'd like that," said Minerva.

"So, what about those other two fellows you mentioned. Meadowes and what's-his-name?"

"Diophantus Lemmas. I think...although I'm not certain...that he's a confirmed bachelor. And Julian Meadowes is married, I believe."

"What about Dumbledore?" asked Amelia.

"What about him?"

"Do you still fancy him?"

"Please, Amelia," Minerva protested, hoping nobody around them was listening. "He's my superior."

"True. And I suppose he's a bit long in the tooth."

"He isn't," Minerva objected, then added quickly, "I mean, yes, he's probably too old for me, but he's hardly an old man."

Amelia eyed Minerva with a small smile, and Minerva had the feeling her friend knew exactly what was going on in her head.

Amelia said, "Well, it sounds like you won't have much luck up there."

"I didn't take the post to find a lover, Amelia."

"No. But you wouldn't say no if one fell in your lap, would you?"

"No," Minerva admitted. "I wouldn't."

"What about Alastor? He's single again, or so I hear."

Minerva gave a short laugh. "Alastor wouldn't be interested in taking up with me again. Especially now that I'm *ateacher*, of all blessed things."

"Don't be so sure of that. He mentions your name quite a lot, you know. There might still be a spark there."

"Alastor and I were a disaster. We fought too much."

"Yes, but making up can be a lot of fun, right?"

Minerva couldn't suppress a smile. "Yes, the making up was quite pleasant."

"*Quite pleasant*? My, you really have turned into a schoolteacher, haven't you?"

"Oh, stop it," said Minerva, laughing with her.

~oOo~

Albus stepped into the Hog's Head, nodding at the two characters sitting in the half-shadows when they acknowledged the tall wizard's presence.

He headed to the bar and, leaning over it, selected a bottle of cheap Firewhisky and two glasses. He fished a few Sickles out of a pouch in his pocket and was about to leave them on the bar when Aberforth appeared from the back.

Aberforth eyed him for a moment, then, recognising his brother under the glamour that made him look like a clean-shaven, nondescript ash-blond, said quietly, "Yer late."

Yer man's upstairs."

"Thank you." Albus headed up the back staircase to the small room in which he was to meet his contact.

When their meeting had finished, Albus was nearly tempted to down the Firewhisky he had poured in his glass out of courtesy rather than any intention to drink it.

His contact, Mortimer Borgin, had relayed disturbing news. It seemed that a small group of men had been gathering in his father's Knockturn Alley shop evenings to discuss plans for stirring up the latent Muggle-hatred that always seemed to simmer around the edges of pure-blood wizarding society. There had been whispers, Borgin said, of a leader recently returned from abroad. Mortimer Borgin had never seen this "Voldemort", as he was apparently called, but Albus had an idea as to his identity, which he did not share with Borgin.

"Not large," Borgin answered when Albus asked him how big the group was. "But I recognised a few of them: Avery, Lestrangle, Nott, Macnair. There were five or six others last time."

When Borgin took his leave, Albus thanked him and told him to stay safe. He used his wand to reseal the bottle of Firewhisky and gave it to the young man, who slipped it into his large pocket without comment.

Albus was thinking about what action, if any, he ought to pursue, when he heard the door open.

"Bad news?" Aberforth asked, quirking his chin at Albus's untouched glass of whisky.

"Worrying news," replied Albus.

"Blackrobes?"

"Something like them, it seems."

"Tossers."

Albus didn't say anything, and Aberforth sat on the chair opposite and put his booted feet up on the table between them.

"I hear you've got a new teacher up there at your school," he said, and Albus could tell from his tone that his brother was about to try to have some unpleasant fun with him.

"Yes," he said. He was too tired for this.

"Professor Minerva McGonagall", the *Prophet* called her. Seemed to me I'd heard that name somewhere before."

"I have no doubt you know exactly who she is, and I have no doubt you have something to say on the subject. Why don't you get it over with so we can both get on with our evening, eh?"

Ignoring Albus's unusual show of pique, Aberforth said, "You've got bollocks, I'll give you that, brother o' mine."

Albus didn't respond, so Aberforth continued, "Hiring a girl you were screwing back when she was your student."

Albus stood to go, Summoning his cloak from the peg in the corner, and headed for the door.

"How long d'you reckon it'll take you to get her back into your bed?" Aberforth called after him.

Albus stopped for a moment, then said quietly, "I have no intention of trying."

"Yeah, but we all know how your intentions have a way of turning out, don't we?"

Albus continued out the door without looking at his brother again.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Chapter 33 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"I'm not sure there is a 'right' in our situation. We simply have to muddle through as best we can."

On a frigid Saturday afternoon in early February, Filius and Minerva gave a duelling demonstration, and it was every bit as exciting as Professor Meadowes had told Albus he hoped it would be. The two new professors went at one another with good-natured gusto, casting and parrying for a full nine minutes before Filius got something through.

Albus was concerned when Minerva flew across the platform to land in a heap at the end, and the collected students gasped in shock, but she was up and her wand was

back in her grasp in a matter of seconds. She ducked under the hex Filius fired at her...so close to hitting its mark that Albus could see the end of her plait lifted by its energy as she dodged...then she hit Filius with a spell that flipped him upside-down before assailing him with a *Rictusempra* that had him gasping for air as he tried to focus his energy. Filius managed to right himself despite the gales of laughter caused by the Tickling Charm, and the two continued to duel.

Filius cast, sending a frightening-looking, ropy vine after Minerva. It caught her by the ankles, pulling her off her feet, and began to wind its way rapidly up her legs, forcing her to choose between expending her attention and energy on finding a counter-spell or blocking the *Expelliarmus* that was sure to come next. She took the latter route, and got off her *Protego* before she could be disarmed, adding a Jelly-Legs Jinx for good measure to keep Filius occupied for a few precious moments. Although the vines had worked their way up to her waist, her wand arm was still free, and Albus caught a glimpse of the familiar expression she had always worn when focussing her energy and intent on a difficult spell. She touched her wand to the tip of the snaking vine and cast.

The vine seemed to open up and peel back upon itself, quickly unravelling its hold on her legs. It separated into four smaller strings, and when Minerva pointed her wand again, intoning quietly but intently, "*Mutatio Ignis*," these suddenly became small jets of flame, prompting Filius, who had been advancing on her, to back away and the audience to gasp in horror.

Albus lifted a commanding hand to quiet the crowd, indicating his confidence that the Transfiguration mistress had no intention of roasting the Charms master in front of their eyes.

They needn't have worried, as Albus could have told them; small though he was, Filius Flitwick was more than capable of defending himself.

Filius pointed his wand and shot four jets of water at the flame-vines simultaneously, extinguishing them with a hiss and creating a thin veil of steam that momentarily hid him from Minerva's view. She quickly cast a blind *Protego*, but it flew wide of the mark, and Filius got a bit closer and shot another jet of water, which he directed fluidly down her wand arm in a show of his prodigious mastery of charm work. When it reached her wand, Filius shouted, "*Glassiador*!" and Minerva's hand and wand were immediately encased in a block of ice.

She raised her arm, crying, "*Finite Incantatem*!" but the ice remained. Minerva looked at it in disbelief, and Albus could see her mind racing, trying to think of a counter-spell she could perform wandlessly, but the crucial seconds ticked by, and finally, Professor Meadows called the bout in favour of Professor Flitwick, who held out his hand to Minerva to shake. When Minerva held up the frozen arm, the group gave a laugh. She looked annoyed for a fleeting second, then she laughed too, and everyone relaxed, including Albus, who realised he had been tense the entire time.

Minerva said, "Do you think one of you gentlemen could help me with this, then?" indicating the ice.

Filius lifted his wand, but Albus caught his arm, saying, "Allow me." He raised Minerva's frozen hand with his own, and instead of using his wand, he blew across it, casting a powerful Warming Charm with just his exhalation. Minerva's breath hitched, and when he heard the murmurs of the crowd, he knew he had made a misstep. The ice melted away immediately, however, and Minerva dried her wand on her robes and flexed her newly thawed hand several times, holding it up for the crowd to see that it was unharmed.

Albus covered his indiscretion with a hearty laugh. "I'm sorry, my friends," he said. "After that impressive demonstration, I couldn't help showing off a bit myself. Please forgive me."

Everyone applauded, and the four professors headed to Albus's private quarters for tea and biscuits at his invitation.

"You two put on quite a show!" said a delighted Julian Meadows when they were seated at the small table in Albus's sitting room. "I thought half the students were going to faint dead away when you went after Filius with those flames, Minerva."

"Madam Soranus would have had my hide," said Minerva. "I hope you knew, Filius, that I never would have done it if I hadn't been confident you could handle anything I could throw at you."

"Thank you for the compliment. I wasn't worried about the flames, other than being afraid I was about to lose the bout!" Flitwick said.

"It was rather a brilliant comeback, Filius," said Albus. "The steam was ingenious, and then the ease with which you directed the water...it was a stunningly elegant bit of charm work."

Flitwick looked embarrassed for a moment, then said, "Ah, well ... I hope it wasn't too unpleasant to have your wand hand frozen, Minerva. I'm afraid I do get carried away at times."

"Not at all. It's quite as good as new," said Minerva, "although I will admit, it was a very strange sensation. I simply couldn't think of a wandless spell to counter it fast enough. I certainly wasn't expecting an Icing Charm. I can't even remember learning it."

"No," said Albus. "It's fallen out of use since the invention of simpler Cooling Charms."

Flitwick smiled at the Headmaster, saying, "As the proverb says, old age and treachery will overcome youth and skill. It would appear that there are advantages to our advancing years, my friend."

Albus chuckled and said, "Indeed."

Julian Meadows said, "Unpredictability is an essential trait in a good duellist. And I'm very glad you demonstrated that to the children. It's easy to become complacent. I thank you both for being willing to give up part of your Saturday afternoon to put on the demonstration. I think it will be a real inspiration to the students."

Minerva said, "I thoroughly enjoyed it. It was an honour to be on the *peste* with Filius."

"My dear girl, the honour was mine," said Filius. "I will never forget the extraordinary duel you had with that young man back in 'forty-four. The odd outcome aside, it was tremendously exciting to see two such talented duellists battle it out."

"Odd outcome?" asked Meadows.

"Yes," said Albus, "Minerva and her opponent got locked together for a few moments. It was a chance occurrence."

He glanced at Minerva momentarily to find her eyes were on him as well, and they quickly looked away from one another.

"How strange," said Meadows. "What happened?"

Albus said, "One of our referees...your predecessor, as a matter of fact...had to intervene to end the spell. We decided to call a tie. To the best of my knowledge, it was the only one in the history of the Inter-House Duelling Championship."

"Extraordinary! How did they come to be locked together? It's a very rare occurrence, I thought."

"It isn't entirely clear," said Albus.

Filius quickly chimed in. "Rare, yes, but it happens from time to time. Anyway, Minerva, I was delighted to find that you've been keeping up with your duelling skills."

Albus realised with gratitude that his friend was trying to change the subject.

"Just a little sparring," Minerva said.

"I'm surprised you can find anyone to keep up," Meadows said.

"I used to be an Auror," Minerva explained, "so I have a few friends that are very sharp duellists. I'm sure they could quite wipe the *thepiste* with me if they were really trying."

"I doubt that," said Albus, and she rewarded him with a brief smile.

"An Auror, eh?" said Meadows. "I'm surprised you didn't go in for my position, then."

"No. I'd be quite lost teaching some of the theoretical aspects of Defence. The emphasis in Auror training is all practical, at least until you start getting into some of the specialty units."

"I'm afraid I'm all theory. Oh, I can defend myself well enough, of course, and I hope I'm correct in saying I do all right by the students in that respect," Meadows said with a glance at Albus, "but I will admit, it's theory that really interests me...the philosophy behind the Dark Arts. What makes a spell Dark, and all that. My research focused on investigating whether Dark Magic could be properly harnessed and made to work positive effects."

"Your research?" asked Minerva, intrigued.

"Yes. I spent some time in America and the Caribbean studying traditional Vodou rituals."

"Really?" said Filius. "I've always thought Vodou was mostly a Muggle attempt to practice magic...a made-up form of witchcraft. It's an area I admit I've never studied, though, so I am woefully uninformed on the subject."

"Most of us are," said Meadows. "But there's some truth to what you say. Magical cultures that practice Vodou are much more fluid in their definitions of 'magic', and their world view doesn't tend to divide people neatly into categories of 'magical' and 'non-magical', so there is some confusion, naturally. It's fascinating to study, and because enforcement of the International Statute is much laxer on some of the islands, there's a level of interaction between Vodouisants and the non-magical population that just doesn't exist in Europe or Asia, or in other parts of the Americas."

"Vodouisants also don't divide practices and spells between 'Dark' and 'Light' as we do. They don't believe in magic that is inherently 'Dark'. That was the primary focus of my research."

"I can certainly see why Albus hired you. He was always interested in those kinds of questions himself," said Minerva, glancing at Albus. "Are you continuing your research here at Hogwarts?"

Meadows paused for a moment before answering, "No."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

"Oh, not at all. I'd like to pick it up again, but when my son was born, my wife was understandably anxious for me to curtail my more hazardous work. This job came along at just the right time, and I'm grateful to Albus for convincing Armando to give it to me."

"Hogwarts is very lucky to have you," said Albus.

Meadows gave a self-conscious laugh. "Well, now that I've bored you all silly with my droning on, I'm afraid I need to be off. Anton's turning fifteen today, and I promised Natasha I would be there well before dinner to help them celebrate."

"We won't keep you, then," said Albus, rising. "Wish the lad many happy returns, Julian."

"I'll do that, Albus, thanks," said Meadows. "And thank you again," he said, turning to Filius and Minerva, "for a wonderful demonstration and a most enjoyable afternoon."

When he had gone, Minerva said, "I don't recall meeting an Anton Meadows. Is he a student here?"

"No," said Albus. "Anton is a Squib. He is being educated at a fine Muggle school in Aberdeen."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"I understand why you say that, Minerva, but don't ever let Julian hear you say it."

"Why," she asked, taken aback.

"He's very proud of his son. Rightly so. He takes great exception to any implication that Anton is somehow inferior simply because he is different from other children of magical families. I must agree with him there. I've met Anton on a few occasions, and he's a most remarkable boy."

"I see," said Minerva, slightly chastened. "I meant no offence."

Albus's tone grew light again, and he placed a reassuring hand on her arm. "I know you didn't, my dear. I just don't want you to inadvertently give offence should you meet Julian's family." He couldn't quite bring himself to withdraw the hand until he caught Filius's glance out of the corner of his eye.

"I appreciate that, Albus," she said.

Filius stood. "As Julian said, a most enjoyable afternoon, but I think I'll take my leave now. I'm afraid you wore me out, Minerva. I'm not as young as I once was, and I think I'd like a little nap before dinner. If you'll excuse me?"

When the door had shut behind Filius, Albus had a moment of irrational panic, thinking Minerva was about to go too.

"More tea, my dear?" he asked quickly.

He saw her hesitate, but was relieved when she said, "Yes, thank you, Albus."

They took their seats again, and he served the tea.

"I must confess, Minerva, that I was nervous this afternoon."

"About the duel? Why?"

"I was a little...only a little, mind you...afraid you might be hurt. I didn't think the 'sparring' you had mentioned would have kept you prepared to face as formidable an opponent as Filius."

"Well, Amelia and Alastor are fairly formidable sparring partners."

"Alastor Moody?" he asked before he could check himself.

"Yes. We've been sparring the past few weekends. We're old friends," she said, and he was fairly certain she was avoiding his eyes.

"Yes, I remember." He tried to ignore the knot that seemed to be forming in his belly.

An awkward gap of silence opened between them, and he had to turn his face away. When he finally looked at her again, she was looking back at him, a slightly pained expression on her face.

"I hate this," she said quietly.

He felt himself blanch. "What?"

"This discomfort ... the awkwardness between us. Everything either of us says seems to bring up memories, and I'm constantly afraid of hurting you inadvertently."

"Minerva..."

"I know that you know Alastor and I were once lovers, and I don't know how or whether to tell you that we aren't any longer. I'm afraid that by telling you, it will seem I'm ... I don't know ... hinting at something, but by not telling you, I feel like I'm hiding something from you. I don't know what's right."

Albus took her hands in his. "I'm not sure there is a 'right' in our situation. We simply have to muddle through as best we can."

She gave him a weak smile, and he released her hands.

He said, "I hope that you will be comfortable telling me things. Even if you think they might be uncomfortable for me to hear. Things may be awkward between us, but I think ... I *hope* ... that will pass with time."

"I didn't realise how hard this would be," she said.

"Nor did I."

"When I accepted the post...when I applied...I thought I was over what happened between us. That I could become comfortable seeing you, working with you, as friends. But I've come to recognise that it isn't that simple."

"No," he agreed. "Not that simple."

She hesitated, then asked, "Do you think we can be friends, Albus?"

"I hope so. I'd still like to try. I enjoy being with you, Minerva. Talking with you, sharing things with you. If that comes at the price of a little awkwardness, a little pain, so be it."

"I'd like to try too."

"I'm very glad to hear it." His tone brightened then, and he said, "Perhaps we could begin with a game of chess?"

"Chess," she said, an eyebrow raised.

"Yes. You still play, do you not?"

"Not for some time. But I think I could remember how."

"Excellent! I play with Filius from time to time, but frankly, he's not much of a challenge. He's become quite predictable."

"Then I will be a disappointment, I'm sure."

"I doubt that, my dear," he said, going to a side table and withdrawing a small chess set from a drawer. "In any event, it will be nice to have more than one opponent. Keeps one on one's toes."

"I shall have to rope Amelia into playing, then."

"Amelia, your sparring partner?" he asked.

"Yes, Amelia Bones."

"Ah, Miss Bones. I remember her. A rather brilliant student, much like yourself."

"Yes, but a few years ahead of me, and a Ravenclaw. She and I were in Auror training together."

"Oh, yes. She was injured when you were, I believe," he said.

Minerva looked at him with surprise. "You knew about my injury?"

"Yes."

"But you were away, looking for Grindelwald then, weren't you?"

"Yes. I found out about it after I returned," he said. "I asked after you...obliquely. I was distressed that you had been injured."

"Oh. I thought ..."

"What?"

"Oh, it isn't important," she said. "Shall we start?" she asked, indicating the chess board.

He had beaten her within half an hour, so they played again, and this time, she lasted forty-five minutes before surrendering her queen to him.

~oOo~

Albus lay awake that night, turning over the day's events in his mind.

The afternoon's duel had been exciting. Too exciting, really, in Albus's estimation. It had aroused layers of emotions he didn't especially want to confront at the moment. There had been fear...that Minerva might be injured or humiliated...and then the old, familiar pride in her accomplishments. And longing. Seeing her in duelling costume, casting and parrying, her hair in a long plait, just as she had been on the day of the Inter-House Duelling Championship so many years ago, had evoked in him a disturbing

mixture of apprehension and desire.

His usually obedient mind stubbornly kept returning to that day and the worry and anger that had accompanied his realisation that Riddle had violated Minerva's memories. Then came, in spite of his efforts to forestall them, the memories of exactly what Riddle had discovered with his Legilimency.

He closed his eyes.

April is the cruellest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain.

I am the dull root, Albus thought, or the dead land. But April is not the cruellest month. And she is not the spring rain.

It had been one of the poems he had inscribed in part in the charmed poetry book for her, in the bleak, dark days during which he was contemplating, but not completing, a break with her and dreading the coming confrontation with Gellert, and it returned to him now, thinking over their chess games that afternoon.

And we shall play a game of chess,

Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door ...

HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME ...

This last line had haunted him, leaping suddenly into his consciousness at odd moments, just as in the poem itself, torturing him with its aptness. He had urged her to read the entire poem, and she had been befuddled by the thing, laughing at its disjointed rhythms and unabashed mixture of classical and common allusions, frowning at its coarseness in places.

He wondered if she still had the journal and what she would do if he made an entry now.

He recognised with shock that his mind was beginning to be filled with Minerva McGonagall, just as it had been twelve years previously.

What should he do?

She felt something too, he was sure of it. That didn't mean, however, that she actually wanted to pursue more than friendship with him at this point. It was memory, most likely. Memory and desire. A potent combination, Albus thought, and a dangerous one.

They were colleagues now, and they had made a few tentative steps toward real friendship. And what had been true twelve years ago was only slightly less so now. He was not under threat of immediate attack, but he still had enemies, many of them. And he was still not whole or free; he had still not atoned for the actions of his past, could never atone for them, and they would continue to lade his every step, as Aberforth had so helpfully reminded him...a fearful shadow-Albus, always behind him, over his shoulder, waiting to pounce and destroy.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter 34 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"You're quite smitten with our lovely Transfiguration mistress. The only question is, what are you going to do about it?"

"Rook to D-one."

"Queen to F-three."

When her black queen drew her sword and plunged it through the flank of the hapless white knight's mount, Minerva saw the ghost of a smile pass Albus's lips. "You need to watch that," she said, looking back at the chessboard.

"What?"

"Your chess face. You smiled at my last move, which leads me to believe you're up to something."

He said, "How do you know my smile was not due to the brilliance of your own move? I am now threatened on either side."

"Because if it had been at my brilliant move, you wouldn't have tried to hide it."

"Ah. You are entirely too clever, my dear. Rook to E-seven. Check."

"If I'm so bloody clever, why am I now in check?" she asked. "Knight to E-seven."

Albus watched sanguinely as his castle crumbled to pieces.

"Because I'm cleverer," he replied. "At chess, at least. At the moment. Although that seems to be changing. Queen to D-seven." The black pawn cowered as the white queen drew her sword and plunged it through the pawn's back, pinning it, twitching, to the board. "Check."

Minerva frowned. Silence reigned for a time as she stared intently at the chessboard, weighing her options. The quiet was broken with a knock on the door that led from Albus's office.

Both players looked up in surprise.

"It could only be Filius," said Albus, "he's the only one with the password to my office. Other than Alfidia, of course, but somehow I doubt our redoubtable matron is at my door."

"I certainly hope not. I can only imagine what she'd make of seeing me in your private quarters at nine o'clock at night."

"*Alohomora*," he said, and the door opened to reveal the Deputy Headmaster. "Ah, Filius ... please come in."

Flitwick hesitated for a moment, seeing Minerva seated at the table in the Headmaster's private sitting room. "Oh, *lam* sorry, Albus. I didn't know you had company."

"It's fine, Filius. Minerva and I were just having a game of chess. You're just in time to see her take my queen," Albus said with a mischievous wink at his opponent, who practiced her annoyed glare on him.

Filius went over to the table and Levitated himself so he could have a better view of the chessboard.

"I am amazed every time I see you do that," said Minerva. "I would never be able to keep myself steady."

"Years and years of practice," answered Filius. After studying the board a moment, he gave a slight chuckle. "So you are."

"What?" asked Minerva.

"About to take his queen."

Minerva frowned, then agreed glumly. "So I am. And then I am well and truly bugged. Any advice to offer?"

"I must protest," said Albus. "Soliciting help from the audience is distinctly cheating."

"Oh, well. We both know I'm going to lose this game, so what's the harm in Filius giving me a few pointers before it happens? You wouldn't want to impede my education, would you, Albus?"

"Certainly not, my dear, but I wouldn't want Filius to sully his reputation as a fair and impartial observer, either."

"Well, Filius?" Minerva turned to the deputy. "Any advice?"

"My dear Minerva, as much as I would love to offer any assistance to a damsel in distress, I fear I must decline. After all, he pays me," said Filius with a nod at the Headmaster.

"Coward," she said, turning her attention back to the chessboard. "King to D-seven." The black king advanced on the white queen, drawing his sword. The white queen knelt so he could strike her head cleanly from her shoulders, which he did forcefully, sending the head sailing across the board to land with a *clack* on the floor.

"That was uncalled for," said Albus genially, although nobody was certain if he was speaking to Minerva or her king. "Bishop to F-five. Filius, would you mind retrieving that head? Double check, by the way."

"I say, Albus!" said Filius as he lowered himself and swiped the white queen's head from the floor. He must have clutched it too tightly in his excitement, because he cried, "Ouch! The little blighter bit me!"

"I do apologise," said Albus. "This is one of my livelier sets."

"Quite all right," said Filius, depositing the offending head on the table and sucking at the wound on his finger.

Minerva ignored the noise. Seeing no other options, she retreated with a sigh. "King to E-eight."

"Bishop to D-seven. Check."

Minerva surveyed the board for a minute before saying sharply to her black king, "Well? You know what to do."

The ebony king nodded at its commander, then moved haltingly across the board, square by square, brushing aside several pawns of both colours and nervously sidestepping a white knight, to present his crown and kneel before the white king, who accepted it with as much grace as could be attributed to a carved figurine.

"Well played, Albus," said Minerva, not entirely kindly.

He ignored her tone. "Thank you, my dear. You gave me quite a run. I wasn't sure I could pull it off."

"I do wish I had seen the beginning of the game. It looked most interesting," said Filius. "Although I'm sorry to have barged in."

"Not at all," said Albus. "Was there something you needed to see me about?"

"Not really, no. I was simply hoping for your company...thought we might have a snifter or two of brandy on this chilly Saturday night."

"A fine idea," said Albus, "Minerva, will you join us for some brandy, or would you prefer whisky?" he asked, crossing to the sideboard.

"Neither, actually, thank you. I should be getting on. I'm visiting my father tomorrow and want to get an early start."

Albus tried and failed to suppress the look of disappointment that crossed his features. "I see. Well, give your father my regards, will you?"

"Of course. Good evening, Filius," she said and went to collect her cloak.

"Good evening, Minerva. Enjoy your visit with your father," said Filius.

"Just a moment, my dear," said Albus. "I'll see you to the Apparition point."

"There's no need, really. Stay and enjoy your brandy. Hagrid usually walks me to the gate if he sees me. Good night. Thank you for the game."

"Thank you, Minerva," Albus put a hand on her arm. "See you Monday."

The door closed behind her. Albus stared at it a fraction of a second longer than he should have. When he turned back to face Filius, he found his friend looking at him with a slightly quizzical expression on his face.

"Well, how about that brandy, *hmm*?" asked Albus, going to the sideboard once again and taking out two glasses and a bottle. "I have a bit of this Delacour left. That should suit."

"I hope I didn't spoil your plans for the evening."

"Nonsense. I had no plans...just the chess game with Minerva. We've been playing on Saturday evenings after dinner. You're most welcome to join us if you'd like to play."

"Oh, no, I don't think so," said Filius, taking the glass Albus held out to him. "I don't want to hamper your game."

"You wouldn't. I don't mind a bit of an audience when I play chess."

"It wasn't chess I was referring to."

It was Albus's turn to give his friend a quizzical look.

Filius gave a small smile. "Come now, Albus. How long have we known each other? You're quite smitten with our lovely Transfiguration mistress. The only question is, what are you going to do about it?"

Albus thought about denying it but decided against it. Filius had long kept any suspicions about the relationship between Albus and Minerva to himself, and Albus wouldn't insult their long friendship by lying about it now.

"Nothing. Not if I want to keep her friendship," he said.

"You don't think she returns your feelings?"

"I don't know, Filius. I don't know. I don't want to jeopardise what we do have by trying to turn it to something else."

"So ... chess games on Saturday nights."

"Precisely."

"It isn't my business, I realise, but I do wonder how long it will take you to understand that she's just as smitten with you."

"Perhaps. But things between us are complicated."

"Because of what happened before?"

Albus looked down into his drink as if searching for answers in the amber liquid. "And if I tell you nothing happened before?"

"I would believe it was the first time you'd lied to me."

"I will say nothing, then."

"That may be the wisest course. But I wouldn't advise you to take the same tack with Minerva. If you care for her, you owe her the truth. I don't know her well yet, but I suspect she's not a woman who will be comfortable with a quiet lie for long. She isn't your student any longer. There's no dishonour in courting her now."

Albus gave a mirthless laugh. "Dishonour. I have gone far past dishonour, my friend."

Filius was acutely uncomfortable, but he willed himself to speak. "Do you want to tell me about it, Albus?"

~oOo~

When Filius got back to his quarters, he had a second drink. The story Albus had told him had shaken him. He had known he was treading on dangerous soil when he brought up Albus's relationship with Minerva McGonagall, but he thought his friend needed a good talking-to on the subject.

Filius Flitwick was a romantic and optimistic soul, despite having endured tremendous heartache himself, and he thought it was high time Albus took some happiness from life. And it was clear that Minerva made him happy. What had been less clear to Filius was why Albus had apparently been reluctant to pursue her now that she was no longer a student.

The Albus Dumbledore Filius had known since their school days had never been a coward. To be sure, young Albus had never given much indication that he was interested in romance, but he had been bold and relentless in his pursuit of every other prize he set his considerable will to attaining. Later, when they had crossed paths again at Oxford, Filius had envied his friend's seemingly effortless ability to attract any woman on whom he set his sights. Envied his ability but worried about his choices. Albus had always seemed to select the one woman out of the crowd who would be least likely to make him happy, in Filius's estimation. They were always pretty, always ambitious, and always a bit aloof. Cold, Filius would have said, had he had a less generous nature. It was a puzzle, he often thought, because Albus was such a warm creature. Gregarious and affectionate, both physically and emotionally, with friends and even acquaintances, Albus Dumbledore seemed to have an uncanny gift for choosing lovers who would not or could not return that kind of affection.

Filius occasionally wondered how much of it had to do with his friend's troubled family life. Albus had confided in him about the attack on his sister, his father's subsequent imprisonment, and the terrible accident that had claimed his mother's life. He had also spoken...very obliquely...about Ariana's death from a stray spell and his feeling of culpability for that tragedy. Filius had never pressed him for more details, but he had the sense his friend hadn't told him the whole story. It was a feeling that would become all too familiar over the long years of their friendship, but Filius Flitwick found he was a man who could live with secrets. He had come to suspect it was the basis for Albus's trust in him.

Thus, he had been unprepared for the confession his friend had just made.

While he had suspected long ago that Albus had been attracted to young Minerva McGonagall, he had never believed that they had actually been lovers. Insofar as he had ever envisioned it, he had imagined scenes of girlish attempts at seduction, gently but firmly rebuffed, perhaps with a tinge of longing and regret on the part of the professor. He had imagined his friend struggling a bit with his attraction...maybe even a kiss...and Albus's better nature naturally overcoming his baser instincts. Filius had imagined teenaged confessions, with tears, some embarrassment, and a proffered handkerchief. He had imagined...or, more accurately, tried not to imagine...cold showers taken and cooling charms strategically placed. Never once had he imagined his friend actually seducing his student.

He hadn't known what to say to Albus's story, nor had he been able to hide his shock and disappointment.

What he did say, finally, was that whatever had happened between them in the past, they had to live in the present and that Albus deserved a bit of happiness, whatever mistakes he had made. Filius was fairly certain he still believed that.

"Do I?" Albus had asked sharply.

"Of course. So does she."

"She does. I just don't think I can give it to her," Albus had said.

"Why don't you let her determine that?"

They had parted with Albus's promise to think about what Filius had said, and Filius had all but raced back to his quarters to escape the overwhelming feeling of illusions being shattered.

"Steady on, man," he admonished himself as he downed his second brandy of the evening.

~oOo~

Minerva spent Sunday in Caithness with her father. The heavy rain kept them indoors, and they spent the morning talking, Thorfinn asking his daughter about her new job and about the last paper she had authored with Griselda Marchbanks, which had finally been published in the December issue of *Transfiguration Today*.

Minerva was delighted when Einar and his wife, Katherine, brought baby Morrigan to visit just after lunch. As Minerva was playing "this little Puffskein" with her five-month-old niece, Einar went on about Minerva's choice to give up her research to teach at Hogwarts.

Fed up, Minerva finally said, "If you're so keen on research, Einar, why don't you do some yourself?" She crooned at the baby, "Your daddie's being a right prat ... yes he is." Morrigan gave a happy squeal at her aunt's observation.

"Come on, Minerva. You know there isn't much research to be done in my area," Einar said. "I just don't see what could be so compelling about Hogwarts that you'd give up everything you've worked for. Last I heard, you were thinking about jumping ship at Oxford to work with Franklin at the U of L on that whatchacallit...x-rayography."

Minerva shot him an amused smirk. "X-ray crystallography. And yes, I thought about it. For about ten seconds. I just don't think I could do what Rosalind does. She grew up half in the Muggle world, so it wasn't such a drastic change for her. Besides, microscopy was really a sideline for me, so a move to work on it full-time would have made no sense."

"Oh. You seemed so keen on it when you and Rosalind were working on that chapter," said Einar, referring to the book their father had edited and to which they had each contributed.

Minerva responded, "Yes, I thought it was fascinating, what she was doing with diffraction techniques, and I did love learning from her, but for me, it's a means to an end rather than something I want to study in and of itself. She's working on identifying the particle structure of viruses, and that's pretty far afield from what I do with Transfiguration and mammalian cellular structure."

"Well, I still think it's a shame to waste all that brainpower on a bunch of spotty teenagers," he said.

"Einar, leave your sister alone. I think teaching is a wonderful choice," said Katherine with a smile at Minerva.

"Indeed, it is," said Thorfinn. "And please to remember that wee Morrigan there will get the benefit of Minerva's brainpower when she gets to Hogwarts. I trust ye won't think that a waste?"

"No, Da, of course not," said Einar. "Sorry, Minerva. I didn't intend to criticise. It was just a surprise, is all."

"Never mind," said Minerva. She didn't especially want to pursue the subject of her career change at the moment.

The rest of the afternoon passed pleasantly enough, and Einar and his family left before dinner. Minerva and Thorfinn settled in the library, a chessboard between them. Minerva won the first game easily, surprising her father.

"Well, you've certainly handed me my hat," Thorfinn said when he discovered himself checkmated. "That's as quick as you've ever beaten me."

"I've been practicing."

"Oh?"

"Yes, I've been playing with Albus on Saturday evenings."

"I'm glad to hear it. So ye two have struck up a friendship, have ye?" Thorfinn asked.

"Yes, I suppose we have."

They spent another hour in conversation before Minerva began to make noises about getting home.

"Is Gran asleep, do you think?" she asked.

"'Tis half-nine, she probably is," Thorfinn said. "But go say goodbye anyway, she'll expect ye to."

Morna MacLaughlin had been ill with pneumonia for the prior month, which worried Minerva. Her grandmother had seemed increasingly frail over the past few years. At ninety-seven years old, Morna was firmly embarked on what would euphemistically be called her "golden years", although many witches and wizards lived well into their hundreds, provided they survived the inevitable magical accidents that claimed more than a few young witches and wizards, and escaped the dreaded dragon pox that had long been such a scourge to the wizarding world.

Minerva sometimes fretted about the time when her father would inevitably be left alone in the large house. Einar was busy with his own family in Inverness, and his work took him all around Britain, leaving little time for visits. Minerva had thought about moving back to Caithness and Apparating to Hogwarts every day, but Apparating in heavy rain or snow was dangerous, and she didn't want to risk being unable to get to work. In the end, leasing a room in Charity Burbage's small Hogsmeade cottage had made the most sense.

As she readied herself for bed that evening, Minerva thought about her living arrangements again. Staying at Charity's was fine for the moment, but it wasn't a long-term solution. Aside from other considerations, Minerva felt constrained by the need not to disturb the older witch with her comings and goings, and in truth, she didn't quite like Charity knowing when she came home evenings. Her former professor never pried or questioned, but Minerva still felt uncomfortable with the notion of her colleague knowing too much about her personal life.

She considered asking Albus if it would be possible to apply for a Floo connection from her father's house to her office, but there was no guarantee that her contract would be picked up at the end of the spring term, so it would make no sense to get on the Floo Network waiting list until she was certain she would be remaining at Hogwarts. She thought she had settled in well, and Albus seemed happy enough with what she was doing with her classes, but Minerva wasn't a woman to count her dragon eggs before they hatched.

For her own part, Minerva had begun to enjoy her classes once the initial nervousness had worn off. She had come to love the hum of satisfaction she felt whenever a student achieved a Transfiguration for the first time, particularly when the student had been having difficulty with it. They were a mixed lot, her first group of students...some

possessed a clear talent for the difficult art, while others needed all the help she could provide, and she found different satisfactions in teaching each.

While classes were enjoyable, Minerva found marking essays less so. After her first week, she had gone to Albus nearly in despair, asking him how on earth she should approach the marking, as so many of the students seemed nearly incapable of expressing a thought clearly.

"Mark them as you see fit," was his unhelpful advice, so she had taken him at his word and marked the majority as "Poor" or worse. When the inevitable hue and cry rose from the affronted students, Albus had soothed his fledgling teacher's ruffled feathers, telling her to ignore the complaints and that he would ignore any owls from equally affronted parents.

"Were the students in my year this bad?" she asked.

"Some, yes," Albus said. "There is great variation in education levels of students when they first come to us. Not everyone is fortunate enough to have had parents as committed to education as your father was. We must demand the best of our students, but we must also recognise that not everyone comes to us with the same level of skill or talent and make adjustments accordingly. Teaching them Transfiguration is only one of your tasks, Minerva."

Minerva had taken his gentle admonition to heart, spending hours each evening painstakingly correcting spelling and grammar and making comments about basic composition in addition to addressing each student's grasp of the Transfiguration concept at hand. She was gaining a new appreciation for how difficult teaching children was.

All in all, though, she liked her new post. And she liked being close to Albus again. She found herself restless on Sundays, anxious for the start of the week...eager to see him take his seat at the High Table for lunch, eager to speak with him, however briefly and publicly, and most of all, eager for Saturday evenings, when they would play chess and talk in his sitting room, away from the various pulls on his attention and hers, if only for an hour or two.

They were easier with one another now, she thought. The chess helped. It gave her something to concentrate on other than the way his eyes sometimes followed her or the way she felt her pulse accelerate when it happened.

It was bearable. She would bear it because it was the price to be paid for admission to his presence and his thoughts on a regular basis. Merlin, but she hated the image of herself as a sort of hanger-on, anxious for any scraps from the great man's table, but she found herself happier than she had been in years in spite of it.

If this was all there was, so be it.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Chapter 35 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"They were our mistakes."

In future years, Minerva would reflect that if her life were written as Renaissance drama...or Restoration comedy, as she might have preferred it...the spring of 1957 would be placed firmly at the beginning of the third act, for it was then that her destiny became irrevocably entwined with Albus Dumbledore's.

She could not pinpoint the precise moment, but she thought it might well have been the afternoon they spent reviewing Albus's N.E.W.T. students together, putting the seventh-years, who were a mere twelve weeks from sitting their exams, through their paces. The purpose was to sort out who was on track and who needed extra help to have a hope of passing the challenging exam.

At the end of the two-hour period, Albus and Minerva sat together at the large desk in the Transfiguration classroom discussing which students needed help in what areas.

"Of the lot, I'd say Miss Belby's in the worst shape," said Minerva. "She doesn't have a natural gift for Transfiguration, and she lacks the ability to focus intensely enough to make up for it."

"I agree," Albus said.

"Do you think she'd benefit from some extra coaching, or is it a lost cause?"

"Oh, I never think any student is a lost cause. Even if she doesn't manage to pass her N.E.W.T., a little extra help will only improve her skills."

"Very well," said Minerva. "I'll mark her down for an extra hour twice a week; do you think that will do?"

"Yes, thank you, my dear. If I might offer a suggestion?"

"Of course. I'd be glad of your advice."

"Spend a week or two just going over the spells she has difficulty with; then, if she's made some progress, introduce some distractions...whatever you think appropriate...and drill her on everything, from the basics to the advanced spell work."

"All right, I will, thank you." Looking again at her notes, she said, "What about Mr Robards? You've said he started the year near the top of the class, but now he can't seem to manage even simple cross-species Transfigurations."

"Yes," said Albus, stroking his beard, "it's very strange. I'm not sure what's going on there, so it's hard to say if he would benefit from extra tutoring."

"Do you think the problem might be emotional?" asked Minerva, remembering her own sudden difficulties the week Albus had disappeared to care for his injured brother.

"It is certainly possible. I do hate to pry into an older student's personal affairs, but I should be very sad if Gawain failed his N.E.W.T. due to an emotional upset. He hopes to join the Auror office."

"Maybe you can ask Diophantus to have a word with him. As his Head of House, he should know the boy best. Perhaps he just needs a sympathetic ear."

"That is a fine idea, Minerva."

"Either way, I'll mark him down for extra lessons...maybe just one hour per week? If he's already troubled, I'd hate to overburden him with extra work or make him more nervous about his exams."

"Yes, do. And I'll speak to Diophantus this evening."

They ran quickly through the remainder of the list, identifying an additional three students who needed extra help and whom Minerva would tutor.

As she closed her notebook, Albus said, "I do appreciate your giving up your free periods, not to mention your Saturday afternoons."

"Nonsense. It's my job, and it's only because you kept your O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. classes that I even have extra free periods. Besides, I'll be teaching the N.E.W.T. students next year, so it's to my benefit to work with some this year. Oh ... that is, if ..." She trailed off, embarrassed to have made the assumption that she would be teaching at Hogwarts the following year.

She was reassured by Albus's hand on hers.

"I daresay you will find that your contract will be renewed at the end of term, if you would like it to be. You're turning out to be a fine teacher, just as I suspected you would. I cannot imagine anyone raising any objection to your continued employment here."

Minerva was unnerved to find her cheeks getting warm. She had thought she was long past blushing at his compliments. "Thank you, Albus. It's nice to hear you say that. I'm really enjoying it...even more than I thought I would."

"I'm very pleased to hear it. Filius has told me much the same thing. Teaching grows on one, I think. If one has the inclination for it in the first place."

"It helps to have a good mentor," said Minerva. "As with anything else."

"Oh, indeed. Galatea Merrythought took me under her wing the first few years I was on staff. I think I would have been quite lost without her."

"I doubt that. What do you hear from Professor Merrythought, by the way?"

"She's well. As you may know, she retired to Cornwall. Although 'retired' is a bit of a misnomer," Albus said with a chuckle.

"How so?"

"She's taken up dragon hunting...says she's always wanted to do it."

"Isn't that a bit dangerous for a witch of her ...er ..."

"Age? Dangerous for anyone, I'd say, but Galatea has the energy of a witch half her age, and she's as formidable as any I've met of any age."

"True," said Minerva. "Please give her my regards the next time you speak with her. She was always my second-favourite professor, you know," she said, giving him an affectionate smile.

Albus took her hand again. "My dear Minerva."

And that might have been it, Minerva later thought. The moment that sealed her fate.

They were quiet for a short while, then Albus said, seemingly out of the blue, "Would you have dinner with me?"

At first, she wasn't certain she had heard him right. "I beg your pardon?"

"Dinner. I'm asking you to have dinner with me some evening. Tonight, if you're free."

When Minerva didn't speak for a few moments, he withdrew his hand and said, "I'm sorry. That was rather abrupt. If you'd rather not, I certainly understand."

"No, I was just surprised, that's all." After a pause, she asked, "And just to be completely clear, Albus, are you asking me for a date?"

"Would you like it to be a date?"

Minerva gave a small laugh, and he raised his eyebrows in surprise.

She said, "You still avoid answering questions by asking them."

"Oh, well ... my answer, then, is that it will be a date if you wish it to be."

"That, Albus, is hardly any better," she replied. "But I think I would like to have dinner with you. As a date."

"A date it is, then. Why don't you meet me at the Apparition point outside the gate at, say, seven o'clock?"

"Seven o'clock, then, Professor Dumbledore," she said, business-like, standing and gathering her things.

"Seven o'clock, Professor McGonagall."

It took most of Minerva's willpower to keep the grin from her face as she walked back to the Burbage cottage that afternoon. Not only was she elated at the idea of moving from friendship with Albus to something more, she was pleased that the strange, Limbo-like place in which their relationship had seemed stuck was at last falling away. It had been obvious almost from the beginning of her employment at Hogwarts that Albus still harboured some feelings for her that went beyond the collegial or the merely friendly, and she had already admitted to herself that her feelings for Albus Dumbledore would never be entirely free of the wistful longing that had characterised them since the day she had decided to put their affair behind her. But Minerva had thought the two of them would remain in the safety of their warm but awkward no-man's-land for quite some time to come, perhaps even forever, and she had resigned herself to it as being the best she dared hope for. She had promised herself that she would not attempt to move things in a romantic direction herself. Not this time.

When she thought back on her behaviour just before and during their 1944 affair, she was most often appalled by her own self-centredness. She had been so young, so

naïve...Albus had been right about that, of course, but not about its consequences. The damage wrought by her single-mindedness and her belief that anything they did in the name of love was right, if not exactly proper, had been to him, not her. The consequences of discovery were enormous for both of them, of course, but as she had grown and matured, and saw much more of life than she had at eighteen, she realised in a way she hadn't quite done before that her actions...even if well-intentioned and seemingly rational...could have sequelae that were beyond her control.

Albus had been a man with far more responsibilities than those imposed by his position at the school. It had only occurred to Minerva years later that the "distraction" he had told her she represented might very well have cost lives, if he had delayed his pursuit of Gellert Grindelwald on her account. Even if he hadn't, the additional pressure of having a schoolgirl as a mistress...whatever its concomitant pleasures...was an additional albatross around the neck of a wizard with more burdens than any mortal should be asked to carry. To be sure, Minerva thought, he could have continued to resist her advances...she was no siren, after all...but none of it would have occurred had she not pressed her suit, whatever Albus's own failings at the time.

And then there was his guilt. She had known well enough that he felt guilty...guilty for bedding her, certainly, and guilty for loving her, arguably...but she had dismissed those feelings as fleeting and unwarranted. At eighteen and in love, it had been easy to do. At thirty-one, she found it less so. There had been...and still was...a great deal about Albus Dumbledore that she didn't know. He had hinted at family troubles...and of course, she had seen evidence of these first-hand...and at something more sinister. He had never told her what it was, but she suspected it was the kind of thing that could eat away at a man's soul if he wasn't careful. She didn't think it had to do with her...not directly, anyway...but something about their relationship seemed to stir it up.

She had caught a glimpse of it when he transcribed that odd poem into the journal he had given her. It felt dark and ominous, and when she had read the full text at his urging, it had frightened her, particularly once she had worked out the Latin of the epigraph that preceded the poem proper:

I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl of Cumae hanging in a jar, and when the boys said to her, 'Sibyl, what do you want?' she replied, 'I want to die.'

That was when she had realised how much it was a poem much about time and age and death...all things that had seemed to haunt Albus's thoughts in those final weeks before he ended their affair.

The awful daring of a moment's surrender

Which an age of prudence can never retract ...

Minerva had tried not to wonder what awful act he wanted to retract.

When Albus had enquired what she thought of the poem, she almost asked him, but, afraid of his answer, she had made light of her discomfort by airily dismissing the poem as a bit of Modernist piffle.

If things progressed between them, she now wondered, would she have the courage to ask him at last?

Stop it, Minerva, she admonished herself. It's just dinner.

~oOo~

When she stepped back out of the cottage, having decided to change into something suitable should they decide to dine in a Muggle restaurant, there was a light rain falling. Minerva cast an Impervious Charm and headed quickly to the Apparition point.

When she got there, Albus was already waiting, wearing a long cloak over what looked like his normal wizard's robes.

"I wasn't sure where we'd go, so I thought I'd wear my Muggle dress," she said. "If we're going to a wizarding establishment, I can easily Transfigure my cloak into something more suitable."

"No, no. What you're wearing is most appropriate...and you look lovely, if I may say so. I have a Muggle jacket and trousers on under my robe. May I?" he asked, offering his arm, which she took.

A moment later they were standing between two sand dunes, and she could hear the sound of the surf coming from just beyond. She had a little trouble walking in the sand in her Muggle shoes, and Albus apologised.

"I'm sorry. The sand is probably getting in your shoes. It's just that I've found this to be the safest place for Apparition."

"Where are we?"

"Devon. A town called Croyde. There's quite a nice little restaurant in the High Street, and they will have a table for us at seven-thirty. I hope you won't mind a bit of a walk."

"Not at all."

Albus took a moment to re-cast their Imperviouses, as there was a strong-ish wind blowing, and they set off in the direction of the town.

The restaurant was really very nice. The fare was simple but well-prepared, and the place was small enough to feel intimate without giving the impression that everyone could hear every word spoken.

They shared a bottle of Chablis to go with the fish they both had ordered, and talked of everything and nothing as they ate and drank. It felt easy, Minerva thought, like they'd done it a thousand times before.

There was laughter and light banter, a bit of stimulating and good-natured argument, and some surprisingly comfortable silences. By the time the waiter came to deliver the bill, Minerva noticed that they were the only ones left in the restaurant. When Albus asked the waiter what time it was, they were both surprised to learn that they had been at dinner for more than three hours.

As they were leaving, the waiter said, "I'd be happy to call you a taxi, sir. Although you may need to wait a bit; we've only got the one in town, and he's likely to be busy this time on a Friday night."

"Oh, it's not necessary," Albus replied. "We'll take shank's mare. But thank you."

"I hope you have some good, strong brollies, then," said the waiter. "Turned a bit nasty out there, it has."

"I'm sure we'll manage," said Albus. "Shall we, my dear?" he said, offering an arm to Minerva.

The weather had indeed turned nasty. The wind was whipping around them and the rain was coming at stinging angles. By the time they had crossed out of the High Street and into a smaller, darker lane in which they could again use the Impervious Charm, they were both soaked through.

"We can't Apparate in this," said Minerva. "Perhaps we should just find a pub and try to wait it out."

"We could do that, I suppose. However, I have another suggestion."

Minerva thought he might be about to suggest they find an inn in which to spend the night...a suggestion she wasn't sure she minded...but he surprised her.

"I have some friends that live just outside town. I'm certain they wouldn't mind us dropping in and drying off. They also have a Floo connection."

"That's lovely, Albus, but how will a Floo connection help us? Unless it's connected to Hogwarts?"

"No. Let's head over and I'll explain when we get there."

It took thirty-five minutes for Albus and Minerva to get to the cottage, their progress hampered significantly by the wind. It seemed to Minerva that they took one step sideways for every two forward, and she had to hold on to Albus's arm to keep steady in her impractical Muggle shoes. Finally, she stopped to Transfigure the damned things into a sensible pair of boots.

As they approached the door, it swung open, and a voice called, "Albus! I thought I felt you through the wards. This is a surprise! Come in, my boy, come in."

As soon as they were in the door, the man who had opened it cast warming charms on the pair of them, saying, "Now, my boy, make sure your lovely companion takes that seat right there, in front of the fire."

Now that she was dry and out of the cruel wind, Minerva took a moment to wonder why the wizard, who looked to be no more than sixty...although it was always hard to tell with wizards and witches...would call the seventy-five-year-old Albus "my boy".

As Albus took the seat beside Minerva at the wizard's insistence, they were joined by a woman, who came in saying, "Albus! So nice to see you!"

Albus rose and embraced the woman. "Please forgive me, Perenelle, for dropping in unannounced, but Minerva and I were rather stuck."

Both the wizard and witch turned eagerly toward Minerva, who rose as Albus said, "Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel, please meet my colleague, Minerva McGonagall."

Minerva extended her hand, intending to shake the wizard's, but he took it and swept it to his lips, kissing the back. He released it with a small bow, saying *Enchanté*, Madame McGonagall," and Minerva suddenly thought she knew where Albus had learned his courtly manners.

Madam Flamel said, "I am charmed to meet you, Madam McGonagall," to which Minerva replied, "The pleasure is mine, Madam Flamel."

"Ah, but you must be so cold!" said Madam Flamel.

"Yes, do bring Albus and Madam McGonagall some brandy to warm them, Perenelle, if you would. And *ma chère*, a nip for us as well, don't you think?"

As Perenelle disappeared through a door, Minerva asked, "Forgive me, but are you Nicolas Flamel, the alchemist?"

Nicolas gave another bow and said, "*À votre service*, madame."

Minerva was dumbfounded for a moment. She knew Albus had worked with Flamel, but she had never expected to meet the great man herself. Now she understood why Nicolas called Albus "my boy". The alchemist was more than six hundred years old.

Recovering her wits, she said, "I can't claim to know much about alchemy, Mr Flamel, but I understand that your work is the foundation for most of what we know of it."

"You flatter me, Madam McGonagall. I am primarily famous through having lived so very long."

"Well, yes. As the only known creator of a philosopher's stone. I would say you are justifiably famous, sir."

"Yes, that was a good piece of luck," said Flamel. "It is a pity, however, that my life's ambition has not yet been met, and so I must soldier on, as they say."

"What is your life's ambition, if I may ask," said Minerva.

"To hear all of Handel's operas," came Perenelle's voice as she re-entered, bearing a tray, a bottle, and several glasses. When she set it down on the tea table, the bottle took it upon itself to pour four glasses, which floated to the waiting hands of the group.

"And all the oratorios, *ma chère*, do not forget those. Do you like Handel?" he asked Minerva.

"Yes, although I haven't really heard that much of his work."

"Please tell me you are not an aficionado of this...what do they call it?...this *bee-boop*." Flamel shuddered.

Minerva suppressed a smile until she heard Albus laugh. "Nicolas keeps up with all the musical developments," he said, "and he has yet to approve of anything since the Baroque period."

"I see," she said, amused. "No, Mr Flamel, I can't say I am a fan of ...*um* ... bee-boop. I do like Mozart quite a bit," she offered.

"*Pah!*" scoffed Flamel. "Little Austrian upstart. I heard him play once, you know. His father led him around Europe like a trained monkey. Disgusting."

"I am sorry..." started Minerva, afraid she had offended.

"Oh, pay no attention to him, child," said Perenelle. "He just likes to have something to complain about. If you really want to see him steam, ask him about Verdi," she said with a mischievous grin.

"Oh, don't," said Albus. "I don't think I could bear another half-hour lecture on the depredations of the Italian Romantics on opera."

"I never will understand your attachment to that vulgar showman," began Nicolas, but Perenelle cut him off, lifting her glass for a toast.

"To friends old and new," she said, with a nod at Minerva.

They all drank, and Perenelle asked, "Tell me, Albus, what brings you and Madam McGonagall all the way down here from Scotland?"

Albus paused for a barely perceptible moment, then answered, "Minerva and I wanted to have dinner away from Hogwarts for a change, and I thought of the Earl of Devonshire and remembered its sea bass with mussels. I'm afraid I didn't count on the storm. We daren't Apparate back until it lifts."

"I see," said Perenelle, and Minerva thought she detected a look passing between husband and wife.

"You are welcome to stay here, of course," said Nicolas.

"Actually, I thought, if it wasn't too inconvenient, that we could make use of your Floo."

"Certainly, my boy," said Nicolas.

"I will, of course, put it to rights when we are finished," said Albus, and Minerva shot him a wondering look.

"You see, my dear, there are times when one has to bend the regulations a bit," said Albus.

"You're going to break into the Floo Network," she said.

"Well, yes, not to put too fine a point on it. Nicolas has been kind enough in the past to allow me access to his connection, and there is another in Hogsmeade that I often use. Normally, this Floo is connected only to the large public Floo near the Leaky Cauldron, but with a bit of an extra charm," he said, brandishing his wand, "I can get it hooked up to the one in the Hog's Head."

"The Hog's Head?" asked Minerva.

"Yes ... er ... the innkeeper there, he allows me the use of his Floo from time to time when I need to go somewhere besides the Ministry."

"Isn't it a bit disreputable?" asked Minerva. She'd never been in the place, but she had been advised to steer clear and do her drinking, if she were so inclined, in the Three Broomsticks.

"Yes, which is why it makes a convenient...and discreet...place from which to come and go. Hogwarts staff generally avoid it, and people there tend to mind their own business...usually because their own business isn't entirely legal. It's a sort of gentlemen's agreement the patrons have."

"A gentlemen's agreement," repeated a sceptical Minerva.

Albus hesitated a moment. "Although I should perhaps mention...in case you don't know already...my brother is the innkeeper."

"Aberforth?" she said, taken aback.

"Yes. He started working there shortly after he was attacked by those Blackrobes," said Albus quietly. "A few years later, he bought the place from old Stan Shunpike when he retired."

"Oh. Well, that's good." Minerva was quite sure she didn't want to meet Aberforth Dumbledore again...at least, not yet, and especially not when she and Albus were returning from a "date". But Albus seemed quite keen to get back, and the weather didn't seem likely to cooperate anytime soon, so there was nothing for it, she supposed.

"All right," she said.

They finished their brandy and said their goodbyes.

Taking a pinch of Floo powder from the container on the mantel, Albus said, "I'll just go first, if you don't mind, my dear, just to ensure my little adjustment worked. I'll return for you once I've tested the connection, all right?"

Minerva nodded, and as soon as he had thrown down the powder, uttering, "The Hog's Head," he was off in a flutter of green flame. A few moments later, he stepped through again, saying, "All right, it's your turn, Minerva. Just say, 'The Hog's Head,' and it should take you right to the private sitting room in the inn."

It worked exactly as advertised, and Minerva was shortly brushing soot from her cloak as she stepped out into a dusty, odd-smelling room lit only by a single oil lantern, which gave the place a slightly eerie ambience. A minute later, Albus stepped out of the fireplace.

"We can leave by the back way," Albus said after readjusting the Floo's charms. "But before we do," he said, his voice dropping, "do you think it would be permissible if I were to kiss you goodnight? I doubt you'd want me doing it on Charity's front stoop."

Minerva's mouth went dry. "Yes. Please do, Albus," she whispered, and he pressed his lips gently to hers. The kiss lasted only seconds, but in that space of time, all the feelings...emotions and sensations both...she had tried to put firmly in the past came flooding back, threatening to overwhelm her composure. When he released her mouth, she turned immediately from him to steady herself, and she could feel him looking at her.

When she turned back, he said, "I'm sorry, Minerva. Perhaps I shouldn't have..."

"No," she interrupted. "You definitely should have. It just evoked certain memories."

"For me as well," he said. He took both her hands in his and said, "I very much want to do things properly this time."

"And what does that mean?"

"It means I want to move slowly. Make sure this is right for both of us before we leap back into anything. I don't want to repeat the mistakes I made before."

"They were our mistakes, Albus. And I agree. We should be cautious."

"There is no explicit prohibition against staff seeing one another socially...it happens quite frequently, as you may imagine...but the fact that I am Headmaster, in addition to my celebrity, makes it desirable to maintain a certain level of discretion."

"'Twas ever thus with us, Albus," she said with a slight smile. "And I prefer it that way, frankly. I don't like people knowing my personal business."

As they passed through the small kitchen behind the bar on their way out, Aberforth Dumbledore came through the door, Levitating a stack of dirty mugs and glasses behind him.

"Hello, Abe," said Albus. "We made use of your Floo, due to the inclement weather. I hope you don't mind."

"And if I did, would you do any differently?" asked Aberforth. *Gah*, never mind. You're the only one does use it, any road. Why would I want to go to Diagon Alley? Can't think why old Stan had the thing connected. He never used it either."

Seemingly noticing Albus's companion for the first time, a crooked smile that was disarmingly like his brother's but completely lacking its warmth grew on his face. "Hello again, Miss Minerva McGonagall. Heard you'd gone to work for my brother."

"Hello, Mr Dumbledore," said Minerva icily.

"Just Aberforth'll be fine," he said. "You're not a student anymore."

Albus and Minerva left the pub without another word.

He walked her to the gate of Charity's house, and neither of them said anything about the encounter with Aberforth.

"Goodnight, Minerva," he said, taking her hand and giving it a gentle squeeze.

"Goodnight, Albus. Thank you for dinner. And for introducing me to the Flamels. They were very kind."

"They are good people."

"I'd like to hear more about your work with Nicolas sometime," she said.

"Maybe the next time we have dinner?"

"If you like. But remember, we have a chess game tomorrow."

"I remember. I will look forward to it."

"As will I."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Chapter 36 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"A wizard...or witch...who excels reaps the rewards."

As she was returning to her classroom from the lunch break on Wednesday, Minerva was stopped by the sound of crying from an empty classroom. As she drew nearer, she could hear a too-familiar voice saying, "If you want it back, say it!" A second, reedier voice chimed in with, "Say it, or I'll turn it into Quintaped and make it bite your prick off."

As she opened the door, she heard a treble sob, "I am Mudblood scum."

She was greeted by the sight of three boys...Lestrangle, Macnair, and another boy whose back was to her but who turned out to be Lloyd Umbridge...standing menacingly over a smaller boy, wands drawn. Lestrangle was Levitating a copy of *Elementary Transfiguration* just out of the boy's jumping, grasping reach.

"Exactly what is going on here?" Minerva asked.

The boys' heads snapped to where she was standing, and they immediately fixed their gazes on the floor, all except Rabastan Lestrangle, who looked at her insolently and said, "Nothing, Professor. Just a bit of harmless fun. Stebbins here is fine, aren't you, Stebbins."

The boy, a first-year Hufflepuff, stood there wiping his eyes with his sleeve, saying nothing.

Minerva's lips thinned as she held out her hand. "Give me the book, Mr Lestrangle." Rabastan handed it over, and Minerva asked the firstie, whose face was burning with the shame of having been observed in such a predicament by his favourite teacher, "Is this yours, Mr Stebbins?"

"Yes, Professor. Thank you," he said, taking it with a small sniffle.

Minerva thought it best to send the boy on his way while she dealt with his tormentors.

"If you are all right, Mr Stebbins, you may go."

The boy gave a quick nod and scurried out.

Turning to the three aggressors, Minerva said, "There was nothing harmless or fun about what you boys were doing. It was theft and bullying, and I won't stand for it. Detention for the three of you for the week, every night after dinner."

"Oh, Professor," said Umbridge, in the whiny voice that always made her itch to hex him, "Not Saturday! It's Quidditch Saturday."

"Then you'll be missing the Slytherin party, won't you, Mr Umbridge?" she said. Turning to the skinny fourth-year, she added, "A little extra work on Transfiguration will benefit you, Mr Macnair. I am quite certain you could never have made good on your threat, given that you have yet to master even the most basic trans-elemental spells that any first-year can manage."

It was unlike Minerva to attempt to humiliate a student, but she was angry, and Minerva had little patience for Walden Macnair under the best of circumstances. He was dim-witted and content to be so, and his association with the sharper Rabastan Lestrangle was doing nothing to alter that, as far as Minerva could see.

Taking a leaf from Lestrangle...or attempting to...Macnair gave her what he no doubt thought was a menacing look, so she said, "And that glare has just earned you and your partners in crime an extra two hundred lines of *Marmion* this evening."

The three boys looked at one another, obviously confused.

"*Marmion*," Minerva informed them, "is a poem about the Battle of Flodden by Sir Walter Scott. Muggle."

"You're giving us lines from some poem about a Muggle battle?" asked Umbridge.

"I am," she said, giving him her stoniest stare. "Have you any other pointless questions?"

Umbridge looked at the floor again. "No, Professor."

"No, I thought not," she said. "My class will begin in three minutes. I suggest you boys be on time for it." She waited while the three Slytherins shuffled out, then she emitted an exasperated sigh.

Supervising detention every night for a week would mean getting home after ten, as well as missing her Saturday-evening chess game with Albus, but she was livid at the bullying she had witnessed and relished the opportunity to have the culprits sitting in her classroom every night. She intended to start them off with *Marmion*, then set them an essay on Muggle history and its contribution to wizarding society, which would necessarily send them to the library during whatever free time remained to them. She might even assign them a chapter or two of her father's book on wizarding and Muggle interaction.

The rest of the week passed uneventfully, and Minerva experienced an unusual shiver of pleasure at Slytherin's victory over Ravenclaw at Saturday's Quidditch game, knowing that her three detainees would be missing the celebration in the dungeons. Slytherin victory parties were famous or notorious, depending on whether one was a member of that House or not, for the lavish provisions, including Butterbeer, furnished by Slytherin Head Horace Slughorn.

Minerva didn't entirely approve of this sanctioned merrymaking. While she was in favour of the few school-wide celebrations that occurred over the course of the year, she didn't hold with special treatment for some students. It simply fostered additional rivalries and exactly the kind of entitled attitude that allowed bullies like Lestrage to operate with relative impunity among his fellow students.

Of course, Slughorn thrived on rivalry and one-upmanship. He had always played favourites among the students...Minerva herself had been a beneficiary of this policy...and encouraged direct competition in his classroom, offering prizes to the student who could successfully complete a complex potion fastest. Offering incentives was very well and good, Minerva thought, but the Potions master all but ignored the students who were struggling and most in need of his help.

It made him an odd choice for Head of House, in Minerva's estimation, but then again, he had been the only Slytherin on staff when the former Slytherin Head, Herbert Burke, had withdrawn in the late 'forties as his health deteriorated. Burke had, however, remained Charms master until Albus rose to the Headmaster's chair, which did not surprise anyone.

The Burkes were one among numerous genteelly impoverished pure-blood families, and Herbert's estranged-but-insistent wife expected to maintain a standard of living commensurate with the Black name to which she had been born. A post at Hogwarts was one of the few forms of employment deemed acceptable in pure-blood society...made more so by the ascent of a Black to the Headship in 1889. There had been a minor scandal when Herbert's brother, Caractacus, had gone into trade at around the same time, eventually opening a shop...the very one in which Tom Riddle had found post-graduation employment...staking it with the sale of many of the family's more interesting heirlooms.

Minerva had been pleased to find that old Professor Burke had retired when she joined the staff...he was not a bad man, but he was an abysmal teacher...less so that Horace Slughorn was now responsible for guiding the Slytherins.

The object of Minerva's musings came up to her as soon as the Slytherin Seeker had caught the Snitch and was flying a victory lap around the stands.

"Well, Professor McGonagall," said Slughorn, "a fine game, don't you agree?"

"Yes, it was, Professor Slughorn."

"It's Slytherin versus Gryffindor next week...should be quite exciting. I hope you won't be too distressed if your old House goes down in defeat," he said jovially.

"It's hardly a foregone conclusion, Professor," she said. "Johnson is once again fit and ready to play, and he's a far finer Chaser than any of Slytherin's."

"But that will not make up for Gryffindor's weakness in the Seeker department."

"I don't think Miss Kirke is especially weak."

"No," said Slughorn. "Please take no offence, dear lady. I was not referring to Miss Kirke's skill, but rather her broom. It is far inferior to Mr Belby's Silver Arrow."

Slughorn had unwittingly hit upon a sore spot that had troubled Minerva since her own Quidditch-playing days. Her first year on the Gryffindor team, they had lost the cup to Slytherin largely because the one of the other Gryffindor Chasers had ridden a broom that was on its last legs, and Minerva's perfectly serviceable Comet hadn't been fast enough to make up for it when competing with the rival team's newer, faster models.

Minerva asked, "Don't you think it rather unfair that a school Quidditch game can be won or lost on the basis of who has the best equipment?"

"It is a good illustration of the importance of getting ahead. A wizard...or witch..." he added, with a small bow in her direction, "who excels reaps the rewards. Those rewards lead, in turn, to more opportunities and more rewards."

"Yes, but in this case, it isn't Mr Belby who has excelled; it is his family's wealth that has allowed him to have the fastest and most expensive broom on the market."

"Ah, but that is life, Professor McGonagall. And the children must face it. It can be a motivating factor, I find, for those who begin at a disadvantage. It was for me, at any rate," he said, and Minerva had the impression that Slughorn had shared a confidence.

It was an uncomfortable moment. "Perhaps you would care to place a wager on the next match, then," Minerva said, hoping to engage him in some collegial rivalry.

"Oh, no, no. I could never wager with a lady." He leant slightly closer and said quietly, "However, I should be delighted if you would celebrate Slytherin's victory...or Gryffindor's...after the match with a wee libation in my chambers. I have the most marvellous bottle of 1949 bubbly I've been saving. A gift from a former student...a Mademoiselle Salon. Muggle-born, but most talented. Her family owns a vineyard in Le Mesnil."

Was he chatting her up?

"I'm afraid I have another engagement, Professor Slughorn." She hoped he'd take the message.

"Yes, quite," he said, obviously flustered, and she felt a bit sorry for him in spite of herself.

Later that evening, she stopped by Albus's quarters before going to the Transfiguration classroom to oversee the detention.

"I am sorry to stand you up," she said.

"Never mind. As Headmaster, I must applaud your devotion to the education of our students," he said. "But as a man ..." He took her in his arms and kissed her.

When they broke, he said, "Stop by after, if you're not too tired. We'll have a nightcap, and I'll see you to the Apparition point."

Two hours later, they stood just at the door leading from Albus's quarters to his office, kissing like a pair of their teenaged charges, Minerva's arms around Albus's neck, his hands at her waist.

Gods, it felt good! She had to make a conscious effort to keep from moaning into his mouth, and she was fairly certain, from the way he was holding her scrupulously away from his body, that he was as aroused as she.

Going slowly had sounded all very well and good, but it was turning out to be exquisite torture. They had had dinner once and played chess on the two previous Saturdays

since their first official "date", and each occasion had been punctuated by kisses of increasing ardour at the end, just before he walked her to the Apparition point.

These encounters had left her aching for more. It had been almost two years since she had been to bed with anyone, and her body was now making her acutely aware of its having been so cruelly neglected. But she held firm to her promise to herself not to push him. If he was not ready to make love, she would content herself with cool baths and her own fingers.

She broke the kiss. "I should be going. It's late, and I don't want to disturb Charity."

"Does she wait up for you?"

"No. But she knows when I come in, I think. I try to be quiet, of course, but she must hear me, and she probably feels the shift in the wards."

On the way to the Apparition point, they saw Hagrid trudging up from the direction of the stables.

"Oi, there, Professors!" Hagrid said.

They greeted him when he caught up with them.

"Lucky break we've had with the weather, innit?" he said, gesturing at the sky.

"Hagrid, what's happened to your arm?" Minerva exclaimed when she saw the bloody rag wrapped around his club-like forearm, which hung just at her eye-level.

"Oh, that? That weren't nothing, Professor. Just one of the Thestrals got shirty with me. Professor Kettleburn says they've been restless with the rain an' whatnot. Saturday's my night to see to the stock," he said with a hint of pride that warmed Minerva's heart.

"Let me have a look at it," she said.

"Oh, no need, Professor. It's just a scratch."

She eyed the rag sceptically. "It needs to be properly cleaned, if nothing else," she said, grasping the arm and beginning to untie the filthy bandage.

An amused-looking Albus said, "You'd best do as she says, Hagrid. Or our Minerva is apt to turn you into a chicken."

Hagrid gave a hearty laugh, and Minerva shot Albus a dirty look as she pulled the rag off and rolled up Hagrid's sleeve. "Give me a spot of light, will you Albus?"

He lit his wand tip and held it over where Minerva was working.

There were three deep, oozing gashes dividing the flesh of Hagrid's hairy arm. Minerva drew her wand and cast a basic wound-cleaning spell, then *Collocutis* to seal the wound edges together.

"There," she said. "That should hold it for the moment, but you ought to see Madam Soranus in the morning. She may need to re-open and heal those cuts properly. You might need something against infection, too."

"Thanks, Professor. I'll ... I'll do that," he said, and all three of them knew he would do no such thing. "Good night, then, Professor, Headmaster. Enjoy yer walk."

As they continued towards the gate, Minerva said, "I do wish he'd call me 'Minerva'. We were at school together, after all. That is, until ... well ..."

"Yes. A terrible business. That was very kind of you to heal him, Minerva. He can't do it himself, of course, and I know he hates going to Alfidia."

Minerva couldn't blame Hagrid for that. "I always suspected you were the one who convinced Headmaster Dippet to hire him on as assistant groundskeeper," she said.

"I merely floated the suggestion and helped Armando get it through the Board of Governors. He felt quite sorry for the boy."

"Then why did he allow them to snap Hagrid's wand?"

"Armando had little choice. He believed Hagrid had simply made a terrible mistake, not that he had any malign intent, but the Ministry insisted. They were under a great deal of pressure. Myrtle's parents were rather influential at the time."

Minerva had agreed with Dippet's assessment herself, but while she had thought Hagrid's expulsion was appropriate, the humiliating ceremony in which his wand had been snapped had appalled her. It never would have happened if the boy hadn't been a "half-breed", as he was called.

Albus said, "For my part, I do not believe Hagrid's spider was responsible for the girl's death."

At the time, Minerva hadn't believed that nonsense about a Chamber of Secrets, so it had not surprised her that the killer had turned out to be something more prosaic than the legendary "Monster of Slytherin". Nor had she been especially surprised that Rubeus Hagrid had brought a dangerous creature into the castle...he had already been notorious for his affinity for them...although she had been shocked that he could attempt to cover up his mistake with those strange messages. He hadn't struck her as the devious type, and something about it had always set wrong with her. The idea that there was an alternate explanation for the terrible events of 1943 now grew on her.

"An Acromantula, I thought," she said.

"Yes, but an immature one. I doubt it was yet able to kill that efficiently."

She thought for a moment, frowning. "How do you know it was immature?"

"I saw it. After Hagrid was accused, I went with him to the Forbidden Forest to see the creature for myself. It couldn't have been more than a few months old; it couldn't even speak yet. 'Aragog', Hagrid called him."

Minerva fought a sudden urge to kiss him then and there. Albus's kindness was among the things she found most attractive about him. Much later, she would realise that it was one of the weapons in his arsenal; his kindness had become such a part of his legend that when he had to be cruel, it often went unrecognised and unremarked as such.

She asked, "If it wasn't the Acromantula that killed Myrtle, what was it? And why did the attacks stop after Hagrid was expelled?"

"I am not certain."

"But you have an idea."

"I do. And I will share it with you one day. But not tonight. It's entirely too dreary a subject for a walk with a lovely witch on such a lovely night."

Minerva suppressed a sigh.

Tom Riddle made an appearance in her dreams that night, and when she woke, sweating and thrashing, she wished, not for the first time, that she were not alone.

~oOo~

Albus sat in the private room above the pub in the Hog's Head, waiting for Borgin. He had almost given him up when the door opened and the young man walked in wearing a look of foggy serenity that told Albus what had kept him.

"Sorry I'm late, Professor. I had the feeling I was being followed, so I had to stop in at an Alley pub before coming here. Make it look like I was there for the duration. I managed to slip out the back after an hour."

"It's all right, Mortimer," Albus said. "So tell me, what's been going on?"

"Not much," said Borgin. "At least, not until yesterday. They haven't met for about two weeks, but last night, everyone was there. Sounded like Voldemort had been away. I heard them talking about Nurmengard."

Albus felt a chill that had little to do with the temperature. "Nurmengard?"

"Yeah," the young man said, grasping the glass and taking a swig of Firewhisky. "I didn't hear everything, but I think Voldemort went there. They kept talking about the Blackrobes, so I assume he saw Grindelwald. Your name was mentioned."

"My name?"

"*Mmm*. I got the sense he was there trying to find out about you. Maybe something about the duel?"

"Likely." Albus didn't believe it for a moment. "What else?"

"One thing that might interest you: there was some talk about recruiting more followers...maybe trying to get Slughorn on board, since he had access to...what did they call it? Oh, yeah, 'right-thinking boys'. Guess 'cause he's Head of Slytherin."

Albus privately thought that they'd have little luck there. Horace, for all his faults, would find Riddle's followers and their philosophies repugnant, given his own background.

"Go on," Albus said.

"There's not much else. It always devolves into talk about Muggle-baiting and the like."

"You still have not seen this Voldemort?"

"No. And I still don't know where he's been keeping...they don't actually talk that much about him, except a few times, like what I've told you." Borgin took another swig of his drink then snorted. "I'm beginning to think they made him up. Kind of a bogeyman, you know?"

"I don't think so," said Albus, and his grave tone took all amusement off Borgin's face. "Listen, Mortimer: I want you to try to find out anything you can about Voldemort...where he's been, where he goes, whom he sees. Who, in your estimation, is the leader in the group?"

"Rufinus Lestrange does most of the talking. The others seem to follow his lead. My dad says..." Borgin stopped, obviously uncomfortable.

"It's all right, son," said Albus, laying a reassuring hand on the young man's arm. "What does he say?"

"That Rufinus leads his brothers around by the nose, even though he's younger. Says he's the one brought the others in. I think maybe he knew Voldemort before the others."

"Possibly. I want you to keep a close eye on Rufinus. He may lead us to information about Voldemort."

"Right. Will do."

The interview was clearly over. As Albus stood, Borgin hesitated for a moment, then said, "Look. It's getting more dangerous. There's more of them and some of 'em are sharp. I hate to ask but ..."

This was the first time money had been brought to the table, even obliquely. The two men had thus far operated under the pleasant and wilful illusion that Mortimer Borgin had come to Albus Dumbledore out of a sense of what was right and his discomfort at his father's association with a band of thugs, but the boy's desperation had been clear enough. His father employed him and held the purse-strings, and Mortimer, as a drunkard and dropout, had little other prospect for earning the cash that would slake his thirst.

Albus felt a wave of sympathy for the young man. Addiction was a terrible curse that made one do strange things. Albus wondered if Borgin would be here if not for his need, or if, given a life free of Firewhisky, he would join his father's comrades in their Dark business. But there was little use in such speculation, and Albus abandoned the thought.

As it was, Borgin was willing to risk his life for a few bottles of cheap liquor. If he lived through this, Albus thought, he'd pay for the best private Healer he could find to help the boy with his dipsomania. Until then, Albus the Great and Good would continue to exploit his weakness.

"I'll see what I can do," he said, corking the bottle that had stood on the table and handing it to Borgin. "Would money help?"

"It might."

Albus nodded and withdrew a leather pouch from his robes. He gave Borgin what he had...two Galleons, three Sickles, and nine Knuts...and bid him take care.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Chapter 37 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"Love ... I don't think it belongs in the same breath as shame."

What did Gellert tell him?

The question tormented Albus for days. He told himself he was concerned that Gellert had set Tom on the same path he and Albus had intended to follow...a hunt for the Deathly Hallows...but that was a half-truth.

The Elder Wand was safe with Albus. As for the Cloak of Invisibility, Albus didn't worry much about it. There were other ways to become invisible...difficult to learn, but not at all beyond the talents of a wizard like Tom Riddle. The Resurrection Stone was another matter. The stone, if it existed, was said to have the power to recall the dead. Gellert had wanted it to create an army of Inferi, and such a use would no doubt appeal to a Tom Riddle who was evidently intent on following in Gellert Grindelwald's Dark footsteps.

What was, in truth, more disturbing to Albus was the idea that Gellert might have told Tom Riddle about him. About what had really happened to his mother and to Ariana, about what he and Gellert had planned. And that Albus had loved him.

Albus did not think he could bear to have the world know about his terrible, shameful past. It had never come out publicly; both his mother's and Ariana's deaths had been written off as magical accidents by an MLE more than thirty years from developing the *Priori Incantatem* spell that would have told them decisively whose wands killed Kendra and Ariana Dumbledore.

If Tom Riddle discovered the true extent of Albus's involvement with the Darkest wizard of the modern era, Albus had little doubt that the young man would use the information to discredit him. He would lose his places on the Wizengamot and the International Confederation, and it was quite likely that he'd be removed from Hogwarts as well. Those losses would be bearable, although over the twenty-eight years he had been there, the school had become increasingly important to him. More significantly, however, if the story of Albus Dumbledore's past came out, the Ministry and everyone else would lose confidence in him. His ability to fight this new threat would be seriously hampered.

Why, they would ask, should we put our trust in a man who allowed such an evil wizard to flourish for so long, knowing what he was?

What could Albus answer?

And what could he say to Minerva?

He had foolishly allowed himself to fall in love with her again. And he had begun to believe they might have a future together. He had almost forgotten why it was impossible.

No matter. When she found out, when it came out what he had done, she would be horrified. A woman like Minerva McGonagall would not understand the kind of weakness that had led to the deaths of so many, beginning with his beloved sister, of that he was certain.

Like a man condemned, Albus waited for the blade to fall.

~oOo~

Two days later, Albus was sitting in his office when he heard a voice call from the Floo, "It's Butterbeer today. Hope you're thirsty. I'll have about four and half, I think."

It was Alastor Moody. When Albus looked into the fireplace, he was unsurprised to find nobody there.

He felt the first pricks of anxiety; Moody hadn't used their code phrase in years, not since he had worked with Albus to track down the remaining Blackrobes in Britain.

Four and a half. That meant Moody would be at the pub at four-thirty that afternoon. Searching his memory for the code they had used, Albus recalled that "it's Butterbeer" meant that Alastor would be using a glamour and would be drinking Butterbeer...an unusual choice of beverage at an establishment like the Hog's Head.

At ten past four, Albus headed out across the grounds. When he stepped out of the gate and was out of sight of the school, he drew his wand and applied a glamour that made him look like a plump, clean-shaven, middle-aged man with black hair and an aquiline nose. He added a limp for good measure. He didn't use glamours often...they were fairly easy to detect and hard to hold for long...but Alastor's obvious concern about secrecy suggested it might be prudent. Besides, the patrons of the Hog's Head wouldn't be likely to look closely enough to detect the glamour, and even if they did, they wouldn't question him about it; men with things to hide didn't generally pry into other men's secrets.

He spied Moody sitting at a table in the far corner of the room. He had a long, grey beard and bushy eyebrows. His skin was a medium-brown that seemed to reflect the light from his bald head, but the deep curse scar he had recently got bringing in the last known Blackrobe in Britain still cut a jagged boundary between the upper and lower portions of his right cheek.

Albus approached and said, "Mind if I join you? I'm very thirsty."

Moody nodded, and Albus sat.

"What'll it be?" asked Moody, a charm obviously changing his normal light Irish lilt to the slightly halting Bajan accent of Barbados.

"What you're having," replied Albus, his own voice disguised by a different charm that made it slightly rougher and higher than his natural sound.

Moody brought the Butterbeers to the table, and they drank in silence for a few minutes. When Albus had finished his drink, Alastor gestured to the stairway near the back. "Want to?"

"Yes, all right," Albus answered. "I'll have word with the barkeep." He approached the bar where Aberforth was pouring three tumblers of Firewhisky.

"Hold yer water, I'll be there in a tic," Aberforth grumbled. He sent the Firewhisky down to the end of the bar with his wand, where it was retrieved by a burly man who threw a few Sickles down and stalked off to a table near the door.

"'Nother round for you and yer friend?" asked Aberforth.

"No, thanks," replied Albus. Lowering his voice and removing the charm that disguised it, he said, "Is the upstairs room available?"

Understanding, Aberforth gave a terse, "Aye," then turned back to his work.

Albus looked over at Moody and nodded briefly then went up the stairs. Moody joined him in the small sitting room moments later. Anyone who had noticed them go up together would think they were there to avail themselves of one of the three small, private bedrooms above the pub.

Both men removed their glamours and sat down near the fire.

Without further ceremony, Alastor said, "Mort Borgin's dead."

Albus knew Moody was watching him for a reaction, so he kept his face impassive despite the shock.

"I'm sorry to hear it, but why did you feel the need to give me the news in person?"

"He was your man in the Death Eaters, wasn't he?"

"Death Eaters?"

"Come off it, Professor, this is me you're talking to," said Moody with a small smile. "I do approve the canniness, but there isn't any need. Here, for good faith: Professor Fancourt caught me trying to shag Laura Davies in a Ravenclaw Tower closet in my sixth year. You spent my detention lecturing me about being a gentleman and teaching me a contraceptive charm."

"Very well. We've established that you are indeed Alastor Moody. Why do you think Mortimer Borgin is my man?"

"I've been watching the Death Eaters too. Kind of an extra-curricular assignment I've given myself; MLE isn't too fussed about 'em at the moment, but anytime a bunch of sods like the Lestranges and the Notts and the Averys form a club, it's a bad business, and I take notice, even if my *superiors*...he gave a look that said exactly what he thought of them..."have their heads too far up their ... well ... they don't pay attention, is what I mean to say."

"I see," said Albus. "And what of Mortimer Borgin?"

"He wasn't careful enough," Moody said with obvious disgust. "I followed him here three weeks ago; he made it too bloody easy. Wasn't hard to figure out who he was meeting. One of the smarter of those bastards must have started to wonder where Mort was getting his sauce...the pubs around the Alley were under orders to chuck him out if he showed his face...and put the same twos together that I did."

"What happened?"

"He was found this morning in the alley in the back of his dad's shop. His skull was bashed in. Someone tried to make it look like an accident...there was a smashed up Cleansweep near him, and he reeked of Firewhisky."

An icy hand gripped Albus's heart.

"What does MLE think?"

"Exactly what someone wants them to think...that he was pissed off his nut and fell. Typical." Moody snorted. "They find no sign of magic and figure it can't be murder. But I know when a man's bumped his noggin and when he's taken a Beater's bat to the skull. Besides," Moody lowered his voice. "He had this in his pocket."

He held out a clipping from the *Daily Prophet*. Albus took and unfolded it. He was suddenly staring into his own face from twelve years prior. Photo-Albus was squinting at the flashes from photographers' cameras and attempting to keep the reporters that surrounded him at arm's length. The paper was dated 8 March 1945...the day Albus had returned from Germany.

Albus looked up after a moment to see Moody eyeing him. The young Auror said, "Yeah, I know. I shouldn't have taken it. But a little voice told me you'd want to know about it and that maybe you'd prefer it if nobody else did."

"Thank you, Alastor," Albus said, impressed by the young man's acumen.

Moody nodded. "I understand why you did it...good to have an insider and all that," he said, "but next time you want a spy, give me a shout first. Borgin was ... not to speak ill of the dead, mind you ... but he was unreliable and an amateur. If he hadn't got caught first, he would've sold you out eventually. I know the type."

"Maybe," said Albus. "He was a troubled young man, but he wasn't a bad one."

Moody gave a grunt that signalled his scepticism on that point.

"He had a double misfortune, Alastor. He had a weakness for drink, and he was born into a family attracted to Darkness. In fact, I'd be surprised if the former didn't follow directly from the latter."

"Anyway," said Alastor, "I know a few blokes who could probably get inside, find out about their leader and report back to us, and who wouldn't get themselves killed for their troubles. If you want, I could..."

"No, no. There's no need yet." The last thing Albus wanted was to put another young man in harm's way. "We'll just keep an eye on these...Death Eaters, you say they call themselves?"

"Yeah. Heard it from Dung Fletcher. He's friendly with Macnair, if friendly includes being a dogsbody for that bit of Kneazle-sick. Macnair's looking for books on bonding magic...outlawed stuff...enslavement marks, that kind of thing. Told Dung he wanted it for his 'club'. When Dung made noises about wanting to join, Macnair got all toffee-nosed, said it was for pure-bloods only. Told him they were called the 'Death Eaters', like that'd scare him off. It did, too. Dung's got the stones of a four-year-old girl."

"How did you get all this out of him, then?"

Moody shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Let's just say he and I have an agreement: he keeps his ear to the ground in the Alley, and I refrain from letting MLE know about certain youthful indiscretions."

"I see," said Albus.

The two men looked at one another with understanding.

Albus returned to the castle deeply disturbed. If Alastor Moody had been following this nascent "club", it meant there was something to it, as Albus had feared. Moody was among the most perceptive people Albus had ever met, and while some would call him an alarmist...and did...Albus knew he was dead right most of the time. The impulsive boy Albus had known had turned into a thoughtful, carefully calculating young man, albeit one with an explosive temper that had landed him in trouble on more than one occasion. It was good to have him as an ally. Perhaps Moody could convince the Ministry to take the new threat seriously even if Albus were to fall into disgrace.

Someone was sending him a message. They had thrown down the gauntlet with Borgin's murder, and the newspaper was clearly meant to tell Albus that they knew what he was doing. Did it also mean they knew about his connection with Gellert?

Albus tried to push that thought away.

It doesn't matter.

What mattered was that a young man was dead, thanks to his connection with Albus Dumbledore...another entry in Albus's personal Butcher's Bill.

He summoned a house-elf, telling her to inform the Deputy Head that he would be absent from dinner in the Great Hall that evening. He had no appetite and no desire to look at the sea of young faces looking up at him as if he could keep them safe.

He buried himself in correspondence and didn't look up until he heard the gargoyle's voice announce that Professor McGonagall was seeking entrance to his office.

~oOo~

Minerva was surprised that the Headmaster's chair remained empty throughout the evening meal. If Albus was absent from the castle, she would have expected a note from him cancelling their Saturday-evening chess game.

After most of the students had left the Great Hall, Minerva excused herself and headed to the Headmaster's tower to look for him. When she reached the door to his private quarters, she knocked several times but received no answer.

"Is the Headmaster in, do you know?" she asked the portrait of Prospero that guarded the entryway.

"I do not know, my lady," the portrait answered in Italian-accented English. "Shall I enquire within?"

"Please do."

The portrait disappeared for a few moments, then returned, saying, "The Headmaster is not in his chambers."

"Thank you."

She descended the two flights of stairs to the entry to his office.

When he heard the gargoyle announce her, Albus's heart leapt, then sank. How could he face Minerva?

"Admit her," he told the gargoyle. A moment later, he heard the knock at his inner office door.

"Enter," he said, opening the door with a wandless spell. He didn't rise immediately when Minerva stepped into the room.

"I'm sorry, am I disturbing you?" she asked.

"No, my dear. I've just been catching up on my correspondence. What can I do for you?"

"You weren't at dinner, and I wasn't sure if you still wanted to play chess," she said. Had he forgotten?

"Ah, our chess game ... I had quite lost track of the time. Please forgive me."

"If you're too busy, we can skip it."

"No," he said, standing and coming around the desk. "Come ..."

He gestured to a bookshelf on the back wall, which immediately moved to reveal a mahogany door.

When they entered his sitting room, he asked, "Would you care for a drink?"

Now she was more concerned. They didn't usually have their nightcap until after they had played.

"No, thank you." She opened the drawer in which he kept the chess set, but he stopped her, saying, "Not just yet, my dear. Why don't you come sit next to me, and we can have a bit of a talk, all right?"

She joined him on a settee near the fireplace, growing increasingly alarmed at this sudden change in the routine they had so recently established. "Is there something wrong?"

He hesitated just a moment too long. "No. Not precisely."

"Imprecisely, then, what's the matter?" she asked, trying to diffuse some of the tension with a weak jest.

There was a long silence, and when he spoke again, it was nearly a whisper.

"I don't know if I can make you happy, Minerva."

She might have laughed if he had not been so obviously distressed. She told him, "It isn't your job to make me happy. It's my own responsibility. You could break my heart again, or I yours, of course, but happiness ... I think that's something we are either able to take from one another or not. I am happy when I'm with you, and unhappy when I'm not. That's really all there is to it."

"No, that isn't all there is to it."

"What else is there?"

"I am ... not the man you think I am."

"What do you mean?"

"The things I have done ... my soul ... I am ... not whole."

His near inability to speak frightened her more than his words. She groped for her reason, and marshalling it, she spoke.

"Are we, any of us, entirely whole? You don't come up through the world as it is without damage. What makes you worse than any of the rest of us?"

"Oh, Minerva. You don't know ..."

"What don't I know?"

"How can I tell you?"

"Tell me."

When he remained silent, she said, "Albus, you can tell me anything. I love you. Whatever you have to say won't change that."

"That is easy to say," he said reproachfully.

She thought for a moment. "You're right. It was an easy platitude, and I'm sorry. You don't deserve that from me. But I think you should tell me anyway...even if you think it will change things between us. It's already between us if you think you can't be with me because of it."

He reached out and caressed her cheek with his rough hand. "My love. If I tell you, will you promise to remember that you are my love? Whatever you may think of me."

She turned her head to kiss his palm. "Yes. I will remember."

He withdrew his hand and put it in his lap, looking down at it, then up at her once again.

"Once upon a time, I loved Gellert Grindelwald." When she didn't respond, he asked, "Do you understand?"

"I'm not sure I do."

"I mean that I was in love with him."

She was quiet, but he saw her begin to bite her bottom lip, and his heart contracted. He was going to lose her, he knew it. His mistake had already cost him his sister's life and his brother's regard; now it would cost him Minerva as well. It was his just deserts.

"Say something, Minerva."

"Tell me about it, Albus. Tell me about him."

"I'll try," he said. "After I had finished at Hogwarts, I had to go back to Godric's Hollow to take care of my sister and brother. My mother had died, you see, and my father ... he was in Azkaban." At her look of surprise, he said, "That is a story for another time, however. Aberforth was making noises about quitting school after his fourth year. And my sister, Ariana ... she was disturbed, thanks to an accident when she was a child. She could not control her magic, and one day, shortly after I finished at Hogwarts, she accidentally killed our mother."

"Oh, Albus," said Minerva, and he could see the tears begin to form in her eyes.

"With my father in Azkaban, I became head of the family. So all my grand plans were set aside so that I could care for my brother and sister. Shortly after that, Gellert came to Godric's Hollow. He had been tossed out of Durmstrang and was in some kind of trouble...as I found out later...so he had come to stay with his aunt, who was our neighbour. She introduced us. I think she thought I could use someone more interesting than Aberforth and herself to talk with, and how right she was!

"Gellert was fascinating, quite simply put. He was brilliant and talented and powerful. As much as I, and perhaps more so." Albus's voice lowered a little. "And he was beautiful."

As Albus said this, he realised that he had, at one time or another, called Minerva all those things too. He wondered if she would make the connection, but he couldn't stop. The words came pouring out of him now, as if a phial of long-stoppered memory had been uncorked and upended all at once into a Pensieve.

"I fell in love. I had never felt that way before, Minerva. I had never met anyone, man or woman, who intrigued me so, who thought the way I did, who felt the way I did about so many things. I was blinded by it. I was so enraptured that I saw only what I wanted to see. I didn't see his cruelty, for example. Or his madness. I saw only his brilliance. His brilliance ... and his desire.

"I was naïve. In every way. I thought that he desired me. It was incredibly exciting to feel desired in that way. Nobody had ever wanted me for anything but my mind before, and he made me feel that he wanted all of me.

"I don't know, maybe he did, maybe he sought in me what I sought in him, but I think that he only ever desired power and saw that I could help give him that. And Merlin help me, I would have done it. I would have. If he hadn't turned on my family."

"Albus..." Minerva said, and he didn't know if she was trying to stop him, if she didn't want to hear any more, but he couldn't help it. He had never told it before, and now he couldn't stop.

"He started with Aberforth. They argued, and he used the Cruciatus on my brother. When I intervened, he turned on Ariana. Said dreadful things. He said, 'She's useless anyway. We'll take her with us, use her as bait. For practice.' And then he did it to her ... performed the Cruciatus. She didn't make a sound, just lay there, twitching with her mouth open and no sound coming out. I was frozen. I couldn't move. But Aberforth stopped it. He's a powerful wizard...deceptively powerful...and he stopped it. Then we all duelled, Ariana just lying there on the floor, not making a sound, but watching us with her mouth open in this terrible silent scream. To this day, I don't know who cast the curse...we were all letting fly by then...but she was hit. We all stopped casting, but it was too late. She was dead."

"Gods, Albus," breathed Minerva, tears running down her cheeks. He didn't realise he had been crying too, not until she reached out and gently brushed the tears from his cheeks. She took his face between her palms and kissed the tracks his tears had made, then pulled his head to her, cradling him against her fragrant neck. He inhaled her scent, listening to her breathing for a few minutes, and it soothed him.

When he finally found the courage to lift his head and look at her, he asked, "Are you shocked?"

"I'm shocked that you didn't kill Grindelwald when you had the chance. I'm not sure I could have held back."

"*Ahhh*," he groaned. "That's just it. My sister's death...that wasn't the worst of it. I knew what he was, Minerva. *knew* it. But I didn't go after him. Not until it was almost too late. I was afraid. Not of him, but of what I might feel. I was afraid ... to be tempted again."

He buried his face against her chest and took a shuddering breath as she stroked his hair. "So I let him go on killing and killing, getting stronger, until I had to do something. Because I was a coward. I was afraid, Minerva ... so afraid ..." he sobbed, clutching the edge of her robe in one fist.

"*Shh*, my darling," she said. "It's all over with. You did what you had to do. You stopped him. It's enough."

"No, no, no," he moaned against her. "Not enough, not enough ... nothing ... never ..."

"*Shh*, love, *shh*," she whispered, rocking him in her arms until his sobs subsided.

When he finally felt in control of his voice again, he asked her, "Do you hate me?"

"No. I could never hate you, Albus."

"And my loving a man ... *that* man ... in the past ... does that not sicken you?"

"No. I don't know exactly how I feel about it, but it doesn't sicken me," she answered. She then asked, somewhat hesitantly, "Do you still have ... feelings for men?"

"No. And I've never loved anyone since ... until you."

She looked confused. "But surely you've..."

"Don't mistake me, Minerva. I haven't been celibate. I have had lovers since Gellert...women, all. But I haven't loved any of them. Desired them, yes. But not loved, do you see?"

"Yes, I think so."

"I didn't think I could feel that for anyone again. You changed that."

"I'm glad," she said.

"Are you?"

"Yes."

He lay against her for a time, feeling spent and empty.

"But you see, Minerva, why I am so uneasy about our relationship? You were so young...the same age I was when I met Gellert, in fact...when I fell in love with you. You were so like me in so many ways...lonely, perhaps isolated by your intelligence, and deeply troubled by some of the things happening around you. Wanting to break free and exercise your formidable gifts. I was afraid that you saw only my power and my talent. And my desire. I don't want you to make the same mistake I did with Gellert."

"You are not Gellert Grindelwald, Albus. You are a good man," she said forcefully.

"Perhaps. But I am a man with many of the same failings. Pride, ambition ..."

"But you love. I don't think the Gellert Grindelwalds of the world have that ability, for all their supposed power."

"No. And I do love you, Minerva. I do. I'm just afraid of what my love might do to you."

"What? What are you afraid of, my darling?"

"I'm afraid I might ... I don't know ... suffocate you."

"I won't let that happen."

"Or that you'll be hurt by your connection with me. I have many enemies, Minerva, both powerful and petty."

"I can defend myself."

"I don't just mean physical danger...I know you are a strong witch...but that you will suffer in other ways. Your career..."

"My career is here, at the moment."

"Your research..."

"Will get done. If not by me, then by someone else," she finished. "I don't care if I never get published again. Don't you see? I've been doing all those things...pursuing my 'brilliant' career, doing research, making my name...for the past twelve years, and as wonderful as it's occasionally been, it's not enough. Something has been missing. You. Every time I made a discovery, every time I read my name in print or on some award, I'd think, 'I wonder what Albus would say about this?' Why do you suppose I chucked it all to come here? Not because I thought you and I would take up where we left off, but because I just wanted to be near you again, to have you in my life. To see you every day, to talk to you, to share things with you."

"You may very well hurt me, Albus, but you won't hurt me the way Gellert hurt you, because you love me. I know you do."

"Gods, Minerva," he breathed. "I don't know how you can love me. I'm so ashamed."

"Of what?"

"Of having loved that ... creature," he said.

"Don't be ashamed of having loved someone, Albus. Even him. You can be ashamed of what you did because of it, maybe, but love ... I don't think it belongs in the same breath as shame."

She gently settled him back against her chest again, putting her arms around him and laying her cheek on the top of his head. "I love you, Albus. And I'm not afraid of it. I hope, in time, you'll stop being afraid too." He made as if to move, perhaps to remonstrate with her, but she held him firmly. "Hush, now. Just rest awhile and let me hold you."

They sat like that for some time until Albus yawned. Minerva said, "You'd better get to bed. You're exhausted, and we both have to be up in the morning."

He didn't seem to have any will to move, so she gently disentangled herself from him and stood, holding out her hand to him and leading him to his bedroom, where she undressed him. Summoning a nightshirt from his dresser, she pulled it on over his head and encouraged him to put his arms through the sleeves.

She led him to the bed and pulled back the bedclothes. He got in, and she pulled the covers up around him, kissing his forehead as if he were a child she was tucking in for the night. He caught her hand as she moved away, asking, "Stay with me?"

"For a while, yes. Until you fall asleep," she said, and came around to lie next to him on top of the bedclothes. She spooned up against his back and put her arm around him. After a few minutes, his breathing became deep and rhythmic. She moved his hair out of the way and placed a light kiss to the back of his neck, then got up.

When she had closed his door behind her, she popped into her tabby form and padded quickly and silently through the castle and out across the grounds, hoping nobody would see her. She Apparated from the gate to the garden of the Burbage cottage.

When she let herself into the house, she was surprised to see Charity coming out of the kitchen.

"Oh! I hope I didn't wake you," she said.

"Oh, no, dear," said Charity. "I couldn't sleep so I came down for a bit of warm milk. Would you like some?"

"No, thank you."

"Did you have a nice time?"

"Um. Fine, yes" Minerva said.

As Minerva turned to go up the stairs, Charity said, "You know, Minerva, if you'd like to bring your young man to dinner some evening, it would be just fine. Or I can

arrange to visit Charles for a night or two on occasion, if you need the house to yourselves."

Minerva was at a loss for words.

Charity gave a chuckle. "You don't really expect me to believe you play chess with old Albus every Saturday night until nearly midnight, do you?" When Minerva opened her mouth, the older witch held up a hand and continued, "It's all right, dear. I know you like your privacy, so I won't pry. All I meant was you're young and attractive; it's only natural for you to have a gentleman friend or two. You don't need to pretend otherwise for my sake. I am an adult witch, after all, you know."

Minerva could think of nothing to say to that. "I ... thank you, Charity. I'll think about it. Well, good night."

"Good night, dear. Sleep well."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Chapter 38 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"You've always known, I think, that I am a dangerous man. And now you know that I am a foolish, wicked, and cowardly one. How can you possibly want me now that you know me?"

"Nicely done," Minerva said, peeling herself off the mat after having been knocked off her feet by the jinx she hadn't even seen coming.

She and Amelia were duelling in one of MLE's four practice rooms at the Ministry of Magic. Minerva wiped her sweaty face with the small towel Amelia had conjured and tossed to her.

"Would you mind if I begged off lunch today? I've been giving extra lessons to some of the N.E.W.T. students, and I'm terribly behind in putting together my lesson plans for the next month."

"Of course, Minerva. No worries," said Amelia. "Speaking of, though, I've been meaning to ask: Are there any seventh-years you think are worth my looking at?"

"Albus knows them better than I do, but I can think of one I'd recommend based on what I've seen of his Transfiguration work, although he's been having some difficulty lately. He's one of the school's best duellists. He won the Inter-House championship last year. I think he's already applied, though. I can ask the other professors for their thoughts, if you like."

"I would, thanks. Edgecombe's after me to recruit a few more poor sods. We've had only a single application this year, and that's a first. It's been too quiet lately. Nobody wants to be an Auror when there's nothing happening."

The two women showered in the MLE locker room and said their goodbyes, then Minerva left the Ministry via the telephone box and Apparated from the usual alleyway off Lambeth Walk to the gates of Hogwarts.

Sleep had eluded her much of the previous night. She had finally taken a half-dose of Dreamless Sleep at ten past three and nearly didn't wake in time to make her eight o'clock sparring date, at which she had performed abysmally, tired and distracted as she was.

She had lain awake most of the night, mulling over what Albus had told her, trying and failing to work out exactly how she felt about it. Perhaps it was shock preventing her from sorting her feelings...there had been so much new and painful information in Albus's monologue that she almost didn't know where to begin. The sudden sensation of being doused in cold water when he had told her about loving Gellert Grindelwald had left her slightly numb and unable to feel much of anything, at least until his anguish over his sister's death had snapped her out of it. Then her heart had quite literally ached for him, and that ache was what drove her now.

An irrational fear that he would be gone when she got to the school gripped her when she had awoken this morning. His attempt to withdraw from her had been so sudden, so unexpected; something had happened, she was certain...something that had brought up the terrible story that had come tumbling from him.

She had to see him, to reassure herself that he was all right, that he was still the man she had loved. The discovery that he was so much more damaged than she had ever imagined made her question whether he could ever truly love her, fully and unreservedly. The depth of his guilt and self-loathing might put that dream forever beyond her reach. It was not something she could fix, she knew that. Experience had taught her the hard lesson that some things were beyond even Minerva McGonagall's formidable will and extraordinary talent. The question of the hour was, then, what did she want to do?

It was just before lunchtime when she presented herself to the gargoyle guarding his office.

"The Headmaster is unavailable," the creature said.

"May I leave him a message?"

"As you wish."

She conjured a bit of parchment and a quill and jotted down a few lines to tell him she was anxious to see him and that she would be in her office most of the afternoon. The gargoyle opened its mouth, and Minerva tucked the rolled parchment inside, where it disappeared. She went to her office and tried to concentrate on lesson planning.

An hour and a half later, she was startled by the gentlepop of house-elf Apparition. The elf handed her a note, bowed quickly, and Disappeared again before she could thank him. She unfolded the note and read:

Minerva,

I am in my office, if you wish to see me.

Albus

This time, the gargoyle moved aside immediately, obviously expecting her. When she entered the office, Albus was standing behind his enormous claw-footed desk but made no move to approach her. Neither of them was certain what to say.

After a moment, he spoke.

"I must apologise to you, Minerva."

"No, you mustn't."

He stepped out from behind the desk, and, glancing at the wall from which the animated portraits of the former Heads were listening with obvious interest, he said, "Perhaps you'd like a cup of tea in my private quarters?"

"I would, thank you."

With the door from his office safely shut behind them, he said, "I'm surprised you want to see me."

"Of course I want to see you. I've been dying to see you all day. That's why I came. I wanted to know how you are."

"I'm fine, as you see. Largely thanks to you. I wasn't quite myself last night. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"You were upset. I couldn't leave you in that state."

"Will you leave me now?"

"No."

"You should, Minerva."

Her anger flashed hot at his words. "How can you say that to me?"

"You've always known, I think, that I am a dangerous man. And now you know that I am a foolish, wicked, and cowardly one. How can you possibly want me now that you know me?"

The fire in her chest was instantly doused. He had laid himself bare to her and expected her flee from what she saw. This was not the great and powerful saviour of the wizarding world nor the brilliant mage who had dazzled an adolescent girl with his matchless intelligence and pointed kindnesses. This was a man, wretched and frightened as any who ever believed himself so sinful as to be unlovable. Dumbledore had been stripped away, leaving only Albus.

Did she love him?

"Honestly?" she said in answer to his question. "I have no idea." Then after a second, she answered her own: "But I do."

She moved swiftly to him, took his face between her palms and kissed him. He stood frozen for a few moments, then opened his lips to her, bringing his arms around her to pull her tightly to him as his fears and his shame seemed to trickle away at the sudden warmth of her breath in his mouth, replaced by his need and the desire to absorb her into himself.

His hands travelled across her back, over her shoulders, and along her arms, up to where her hands were still cupping his cheeks. He ran his palms over her face, and finally to the back of her head, where they held her fast to him, not releasing their hold until they were both gasping for breath.

Minerva's hands dropped to his chest, where she gathered the pale-green silk of his robe in her fists, pulling him down to her so that she could reach his mouth again. Her tongue found his, and she could taste tea coupled with something too sweet lingering on his breath. It was a flavour she would always thereafter associate with sex.

She kissed him greedily, trying to reach all of his mouth at once. His beard and moustache chafed at her face, but she didn't care. She had to hold him there, make him feel what she felt, know how much she loved and wanted him...Albus, not Dumbledore...even with his past dragging behind him like a dead and decaying limb.

He broke the kiss and moved his mouth to her neck, kissing and sucking at the sensitive flesh there, barely hearing her cry out as he marked her, not caring. He pulled at her blouse, his hands desperately seeking to uncover more of her skin...skin he had tried not to think about but had dreamt of for twelve long years...popping several of the mother-of-pearl buttons from it. His lips and tongue burnt a desperate path down the milky terrain he had exposed, traversing the bony ridges of her clavicles and sliding into the sweet valley between her breasts.

She heard a sound as if from far away and realised it was her own voice moaning and whimpering as he sucked at her, pushing her bra down to bare one breast to his frantic mouth. When he removed his other arm from behind her back to try to push the blouse from her shoulders, she stumbled clumsily backwards, and he removed his mouth to move her back until her calves hit the edge of the settee. She tumbled back onto it, reaching for him.

He came to his knees in front of her, and she leant forward to work at unfastening his over-robe. He helped her unhook it, then yanked it off, tossing it aside. Moving his hands over her legs and pushing up her skirt, he found her knickers and pressed his fingers into the damp fabric, rubbing her tender flesh through the silk until he heard her breath start to come in ragged gasps, his eyes fixed on what his hands were doing. Her fingers scrabbled at the opening to his under-robe, without success, so he reached down and opened it far enough to allow her to reach inside.

She stroked him, pausing only long enough for him to stand and pull off his shorts. Then he was tugging at her knickers, and she shifted her hips up so he could slide them from her. She tried to kick them off, giving up when they snagged and remained stubbornly stuck on the heel of her right shoe. He was trembling and moaning as she continued to touch him, and she thought he might already be close to climax. She wanted him desperately, so she pulled him closer, encouraging him to complete their union.

He knew he should wait, make sure she was satisfied before taking her, but it had been twelve years and nine months of empty wanting, and he couldn't. He lowered his head to her, moving his lips across her neck to her ear, murmuring, "Let me ... oh, let me ... Minerva ... let me ..." and without waiting for her answer, buried himself deep inside her.

Neither of them moved for a few moments. He lifted his head to look at her face. Her eyes were open, and she smiled at him. "Yes, Albus," she whispered. He kissed her mouth as he began to thrust, and she thought nothing had ever felt so good...so right...as being with this man in this way.

It wasn't long before she felt herself slide over the edge of the precipice. She made no sound as the pleasure radiated from her centre to consume her for a few delirious seconds, echoing faintly through her body even as it ebbed.

He felt as if everything else had faded away, leaving just this, just himself and this woman. The tension built within him, and the world contracted further to exist solely in their physical connection until it burst from him in a small storm of colour and light that he felt rather than saw.

When he returned to the world as it was, he was sprawled partly on top of her, and they were both panting. Her eyes were still open, and she reached up to stroke his hair, moving it tenderly away from where it hung dankly around his face, so that she could see him more clearly.

She waited for him to speak first, which, at length, he did, once their breath had slowed.

"Gods, Minerva. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be quite so ... urgent," he said.

"I'm glad you were. I was feeling a bit urgent myself."

"But did you ...?" He trailed off, but she knew what he meant.

"Yes," she laughed. "You couldn't tell?"

"I suppose I was a bit preoccupied. I just couldn't wait. I was afraid I was too quick."

"No, not at all," she said. "But do you suppose we could move somewhere a bit more comfortable next time?"

He climbed laboriously off of her and helped her to her feet. With her torn blouse and dishevelled hair and her bra halfway off, she looked like the quintessential ravished woman from the cover of one of the ten-Knut novels Professor Fancourt was always confiscating from her Hufflepuff girls. He was slightly ashamed at the shiver the sight elicited in him.

He said, "Shall we retire to my bedroom? We can rest a bit, then perhaps I can show you that I am capable of taking my time with you."

"Yes, please."

She'd been in his bedroom the previous night, but she'd hardly registered anything about it. It was much larger than the one he had occupied in Gryffindor Tower, although the four-poster bed with the blue brocade hangings looked exactly as she remembered it. It was distinctly less grand than the other furniture, which she assumed came with the Headmaster's suite.

"You kept the bed," she said.

"Yes. It had some rather nice memories I wasn't quite ready to relinquish," he said, which made her smile.

They both removed the remainder of their clothes, and Albus turned down the bedclothes with a wave of his hand. When they were settled in his bed, she lay with her head on his shoulder, her hand making lazy circles on his chest.

"This is rather decadent," he said, "lying in bed with a beautiful witch on a Sunday afternoon."

"It is, isn't it? I could get used to it."

"I'm not sure how often we'll manage it."

"*Mmm*. We'll manage. We always did before."

"We'll still need to be careful. You may not be a student any longer, but I'm violating the morals clause of my contract nevertheless."

"Morals clause?"

"Oh, yes. Unmarried residential staff members are prohibited from engaging in sexual activity on Hogwarts's grounds."

"Really? That seems a bit antediluvian."

"Antediluvian or not, it is grounds for dismissal."

"They wouldn't dismiss the Headmaster over such a thing, though, surely."

"They might indeed. I've been Head for less than a year, remember, and you're my subordinate. Besides, there are certain governors who would love any excuse to give me the sack."

Minerva could easily guess which governors those might be. She said, "We will be careful, of course. I'm certainly not planning on telling anyone, in any event."

"Not even your father?"

"No, I hadn't planned on it. Why?"

"I just thought you were very close."

"We are, but I don't give him the details of my romantic conquests," she said with a smile. "I don't think he really wants to know."

Albus felt a morsel of relief at her answer. After a moment's hesitation, he asked, "Have you ever told anyone about us? About what happened when you were a student?"

"No, I haven't." She added quickly, "I'm not ashamed of it. But I thought it best not to tell anyone. It isn't anyone's business."

"No. But I should perhaps tell you, Filius knows."

Her hand stopped moving on his chest, and she shifted onto her side to look at him. "Filius? How?"

"I told him." She stiffened, and he explained about the conversation he had had with Filius after their chess game.

"He encouraged you to ...?" she asked.

"To pursue you now, yes. To be honest, I'm not sure I would have found the courage without his small but well-placed boot to my backside."

"Then I suppose I owe him a debt of gratitude."

"We both do," he said, rolling over to kiss her.

The kiss deepened and built, and his desire began to stir again at the feeling of Minerva, warm and naked, pressing up against him. She felt it too and smiled against his lips, reaching down for him.

"Again?" he asked.

"*Mmm*. Again and again and again ... we have a lot of time to make up for," she said. "Any objections?"

"Not a single one," he said, running a hand down her leg. She was still very aroused, and as he touched her, her breathy moans told him that he still knew what kinds of touches pleased her.

She quickly found her pleasure, crying out, "Ah, gods! Albus ... oh!" and when she stopped trembling, she pushed at him to urge him to roll over on his back. He did, and she straddled him, and he relaxed back against the mattress, content to let her take charge this time.

It was slower and tenderer this time, and their eyes met time and again as they moved together. When it was finished, she lay atop him, her head buried between his neck and chin, until the perspiration cooled on her skin and she shivered. He Summoned the bedclothes and tucked them in around her shoulders.

"Warmer now?"

"Yes. Lovely."

"Lovely doesn't begin to cover it."

At some point, she must have moved off of him, although she didn't remember doing it, because when she woke, the light was slicing through the window at a sharp angle that told her the sun was nearly setting.

Albus was snoring lightly beside her, and she leant over and kissed his lips softly.

"Albus ..."

When he didn't stir, she shook him gently by the shoulder. "Albus ... Albus?"

"*Hmm* ..." he sighed, opening his eyes. He smiled to see her there, leaning over him.

"I'm sorry to wake you, but it must be near dinnertime. I don't have my wand but..."

He interrupted her by pointing at the wall just to the right and above the bed. There was the antique clock she remembered from his bedroom in Gryffindor Tower.

"I forgot about your fondness for clocks," she said.

"You must admit, they can be quite useful. I'm not certain I have the strength to*Accio* my wand."

"Yes, well, *that* clock says it's ten minutes of six," she said. "We probably ought to get up so you can get to dinner on time. Charity will be expecting me, at any rate. Leg of mutton on Sundays," she added with a slight grimace.

"I wish I could ask you to stay," he said with a sigh. "But it wouldn't be prudent."

"No," she agreed. "Would you mind if I used your shower?"

"Of course not. You should find a clean towel and flannel in the bathroom cupboard. He felt a tug of regret as she got out of the bed, but it was ameliorated by the agreeable sight of her crossing the bedroom, the lengthening shadows of early evening dancing across the curves and planes of her nude body. A body, he noted, that had lost the adolescent roundness he remembered, and had settled into an angular womanhood he decided he found pleasing.

Feeling his eyes on her, she smiled to herself.

She found her knickers by the settee but had to retrieve her wand from her cloak pocket to*Accio* the buttons that were missing from her blouse. She took them to the bedroom to re-attach them to the garment.

After a quick wash, she dried her hair and conjured a comb, deftly working through the snarls with the help of a Detangling Charm, as Albus showered. He emerged, and she was waiting with a towel, which she had warmed with her wand.

"Thank you, my love," he said. Looking at her intently for a moment, he asked, "Do they hurt?" running his fingers gently over the small, reddish reminders of his ardour that ran from just under her jawline to where her neck met her shoulders.

"No, not at all."

"Shall I heal them?"

She debated with herself for a moment, then handed him her wand. "Please," she said.

He pointed the wand at her neck and said, "*Curo Contusionem*." She felt a brief warmth, and when she inspected herself in the mirror, the marks were gone.

"Thank you," she said as he returned her wand. He leant into her and kissed the spots where the marks had been.

When they were both dressed, he said, "I'm not sure when..." but she stopped him.

"Let's just go on as we have been, Albus. No pressure, no worries. And on Saturday," she said with a wry smile, "we can ... play chess."

Of the many coded phrases that eventually became part of the private lexicon Albus and Minerva would build in their years together, "playing chess" was by far the most pleasant.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"Do you remember Tom Riddle?"

Amelia Bones was the first unofficial visitor Alastor Moody had at St Mungo's after he lost his right eye. Although she wasn't part of the MLE team investigating the attack, she bluffed her way into his room using a combination of actual, Ministry-given authority and the authority she projected by the sheer force of her personality. And it didn't hurt that Marlene, who was a Healer in the Creature-Induced Injuries Ward, was friendly with the matron in charge of the secure ward where Alastor was recuperating.

"Jealous, were you Moody?" Amelia asked, hands on her generous hips, when she came to a stop at the end of the young Auror's bed. "My eye is so lovely, you just had to have one for yourself?"

Alastor just glared at his visitor as best he could with the bandage that enveloped the right portion of his face. Then he asked the question that had been plaguing him for the two days since he had landed in this hellhole of a hospital and that nobody he'd spoken to so far had been willing to answer.

"Am I out?"

Amelia didn't answer immediately.

"Come on, Bonesy. You know everything that goes on in that place. What's McKinnon saying?"

"Nothing that I'm privy to."

"Damn it, Bonesy, give me a straight answer. Tell me: Am I or am I not still an Auror?"

"Alastor, you'll be an Auror to your grave, whether or not MLE choose to let you keep the title. And I don't know if they will yet, but if I have any say in the matter, you stay. McKinnon is not unsympathetic, I think, but he's mad as hell that you got yourself injured during some extra-curricular field op. Don't bother denying it," she said when he opened his mouth to object.

"Yeah, well ... I wouldn't have got meself all pranged up if they'd pay a little attention to..."

Amelia put up her hand, warning in the quirk of her eyebrow. "Being combative isn't going to help you keep your job, Moody."

"And what would you suggest, Madam Bones? You're much better at the office end of things than I am."

She considered for a moment. "Stick to your story: you thought the man who attacked you was breaking into Borgin's. Nobody who knows you believes it, but McKinnon will back you if you don't force him into a corner."

"And what about Lestrangle?"

"You've got to drop that," she said. "Nobody will believe Romulus Lestrangle would break into a shop. And nobody is going to care that you think the Lestrangle brothers are up to something worse, either...at least nobody who wants to keep their job for long."

"The bastard cursed me bad enough to take my eye. Doesn't that show..."

"It won't fly, Alastor. The Lestranges are powerful, magically and socially. Don't try to tangle with them until you've got all your pixies in a row. You can't prove it was Romulus Lestrangle, not without giving them a memory for the Pensieve, and then they'll claim you tampered with it. And it will raise questions about why you were following Lestrangle without authorisation in the first place. All you'll achieve by accusing him is to discredit yourself."

The injured wizard fell back against his pillow, knowing she was right. Amelia Bones usually was. Alastor was canny, but he had to admit that he had a tin ear for politics. And this time, because he had been angry, both at Mort Borgin's death and at the way the Ministry had written it off, he had abandoned the caution that had been beaten into him by the mentors who had seen his fire and talent and tried to temper it into something strong and useful. And he had paid dearly for it. Professor Merrythought would have strung him up by his skivvies, he reflected. And Merlin only knew what Greg McKinnon would have to say to him when he got back to the office. *If* he got there.

"So I tell them I didn't see who it was cursed me," he said.

"Exactly."

"And then what? Just let that little prick continue on his merry way?"

"Yes."

His anger flared up as he remembered hearing Romulus Lestrangle laugh just before Disapparating after dodging the hex that Moody, his good eye blurred by blood, had sent far wide of his mark. Alastor raised the flag one last time. "Bugger that, Bonesy, you..."

"For the moment, Alastor. Leave it alone for the moment. You've drawn attention to yourself. Now, not only do the Death Eaters know you're on their case, but MLE suspects you're going rogue, and you know exactly how Edgecombe will deal with that. So lie low. Get yourself fitted with a new eye. Show them you can still do your job twice as well as wizards with two good eyes, because, believe me, you'll have to. In the meantime, give the Death Eaters time to slip up. And they will. If what you've told me is true, they've got some serious liabilities in the brains department...Macnair, Carrow ..."

Moody snorted. "Guess I could join 'em, then. Wasn't smart enough to avoid the bad end of Lestrangle's wand."

"Everyone gets caught now and again, Alastor. Even the best. You know that. You've been an Auror how long now?"

"Seven years. Ten, counting internship."

"And how many of the people who joined when you did are still working in the field?"

"Two, if you include me."

"So, either you're luckier than most, or better. Personally, I think it's both. You have the luck of your countrymen, Alastor Moody, but don't push it. And try not to feel too sorry for yourself; you managed to go a whole ten years before losing your eye. I didn't even keep mine a year."

Alastor gave her feeble joke another of his snorts, this one appreciative.

"When are they fitting you?" she asked.

"Next week sometime, the Healer said."

"Good. Send me an owl when you're set up. I'll give you some pointers on working with the prosthesis. We can spar a bit when you're ready. In the meantime, I'll beat the Bludger with McKinnon and Edgcombe. Try to help you hold on to your job."

"Thanks, Amelia," said a very grateful and slightly humbled Alastor Moody.

The witch grimaced. "Don't you start with this 'Amelia' crap. Only people who call me that are my grandmother and Minerva. Speaking of which, do you want to see her?"

"Your grandmother?"

Amelia smiled. "Now, that's the snot-nosed Alastor Moody I remember. I'm sparring with her on Sunday. I'll tell her to stop by if you're still here," she said. "Unless you'd rather I didn't."

"Oh, no. I'd be delighted to entertain your granny. She'll get a kick out of the specially ventilated robes I'm wearing. They're all the rage in the shops at Diagon Alley, I hear."

Reassured as to his state of mind, Amelia rolled her magical eye and headed for the door. "Later, Auror Moody."

"Later, Auror Bones."

~oOo~

Minerva McGonagall appeared in Alastor's room just after noon on Sunday wearing a worried look that she tried to hide but that Alastor recognised immediately.

"Remind me to complain about the lax security in this loony bin," he said, trying to set her at ease.

"Amelia got me in," she said. "Alastor, what happened?"

He told her the story he was now officially committed to: He had been in Knockturn Alley, trying to trace some cursed artefacts that had shown up in Muggle London recently, when he was caught by a Dark spell cast by a wizard or witch he never saw. Probably someone looking for revenge against the Auror known in certain circles as the "Azkaban Express", he said. Whether Minerva believed him or not, he couldn't tell from her face.

To his relief and her credit, she didn't fuss over him much. She just asked how he was getting on, when he might be getting his artificial eye, and whether he needed anything while he recuperated from the curse.

It gave him a little pain, talking with her like this. If he tried, he could almost imagine that she was still his girl, visiting her wounded warrior, and that he'd be returning to a house full of Minerva rather than to a flat full of empty carry-out tins and months-old copies of the *Daily Prophet*.

Near the end of their affair, Alastor Moody had been gobsmacked by the realisation that he had fallen in love with Minerva McGonagall. He certainly hadn't intended it, and it had made him ill-tempered and, well ... moody, because he knew perfectly well that she didn't feel the same way about him and never would.

Part of it was that she resented the way he had soared to the top of the pile in the Auror ranks, while she had mouldered away mostly chained to a desk or a lab bench. When Alastor told her he couldn't do anything about it...he couldn't help having a willy any more than she could help having a quim...it only allowed her to transfer her perfectly righteous fury from the anti-feminist MLE to the decidedly pro-Minerva Alastor Moody. He knew it and said it anyway, hoping, he supposed, that her fury would spend itself faster if it had a direct and palpable target.

The other part of what Alastor had thought of as "their problem" was that Minerva was in love with someone else. They never spoke of it, but he knew from all the subtle signals that people give off when they're suffering from an unrequited passion...signals with which Moody had gained more than a passing acquaintance himself...and he knew that its object wasn't him. She'd had her heart broken good and proper, and it was beyond the modest masculine endowments of an Alastor Moody to put it to rights.

And so each of them had reverted to type, Alastor goading and needling with increasing desperation, Minerva exploding predictably at it. The two of them had had some spectacular blow-outs near the end, and eventually the time had come when the sex that resulted from them couldn't make up for the pre-requisite unpleasantness.

He wasn't especially sorry when she had asked him to remove his few overnight things from her bedroom and bath...the law of diminishing returns had clearly been invoked weeks before...but he did feel pangs of regret now and again, and he was pleased when it became clear that he and Minerva would "always be friends", as the phrase is often put, but which rarely happens in practice.

He did often wonder, though, whose shadow had been between himself and Minerva.

About ten minutes into her visit, they were interrupted by the arrival of Albus Dumbledore. After a few minutes of pleasant chit-chat, Minerva excused herself to allow the two men to talk privately.

Alastor's ears pricked up when Dumbledore told her, "We'll only be a few minutes. If you'll wait for me, I have a few things to discuss with you, Minerva, and it might be pleasanter to do it over tea today than in my office tomorrow. If you're free, that is."

"I am," she said. "I'll meet you in the reception area."

When she had gone, Albus just stood looking at Alastor expectantly.

"Don't look at me that way. Makes me feel like a student called on your carpet again," Alastor said.

"Considering that you behaved exactly as you used to at school, I should think it entirely appropriate."

"All right, I mucked it up," Alastor conceded. "You can add your insults to my injury if you like. I'm a big boy. I can take it."

Albus cast an Imperturbable Charm on the door before speaking again.

"I thought we had agreed that you were going to stay out of it for the time being," he said.

"I never agreed, and it isn't for you to tell me how to spend my time," Alastor said, which earned him a raised eyebrow.

Alastor chuckled.

"Is there something amusing?" enquired an irritated Dumbledore.

"That look. It's straight off Minerva's face. It's the one she used to give me whenever she thought I'd been naughty in a way she didn't like."

"That is neither here nor there. We were talking about your ill-advised and, may I say, amateurish attempt at espionage."

"Come off it, Dumbledore. You can't tell me you think we should let these bastards go on without someone keeping an eye on 'em. They're dangerous. You and I both knew it before LeStrange's wand got the better of my head."

"LeStrange?" Dumbledore's brow furrowed.

"Yeah. Romulus, to be exact. Although either of his fecking brothers would have been happy enough to claim it."

Dumbledore was silent for a few moments.

"They're getting bolder," Dumbledore said at last. "Between Borgin's murder and the attack on you ... I don't like it."

"Yeah? Well that's two of us, anyway."

"They seem to feel they can operate with impunity. It suggests a strong belief in their leader."

"This ... Lord Voldymort?"

"Voldemort, yes."

"Still haven't seen him. Leastways, not that I know of. I suppose it could be one of the Death Eaters we already know."

"I don't think so."

Alastor's good eye narrowed. "You know who he is, don't you?"

"Not with absolute certainty, no. But I have a suspicion."

"You going to tell me, or do I have to guess?"

Albus considered for a moment before speaking. "Do you remember Tom Riddle?"

"Sure. Slytherin. School hero. Prat. Always panting after Minerva. You think he's Voldemort?"

"I think it's a definite possibility."

"He'd be the type," said Alastor. "But what makes you think it's him? Why not any of the other Slytherin gits with pure-blood mania?"

"Can you think of any that had his charisma? Or, frankly, his ability?"

Moody thought about it. "Not really. He did always seem to have a band of toadies following him around, hanging off his every word like he was a Veela in heat. So, what do we do about him?"

"I think we have to wait to see what he's up to. So far, we only have a murder we can't prove and an assault that just draws negative attention to the victim."

Alastor looked gloomy. "Yeah. Sorry about that. I guess I left my brains at home that day."

"I'm sorry you were injured, Alastor. But once you're back on your feet, I think it is advisable for you to continue your surveillance. But from a distance. They know you're watching them now, so it's no good following them about. Just keep your ear to the ground. Is there anyone you trust who could act as go-between with your contacts?"

"Amelia Bones," said Alastor. "She's the only MLE officer who's copped to the problem, and a cannier witch you'd be hard-pressed to find." He didn't add that he'd already had several long discussions on the subject with her.

"And you trust her to be careful?"

"I'd trust her with my other eye."

"Good," said Dumbledore smiling. He released the charm from the door, saying, "Take care of yourself, Alastor."

"Oh, I will, Professor. Better not keep Minerva waiting," he added with a smile that didn't quite reach his remaining eye.

~oOo~

When Albus suggested that they Apparate to Godric's Hollow rather than repair to a Muggle tea shop, Minerva agreed readily.

No sooner had Albus closed the cottage door behind them than they were in each other's arms.

In between kisses, Minerva murmured, "I was ... *mmm* ... surprised to see you ...*oh!* ... in Alastor's room."

"We had some business to discuss," said Albus, continuing his assault on her neck. He forestalled any further inquiry by putting his hands on her breasts and his tongue in her mouth.

They moved quickly upstairs, and as Albus Banished her clothes, she said, "Your brother isn't apt to come barging in this time, is he?"

Running his hands over her newly bare skin, he answered, "Not today. He only ever takes Mondays off. But just to reassure you ..." He drew his wand and cast both a simple warding charm and an Imperturbable on the bedroom door before returning to his pleasant task.

"Thank you," she said, taking the lapels of his robe in her hands. "Now, about these clothes ..."

Shortly thereafter, they were both naked on the bed, which creaked and groaned along with their movements, its protests eventually drowned out by the couple's moans and exhortations. When Albus finally finished, she held him to her as his breathing and heartbeat returned to their normal pace, and he felt as if nothing could touch them for those few, golden moments.

He rolled off of her, closed his eyes, and fell asleep for a minute while she used the loo. When she returned, she snuggled up close to him again, and he felt her hands circling his chest. He pulled her even closer and threw a lazy leg over hers.

She asked, "What was your business with Alastor?"

"Oh, just a few things I've asked him to keep an eye on for me."

"That's going to be a bit harder now," she said. "Poor Alastor. I'm sure he's worried about what's going to happen to his job. After what happened when Amelia was injured ..."

"Remember that Alastor Moody has been an Auror for almost a decade, and one of the most successful."

"And a man."

"Yes, I expect that will make it easier for him than it was for Amelia when she was injured. You were injured at the same time, I believe, weren't you?"

"Yes. It was during an operation in the Ardennes. One we trainees really had no business carrying out, but by then, the French had no fighters left to speak of, and the Magical Allies were expected to hold the line with only our Aurors, what was left of the French force, the few German groups that could get out, and a number of stray Belgians."

"Still, you managed," Albus said.

"In the end, yes. But we couldn't have held much longer if you hadn't ..."

"Taken Grindelwald."

"Yes. That must have needed incredible courage," she said softly.

"I wouldn't call it courage. Desperation, maybe."

"All the same, you did it. I remember..." She stopped.

"You remember what?" he prodded.

"It's silly. I remember how elated everyone was when the news came. But I was so wretched because everyone assumed you had been killed. I felt as if the world had collapsed around me and I'd never be happy again. It was like a Dementor's pall. I thought I might go mad."

"I'm sorry," he said. "It was several weeks before I could get back. I was in hospital...a Muggle hospital in Dresden. They were wonderful. Quite decent to me despite what had just happened to them."

"I saw photographs of the city. It looked horrific."

"Yes. Yes, it was. Anyway, they saved my life. The Muggle doctor was a bit perplexed about how my leg healed so quickly," he said with a chuckle. "Poor fellow."

"Is that where this came from?" she asked, tracing two fingertips along the waxy ridges of the scar that covered several inches around his left knee.

"Yes."

Minerva scooted down the bed and began kissing the scar, running her tongue along the white lines.

He jumped. "Oi! That tickles!"

She held his leg in place, soothing it with her hands. "Sorry." Looking at the scar, she said, "You know, Albus, your scar looks a bit like a map of the London Underground."

"The London Underground?"

"Yes. You know, the Muggle trains that run under the city."

"I know, but how are you familiar with its maps?"

"I spent some time in Tube stations during my stint as an Auror. I helped investigate an alleged ring of wizards trafficking in human virgins. I was supposed to be 'bait', I think." She snorted. "If only they had known," she added with a laugh. "Anyway, they were supposedly selling them to the vampires that lived in the tunnels. It turned out to be a hoax, but I did get quite familiar with a few of the Underground lines. Muggles really are quite ingenious sometimes." She frowned then, her mind returning to what Muggle ingenuity had wrought in Dresden the day Albus had been injured.

She continued running her fingers along his scar. "Does it still hurt?"

"Sometimes. When it's damp."

"Which it always is, in the castle."

After a few moments, he told her, "I thought about you, you know. At the end...or what I thought was the end."

"You mean..."

"Yes. When I was stuck in that factory, waiting to die. I thought about you and the time we had spent together. It was a comfort."

"I'm glad."

"I'm sorry I hurt you so, Minerva."

She shimmied back up the bed and nestled herself into his arms. "It doesn't matter now," she said. "I understand why you had to do it."

As he held her, Albus hoped he wouldn't have to do it again. The business with Riddle and his so-called "Death Eaters" was troubling, not least because of Tom's previous obsession with Minerva. Albus didn't know if Riddle still wanted her, but he suspected Riddle would take any opportunity to hurt her should it arise. Albus was determined that it shouldn't. He wanted to keep his life...what he thought of as his solemn obligation...fighting the Dark entirely separate from his other life, the one he had made at Hogwarts, which included teaching, and Minerva, and everything else that was good, but he knew it wasn't possible. All he could do was fight this new threat as best he could and hope he could keep Minerva out of it. If he couldn't ... well, he supposed he'd burn that bridge when he came to it. For the moment, he just wanted to be lost in her for as long as circumstances...and Minerva herself...would allow it.

Chapter Forty

Chapter 40 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"You'll simply have to trust me."

Minerva McGonagall was happy.

She didn't normally think about happiness or whether she possessed it, except in times of extremity, but now, as she was putting things into her small carpetbag, she realised that the past few weeks had been among the happiest she had spent since childhood.

Her classes were going well. Gawain Robards seemed to have sorted whatever was affecting his work and was back on track to excel in his Transfiguration N.E.W.T., and Catherine Belby was improving, although maybe not quite enough to pass the difficult exam. The general quality of the students' essays had improved markedly, which gave Minerva greater confidence in her teaching abilities and made an evening's marking much pleasanter work. Her grandmother's health had improved, and her seven-month-old niece, Morrigan, had begun to show signs of magic. (Not that anyone had really been worried, but a magical family always heaved a sigh of relief the first time a baby moved a favourite toy or upset a dish of mashed peas without touching it.)

And of course, there was Albus. They spent Saturday evenings together, playing chess and making love...a fine combination of pleasures, in Minerva's book...and sometimes were able to spend an hour or two together in the afternoon after her Saturday tutoring sessions; she would take a stack of papers to his office, and if he was there, she'd sit by his fire marking them as he worked at his desk.

He seemed to have relaxed a bit since the unorthodox reigniting of their affair. Enough, anyway, to ask her to spend the two days he would take off during the upcoming Easter holidays with him. Someplace away from Hogwarts, he had said, although he wouldn't tell her where they were going.

She hoped it wasn't Godric's Hollow. The afternoon they had spent in the Dumbledore cottage two Sundays ago had been pleasant...more than pleasant...and she had been happy to have someplace to be alone with Albus, but she wasn't at ease there. There was the uncomfortable memory of meeting Aberforth Dumbledore and the words that had passed between them, and now she couldn't help thinking of the terrible things that had happened to Albus and his family in the house. She didn't know how he could stand being there. Anyway, she doubted he would bring her there again for a romantic tryst. They had only gone there that first time years ago because they certainly couldn't have checked into a hotel...even a Muggle one...without raising eyebrows. She looked less like his granddaughter now, and he hadn't aged perceptibly. She wondered idly if she would always age faster than he did. It was highly likely, she thought. The aging process in wizards and witches seemed to be tied to magical power, although nobody had yet figured out just how. Everyone seemed to grow and mature at about the same rate in childhood and adolescence, but at some point in young adulthood...at around the age Minerva was now, in fact...things seemed to change. The most powerful mages seemed to grow older according to a clock that slowed exponentially as they got older, and that had certainly been true for Albus, she thought. With the exception of a slightly longer beard and hair, streaked with a bit more grey, at seventy-five, he looked much the same as he had at sixty-three, which was to say, he looked as Muggles and many wizards did when they were in their fifties.

Not that it mattered much. He was not a conventionally handsome man, but to her, he was beautiful. He was tall and broad of shoulder, much like her father...and she didn't care to examine *that* fact too closely...although Thorfinn McGonagall was somewhat thicker-set and shorter of beard. She had never found long beards or locks especially attractive, except on Albus. Her other lovers had all been clean-shaven with short-trimmed hair, and she wondered now if there had been a reason for that.

She smiled at her thoughts. Yes, she was happy. She was in love with a man who loved her, and the whole world was in front of them. It didn't matter to her that they still had to hide their relationship; in truth, she found that a bonus. She'd never liked everyone knowing her personal business, and the fact she and Albus didn't...couldn't...spend every free moment together was fine with her. She had found that being the sole focus of anyone's attention for extended periods wore on her dreadfully, which was one reason things hadn't worked out with Doug McLaggen...the other being, of course, that she didn't truly love him...and why things had worked out for so long with Alastor.

A weekend alone with Albus, though, that was different.

She snapped her bag shut and placed it on the trunk at the end of her bed. When she went downstairs, Charity was just laying the table for their dinner.

"A bit of salmon tonight," Charity said. "I hope that suits."

"It does, thank you. I wish you'd let me help with the meals, though."

"Oh, no. You pay me for room and board, and room and board I aim to provide. Besides, I enjoy cooking. It's nice to have someone to do it for again. Unless you like to cook yourself?"

"No," said Minerva, laughing. "To tell you the truth, I'm rather a disaster in the kitchen. When I was living in Oxford, most nights I'd just heat up an egg and some toast, which is about the best I can manage."

"Well, it's no wonder you're so slim. I told Albus when you came to me I was going to fatten you by a stone, and I mean to do it."

When they had eaten, Minerva helped clear away the dishes and applied the drying charms after Charity had washed them by hand. After they finished, Charity said, "I'm going to go up now; I'm exhausted. I was up half of last night marking those bloody exams. If I don't see you in the morning, I hope you and your mysterious young man have a wonderful weekend."

"Thank you. And I hope you enjoy Charles's visit. I'm sorry I won't have the chance to meet him. He sounds lovely."

"That he is, that he is," said Charity. "Goodnight, Minerva."

"Goodnight, Charity."

~oOo~

Albus Dumbledore was happy.

He knew he shouldn't be. The attack on Alastor Moody and the terrible injury the young man had sustained should have precluded it. His concerns about Riddle and his followers should have been his primary concern, and if they weren't, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, ranking member of the Wizengamot, and voting Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards should have had plenty of other problems contending for the honour.

But he was happy. Seeing Minerva every day...even if it was just in the corridors or at lunch in the Great Hall...kept him from brooding on his worries, much as it had during the war, at least until he had no longer been able to put them aside. But this time, he reflected, there was no reckoning to come. Minerva knew the worst of him and hadn't turned away. And if he could keep an eye on Riddle without having to become directly involved...at least not yet...perhaps he and Minerva could be together without putting her in harm's way.

The afternoon they had recently spent away from the school at Godric's Hollow had been the best few hours he had enjoyed in a long, long time. Alone with Minerva, with no distractions, no feeling that they were sequestered in his rooms or that they might be interrupted at any moment by a school crisis...it had been as free as he could recall feeling since his boyhood. He remembered the weekend they had spent there during their first affair, and it had given him the idea that they might go away together for a few days during the upcoming Easter holidays.

They couldn't go across the Channel; there was too much risk that they wouldn't be able to get back quickly should he need to. But they could, he thought, find someplace secluded and romantic, where they could just be Albus and Minerva for a little while. A Muggle place, he decided. That way, they could be a couple without undue risk of discovery by anyone who knew them. He thought she would be quite comfortable spending a little time in the Muggle world, given the years she had spent living in London and Oxford, as well as the travels she had told him about. Witches and wizards who lived in larger cities or even suburbs tended to be more comfortable moving in the non-Magical world than did their rural counterparts, because they had to do it on a daily basis.

Yes, he thought, a *small Muggle hotel*. Somewhere pretty and relatively remote. Minerva wasn't fussy about food, nor did she seem to require the pampering that some witches wanted when they were on holiday. She enjoyed the same kinds of relatively quiet pursuits that he did: reading, walking, chess, lively talk.

He settled on a small country house hotel on Staffin Bay in the Isle of Skye. His parents had taken Aberforth and him to the island when they were small, and Albus had never forgotten the spectacular Quiraing landslip. He was eager to see it again and to share it with Minerva. They could Apparate to Portree, then the hotel carriage would pick them up for the short drive to Staffin.

They could walk the hills, and if they were feeling adventurous, climb a bit as well. There was boating in the bay, and fishing, if she were game for it. The inn had what sounded like a decent restaurant, so they wouldn't have to worry about meals. It was off-season, and he had his pick of rooms. He selected one with view of the bay. It had an en-suite bath and a fireplace, so if the weather were inclement, they could choose to stay in the room and ... read.

Minerva was delighted at the suggestion they spend a weekend away, but Albus quickly discovered that she wasn't especially keen on surprises.

"You'll just have to wait and see, my love," he said the third time she tried to wheedle their destination out of him.

"If I don't know where we're going," she asked, "how will I know what to wear? What to bring?"

"Bring warm, comfortable clothes and good walking shoes. But you needn't bother with a nightdress. I promise to keep you sufficiently warm in bed," he said, putting his arms around her waist, pulling her to him, and kissing her neck.

"Albus," she admonished with a nervous glance at the staffroom door.

"Quite right, quite right," he said with a grin, releasing her. "You might also want to bring your broom. If the weather permits, there should be some lovely flying."

"I'd like that. Not least because I've never seen you on a broom."

"I don't fly often," he admitted. "I was never very good at it, but if you promise not to go too fast or too high, I imagine I'll keep up."

"So we must be going somewhere where there aren't many Muggles."

"Now, now, Minerva. No fair trying to guess. You'll just have to wait and see."

"*Hmpf.*"

"You'll like it, I promise."

"Oh, I'm not worried about that, Albus. But you know me: I like to be prepared for things."

"Well, there isn't much to prepare for our little holiday. I've made all the arrangements. Just pack a bag with a few clothes and be ready to leave first thing Saturday morning. Beyond that," he said, "you'll simply have to trust me."

"I do, Albus. I do."

Chapter Forty-One

Chapter 41 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"You are a wicked, wicked wizard."

"Where are we going?" Minerva asked as soon as she saw Albus at the Apparition spot just outside the school grounds.

"Well, good morning to you too, Minerva," said Albus.

She responded with a sheepish, "Good morning."

Albus gave her a smile. Looking at her bag, he asked, "Do you have everything you need?"

"I think so, but of course, it is difficult to be certain when I don't know what our destination is."

"Ah, well. Your wait is nearly over. If you'll take my arm, we can be off and sate your curiosity."

She did so, and a few moments later, they were standing under a pier opposite a railway station.

Albus stood there with a satisfied smile on his face.

Minerva looked around.

"Perhaps my grasp of geography isn't what it should be, but I still don't know where we are," she said.

"Ah. Well, here's a hint: the local Quidditch team won the League Cup in ... 1953, I believe."

She thought for a minute, then said, "Portree."

"Correct, my dear Professor," he said. "I thought an island holiday might suit us. A man should be at the station in a few moments to pick us up to take us up to Staffin. I told them we were coming in on the nine-forty from Inverness."

"It sounds lovely. Thank you."

They walked to small station house, and the hotel car arrived shortly as promised. The drive was bumpy but pleasant, affording them some lovely views of the island's dramatic scenery. They were delayed only slightly by a flock of sheep crossing the single-lane road outside of the town.

Minerva was delighted by the view from their room. Even in the mist that blanketed them at the moment, the mountains were just visible over the bay, and she couldn't wait to have a go at them on her broom, which she had Shrunk and packed in her small carpetbag.

"This is wonderful, Albus. I couldn't think of a nicer holiday," she said, putting her arms around his neck.

"I'm glad you approve. Maybe next time you'll trust me when I arrange a surprise."

"I certainly will." She kissed him quickly, then said, "Let's have a fly!"

"All right. But you must promise to take things slowly for me, all right?"

"Of course."

An hour later, when they were soaring above the rocky coast of the bay where it met the mountains, Minerva realised that Albus hadn't been exhibiting false modesty. He really was not especially comfortable on a broom. He wobbled quite a bit, and she found she had to slow down considerably from what she would have found a reasonable speed to allow him to keep up with her.

He refused to skim the bay with her, choosing instead to follow along behind her a good twenty feet in the air above.

When they landed on a small, rocky beach, he said, "I'm sorry to hold you back, my dear. If you'd like to have a go without me, I can wait here."

"Nonsense. I came here to be with you. I can fly at home. Besides," she said putting her arms around him and pulling him close, "I'm freezing."

"I don't wonder. You're nearly soaked."

The spray from her pass at the waterline had wet her breeks and jumper, and her hair was plastered against her face in wet tendrils where it had come loose from her plait. Her nose and cheeks were bright pink from the cold, and her eyes were watering from the wind. He thought she looked perfectly beautiful.

He drew his wand and cast drying and warming charms on her, holding her cold hands in his, bringing them to his mouth to blow gently on her numb fingers.

"Thank you," she said. "I hope I didn't overtax you. If I go too fast or too high, you must let me know." It was an odd feeling to find that there was something she did better than he, but she found she liked it.

"I will," he said. "I'm afraid I've never got very good at flying. I don't have much reason to do it often, so I'm out of practice. You, however, look like you were born on a broom."

"I was, practically. My father isn't much for flying, either, but my gran loved it, and she took Einar and me for rides from the time we could walk."

"I didn't learn until I came to Hogwarts. My mother had never learnt, and my father thought brooms were a waste of money, I'm afraid."

"Your mother never flew?" she asked, surprised.

"No. She was Muggle-born. Flying wasn't among the things the witch who gave her her magical education taught her."

The afternoon was becoming full of surprising information. "Didn't she go to Hogwarts?" asked Minerva.

"No. My grandparents were unconvinced that a magical school would offer a proper education for a young girl. They were shopkeepers, only a generation out of the mines, and I think they were very anxious to give their daughter the kind of education their own parents could never have afforded. My mother was sent to a fine girls' day

school...a Muggle school...outside Llandoverly. But to my grandparents' credit, they did ask Headmistress Wilkins to recommend a magical tutor for my mother. Apparently, she found them an excellent one. My mother always spoke very highly of her ... the daughter of Dilys Derwent, if I recall correctly. That's how my mother met my father. He was apprenticing with the younger Madam Derwent, and she enlisted him to help my mother with her Potions work. She took to the subject, and, apparently, to my father," he said with a grin.

"Your mother must have been a remarkable woman."

"She was, in many ways. Much like your father, she taught us from the best of Muggle science, philosophy, art, as well as magic. But ..."

"But what?" she prodded gently. He had never spoken much about his family, other than the terrible story of his mother's and sister's deaths, and Minerva was eager to know as much as she could about the complicated, fascinating wizard she loved.

"She was quite shy. A loner, one might say. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but I think it worked to her disadvantage. She didn't make friends easily, and not having grown up in the magical world, she might have benefitted from close friends who might have eased the transition. I think one of the reasons she chose my father was that she knew he had little interest in, or indeed, opportunity to mix with pure-blood society. The Dumbledores were well regarded, but their social standing and financial circumstances weren't like those of the Blacks, or even the Prewetts. He had a bit of money from his family, but my father was a simple man. All he wanted was to run his small apothecary in a little village where he could be of some use without having to pander too much to high society. Fortunately for him, a quiet life in Mould-on-the-Wold suited my mother to the ground."

Minerva wondered silently what Percival Dumbledore would have made of his famous son.

"After we moved to Godric's Hollow," Albus continued, "my mother became even more reclusive, for a variety of reasons. We didn't have much contact with other magical families. I was fortunate to have Bathilda Bagshot as a neighbour..."

"Bathilda Bagshot? The magical historian?"

"Yes. She lived next door. Still does," he said, and Minerva realised that the famous scholar must have been the "Bathilda" Aberforth had referred to all those years ago when he had arrived unexpectedly at the cottage in Godric's Hollow.

Albus said, "She helped take charge of our early magical education. It was through her good offices that I met Griselda Marchbanks, who became something of a mentor later on...as you know."

"Yes."

"A witch of great intelligence and talent, is Bathilda, but she was more interested in the theoretical aspects of magic than in its practical applications, like flying. So I'm afraid I didn't ever get on a broom until my third year at Hogwarts. Elphias Doge was kind enough to teach me, but," he said with a chuckle, "I'm afraid Elphias isn't much of a teacher. I never did learn to fly properly...as you've just seen."

"Well, if you ever want a *real* flying lesson ..." said Minerva.

"No, thank you, my dear. I'm content to muddle along as I do, with my feet on the ground and my head in the air."

"If you think you're ready for another go, I'm getting hungry."

They flew back to the deserted beach at Staffin and returned to the hotel. After a late lunch, they retired to their room, and Minerva said, "I think I'd like a bath. I never feel really clean after using a charm. Besides, I'm still a bit chilly."

"As you wish, my love."

"You know," she said, approaching him as she unbuttoned her cardigan, "the tub is big enough for two, if you'd care to join me for a soak."

"A fine idea, Professor McGonagall." He moved his hands to help her finish her buttons. "Shall I help you with these Muggle things, then?"

"A fine idea, Professor Dumbledore, provided you allow me to return the favour."

Five minutes later, they were submerged in fragrant hot water, Minerva resting against Albus's chest as he soaped her shoulders with a large flannel. When he had rinsed them, he moved on to her arms, lifting one, then the other, running the soapy cloth up and down their length. He next tended to her belly, making small circles, moving ever lower, until her reached her centre. Instead of lingering there, however, he took her right leg behind the calf, bringing it up towards them so he could run the flannel over the smooth skin of her leg.

"You have the longest legs I have ever seen," he remarked as he washed it.

"My gran used to say I was like an Abraxan foal: all arms and legs akimbo."

"Surely not akimbo."

"Oh, yes. I was not always the graceful gazelle you met at Hogwarts. It took me a few years to grow into my limbs."

"Such lovely limbs," he said, urging her to bend her knees so he could reach her ankles and feet. When he threaded the flannel between her toes, she couldn't help flinching.

"Ticklish?" he asked.

"Not especially." She jumped when he did it again. "But when you do that ..."

He released the right leg to tend to the left, and when he was done with that, he moved the flannel up to circle her breasts, moving from one to the other. When he had finished washing them, he *Accio*-ed his wand from the vanity where he had left it and used it to turn on the hot tap, sending the flannel across the tub to rinse it in the hot water. He Summoned the steaming flannel and laid his wand on the floor next to the tub. He wrung the flannel out and laid it quickly over her left breast, making her gasp; it was hot almost to the point of being painful, but a moment before it became unbearable, she felt the whisper of his magic and heard his voice murmuring, "*Frigero*." The flannel suddenly grew very cold, and she felt her nipple contract to a hard point. The intense sensation sent a mixture of painful and pleasurable signals straight to her sex. She hissed.

"All right?" he asked.

"Mmmm."

He removed the flannel and dipped it back into the bath water, warming it, and laid it across the other breast. He moved his hand over it, the rough texture of the flannel pleasantly stimulating her nipple, as he moved his other hand down to rest against her centre. She was trembling with desire now, but he kept his hand infuriatingly still. His lips kissed a short path to her ear, and his breath was warm and moist and heavy as he sucked her earlobe between his teeth and flicked his tongue lightly around the shell of her ear.

"Tell me what you want me to do to you," he whispered.

"Whatever you like," she breathed back, arching her hips.

"No, tell me," he insisted.

"I want you to touch me," she whispered.

"Touch you how?"

"Like this ..." She surprised him by putting her hand over his, guiding him to her sex. "Ohhh, yes," she moaned, "just like that."

"You like this?" he breathed in her ear. "When I touch you this way?"

"Gods, yes," she said, her hips emphasising the assertion by bucking up into his busy hand.

Her breath gradually quickened until all she could do was gasp, the muscles of her abdomen contracting and her legs trembling as he pleased her, her hands clutching, white-knuckled, at the sides of the tub.

Her entire body seemed to convulse as she screamed out his name in her ecstasy. He stopped moving but held her in place as she gradually relaxed and her heaving breath eventually slowed.

When she let her head fall back against his chest and opened her eyes, he was smiling down at her.

She sighed contentedly. "You are a wicked, wicked wizard."

"Am I?"

"Very."

"But I am your wicked wizard."

"Are you?"

"Entirely."

"S good," she murmured.

"I think we'd better get out before we both fall asleep right here," he said. "It would be most inconvenient for the hotel staff if we were to drown."

"Oh, very," she agreed.

She rose and stepped out of the tub. "Wait a moment," she said as she wrapped a towel around herself. "We managed to get quite a bit of water on the floor. May I?" she asked, indicating his wand, which still lay on the tiled floor next to the tub.

"Of course, my dear."

She took it up and Vanished the small pool of water that had gathered under the tub. As he got out, she took a towel from the shelf and held it for him.

She put another towel over his head, massaging his scalp as she dried his damp hair, using it to gently wring the excess water from its length.

He said, "Thank you, my love," when she removed it, and he moved to finish drying himself, but she motioned for him to stay where he was.

"I'm not done yet," she said, running the towel over his wet shoulders and back. She paused long enough to take up his wand again and cast drying and warming charms on the towel, then set to work on his arms, moving down one, then the other, next moving up to run the towel over his chest. She ran one hand over it, following it with her mouth, giving each nipple a playful swipe of her tongue, then planting light kisses over his pectoral muscles and down his abdomen to his navel.

She noted with satisfaction that the towel covering his midsection was conspicuously tented in front, but she didn't dally there. Instead, she knelt on the floor and moved the towel down one leg, then up the other, repeating the action until his legs were dry. Dropping the towel, she followed the path she had just taken, moving her palms slowly up his bare legs and under the towel, snaking them around to the back to cup and squeeze his firm buttocks before running her nails lightly down the backs of his legs, careful to skip over the scar at the back of his left knee. She leant over to kiss and lick at his right ankle, moving her lips and tongue slowly and gradually up his leg until her head was under the towel. Kissing, nipping, and lapping at his inner thighs, she unwrapped the towel from his middle and tossed it aside.

As she tended him with her tongue, he began to moan.

"Oh, gods ... Minerva ... oh ..."

Eventually, she rose and led him to the bed, where he put his talented mouth to work until she was once again trembling on the brink.

He moved up her body to lie on top of her.

"I want to be inside you now."

"Yes," she gasped.

He watched her face as he slid into her. She opened her eyes and looked back at him. Neither one moved as they held one another's gaze. They lay like that for a minute, both trembling, until he whispered, "I love you."

She was about to say, "I love you too," when pleasure began to spread through her body, seeming to squeeze the air from her lungs, engulfing her until all she could do was exist in this moment, without thought, without breath, without anything but joy, visceral and pure.

He saw her face contract, almost as if she were in pain, and felt his own pleasure come upon him. It seemed to go on and on, and for a moment, he thought he might pass out from lack of air. When he finally found some breath, he could only moan, "Ohhh, Minerva ... Minerva ... Minerva," just as he had the first time they made love, years ago.

Her eyes were closed and she was gasping for breath. When she seemed to have recovered it, he leant down and kissed her deeply.

He released her lips, and she breathed, "Merlin ..."

"Indeed," he said. "That was..."

"Amazing," they said together.

They both laughed, and he moved off of her, gathering her into his arms.

They lay quietly for a few minutes until he heard her voice, still thick with sex.

"Albus?"

"*Hmm?*" came his sleepy reply.

"Have you ever considered hiring someone to teach flying?"

"*Hmm?*" he asked again, slightly confused the sudden change of subject from ... sleep ... to flying.

"An instructor. For the students," she said. "I was just thinking about what you said before about not learning to fly until you got to Hogwarts."

"If that's what you were thinking about a few minutes ago, I'm afraid I've lost my touch."

"Don't be daft. I meant, I was thinking about it before you got my undivided attention. It doesn't seem quite right that Muggle-borns and others whose parents don't teach them to fly for one reason or another don't get the chance to learn. "She shifted over onto her side to look at him, warming to her subject. "I mean, how many Muggle-borns make one of the house Quidditch teams?"

"I don't know, but I have a feeling you're going to tell me."

"I am: none. This year, at least, there are *no* Muggle-born students playing Quidditch at Hogwarts. And I can't remember any from my time as a student, can you?"

"I've never considered it."

"That's just it, no one does. I know it sounds trivial, but it's just emblematic of the way Muggle-borns can be marginalised as they try to integrate into wizarding society. Nobody means for it to happen...or at least, most of us don't...but it does happen. We teach them magic, but you said yourself that it's only part of our job."

"So I did," he said, marvelling at the variety of things she could apparently think about at one time. "So you think the solution is to have flying classes at Hogwarts?"

"Of course not. But it would be one small, tangible thing we could do to help put Muggle-borns on an equal footing with the other students. Besides, it couldn't hurt to give everyone a basic foundation in flying. Look at the number of accidents we have as it is. It seems as if one or two of my students are missing from class each week due to broom-related mishaps." She was exaggerating, but only slightly.

"It's not a bad idea, Minerva. Not a bad idea at all. When we get back, I'll talk it over with Filius, get his thoughts on it. If he agrees, I'll ask him to work up some numbers to propose to the governors."

"Oh, the governors," Minerva said, her lips pursing with distaste. "They'll never agree, will they? Muggle-borns are never very high on their list of priorities, I imagine."

"That's a bit unfair," he said. "It's true, the majority of the governors are pure-bloods, or close to it, but quite a few of them are sympathetic to the plight of our Muggle-born students."

"Well, you know them," she said.

He did. And he had to admit, she was right, to a degree. The Hogwarts Board of Governors tended to give the bulk of their attention to matters of curriculum, mostly to ensure that their pet subjects continued to be taught exactly as they themselves had learned them. They paid collective lip-service to helping the less fortunate students with tuition and money for supplies and textbooks...a few of them were quite genuinely committed to the Needy Students Fund...and several maintained what Albus considered an over-active interest in matters related to Quidditch. Which gave him an idea.

"Perhaps if we had a flying instructor who could also help train the Quidditch teams," he mused.

"Exactly," Minerva said, excited now. "I'm sure having really first-rate Quidditch teams is high on the list of priorities for some of the governors."

"Too right, my dear. You know, if I position it correctly, we might even get a few of our wealthier families to make an endowment to fund the position."

She leant over and kissed him quickly. "You are a genius."

"It was your idea," he protested.

"All right then, I am a genius."

"That you are, my dear Miss McGonagall. That you are."

Chapter Forty-Two

Chapter 42 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"Perhaps I might see the Headmaster. He and I have some business to discuss."

When Albus awoke the next morning, it took him several moments to work out that the heat of the body curled up against him was not the continuation of a lovely dream.

But no, it was Minerva, warm, naked, and very, very real, breathing heavily and steadily, the pale skin of her back making momentary contact with his chest with each intake of breath. He lifted his head, and it took some willpower for him not to reach over and brush the hair from her cheek so he could watch her face in repose, as he all too rarely saw it.

Instead, he settled his head back against the pillow and contented himself with breathing in her scent and enjoying the feel of her close to him.

How is this possible? he wondered to himself.

A few months ago, he had been settling in as Headmaster of Hogwarts, busy also with his work on the Wizengamot and a million other things besides, barely thinking of Minerva McGonagall...at least, not in his working hours, which was most of the time. He had thought himself ... if not content, exactly, then settled in his discontent and resigned to being alone among the throngs of people who needed him on a regular basis for his unique talents but never as a man.

Then Minerva had shown up in his office, offering her professional services, and he had suddenly been acutely aware of her absence from his life over the long years. That day, he had experienced the same feelings of longing and helplessness he had all those years ago, when he had known with every neuron in his considerable brain that his desires were wrong and dangerous for both of them but had pursued them anyway. So, when she came for the interview, he had found himself offering her the job just as he had once found himself kissing her in his chambers just after 1943 had turned over into 1944...without intending to, but immediately glad he had before the stupidity of what he had done assaulted him.

But it was no longer 1944, and she was no longer eighteen. The Albus Dumbledore of 1957 didn't have a dreadful appointment to keep nor any more terrible secrets that might change the love and respect he had come to crave from her into the scorn and disgust he had secretly felt he deserved. If she could forgive him, could he not forgive himself?

Perhaps.

She is a miracle, he thought suddenly. His personal miracle. He supposed he might have to re-evaluate his disbelief in a benevolent God.

After a few minutes, he couldn't resist touching her and carefully moved her hair out of the way so he could kiss the back of her neck. She stirred against him, and he inched himself closer up against her, his hand coming to rest on her breast.

She felt him pressing against her, and raised her outside knee, giving him silent permission to ...

Yes, that ... oh!

They made love without speaking, the only sounds in the room their breath and the gentle creaking of the old bed frame.

When it was over, she sighed her contentment. "Oh, Albus ... Albus ..."

"Yes, my love?"

"That was a very nice way to wake up."

"Wasn't it?"

"If the world were fair, it would always be like this."

"You wouldn't get tired of it?"

"Of course not," she said. "Why? Do you think you'd tire of it?"

"Not in a million years. But I might expire after not too many of them. I'm not as young you."

"Oh, pish. As if you're an old man! You certainly make love like a young man."

"I'm glad you think so." After a moment's hesitation, he asked, "And have you made love with many young men?" He tried to keep his tone light and joking, but she turned over to look at him.

"Is that a serious question, Albus? Are you asking me how many lovers I've had?"

"It isn't any of my business, I realise, but one is curious."

"Is one? And would the answer make any difference?"

"Difference in what?"

"I don't know ... in how you feel about me. About us."

"No. I will adore you whether it's one or a hundred."

"A hundred!" she exclaimed in mock outrage. "I don't know whether to be flattered or insulted."

After a moment, she said, "If you really want to know ..."

"I do," he replied softly. He wasn't proud of it, but the question had arisen, and he couldn't quite put it out of his head.

"Well ... you know about Alastor. And there was another man, someone I was very fond of. We were together for more than a year."

"Douglas McLaggen," he said.

"You know?"

"Alastor mentioned it once."

That wasn't quite true. Alastor had only told him that Minerva had turned down a proposal from an old training mate, but Albus had subsequently done a bit of quiet sleuthing to discover the man's name, for reasons he didn't quite know. He wasn't proud of that, either.

"I see," she said. "So you and Alastor discussed me?" She remembered with some shame her hope that her then-boyfriend would do just that...tell Albus about their affair...in the hope of making her former lover jealous.

"Not exactly," Albus said. "But Alastor did mention once that you two were seeing one another, and he said he didn't think you were the marrying kind because you'd turned down a proposal."

She laughed. "That must have been very comforting to Alastor. I can't think of a man less inclined to marry than him." She quieted for a moment, remembering Alastor's current predicament. "Do you think they'll throw him out of the Aurors?"

"I don't know. If you like, when we get back, I'll have a word with Marius Edgecombe."

"Can you do that?"

"I can't tell him what to do, of course, but I can try to find out what he's thinking and put in a good word for Alastor. As a member of the Wizengamot, it's within my purview, more or less."

"Oh, please do, Albus."

"Of course." Giving a laugh, he added, "You must be quite a siren, persuading me to intervene with the Ministry on your old lover's behalf."

"I don't know about that, but I do care for Alastor. Not the way I care for you, of course, but he will always be dear to me." She put a hand on his arm. "Does that bother you?"

"Oh, no. I'm pleased that you and Alastor have remained friends. He's a good man."

"He is," she agreed happily.

"Now, about those others," he said. "Will you tell me about them, Minerva?"

"There isn't much to tell, really. Besides Alastor and Doug there were three others. But none of them lasted long."

"Were you in love with any of them?"

"No. None of them," she said. "Does that shock you?"

"No. If anything, I find it a bit of a relief."

"You don't like competition," she said, goading him gently.

"Does anyone?"

"Probably not. And you, Albus? You've said you never loved anyone else since ... since Grindelwald. But have you had many lovers?"

He wasn't especially comfortable telling her about his other affairs, but he could hardly decline to answer after she had been so forthright with him.

"Not many. At least, not compared with some men my age, I suppose. I never really made a count, but there were... oh ... five with whom I spent more than a few weeks. And several others that were shorter affairs."

"Did you have any that were just once?" she asked, remembering the tryst she had had with the soldier the day the Muggle war had ended. She hadn't counted him in the tally she had given to Albus, but she was curious to know if he had ever done anything similar.

"I am ashamed to admit that there were a few like that, when I was a younger man."

She was somehow relieved to hear it. "You needn't be ashamed, Albus. I don't think that's such a terrible thing, as long as everyone is honest about their intentions."

"No, I suppose there are worse crimes. Anyway, all of it was a very long time ago. By the time you came along, there hadn't been anyone in years."

"So I was the end of a long, dry season," she said, teasing him again.

"Yes. And the beginning of another."

"What do you mean?"

"After things ended between us," he said.

"Are you saying there's been no one since then?"

"No one."

"Not even a fling?"

"No one," he confirmed.

Now she was shocked. Remembering the awful jealousy she had felt at the ball the Ministry had given in Albus's honour, she asked, "What about that woman you were with at the ball...the one they gave after the end of the war?"

"Cressida?"

"Was that her name?"

"Yes. Cressida Burgess," he said. "You noticed who I was with?"

"Of course. Didn't you notice my date?" she asked, thinking about how hard she had tried to make him notice.

"Yes. It was all I could do to keep from hexing him on the spot."

"Funny, I felt the same way about your Madam Burgess. I was quite sure she was your lover, and it drove me nearly mad that night," she told him. "She was so beautiful, so elegant and assured. Compared with her, I felt like a child, and an awkward, ugly one at that."

"I'm sorry," he said earnestly. "But she was just an old friend who agreed to accompany me to the ball." After a moment, he said, "Although in the spirit of full disclosure, I should tell you that we had been more than friends, years before."

"Oh?"

"She was an apprentice to Nicolas when I was working with him in the 'twenties, and we had a brief affair. I'm sure she was astonished to hear from me again after all that time."

"Are you still friendly with her?"

"No. I'm afraid our evening at the ball didn't do much to persuade her that my acquaintance was worth keeping. I was quite a miserable escort, being, as I was, somewhat distracted."

"Were you still in love with me?"

"I never stopped loving you, Minerva," he said quietly. "Not for a moment. I had resigned myself to living without you, though."

"Why?"

"Because I thought it would be better for you."

"Oh, Albus," she said. "What's better for me is to be with the wizard I love, not settling for something else. And from now on, why don't you let me worry about what's best for me?"

"Minerva..." he began, but she interrupted him.

"Hush, Albus. I understand why you felt that way then, but I'm a grown woman now. You aren't responsible for safeguarding my well-being."

"But I do care about it. Quite deeply."

"That's lovely...and I care about yours...but why don't we agree that neither of us will make a decision about the other's welfare without a bit of consultation *hmm?*"

"Fair enough," he said, and she kissed him quickly.

"Now, breakfast," she said.

They had a quiet meal in the hotel dining room, then set off to explore the wonders of the Quiraing. They used their brooms, which they had Shrunk and concealed in the picnic basket, to traverse the most difficult terrain and hiked among the slopes and rocks when it suited them.

The morning was clear and provided a beautiful view of some of the outer islands of the Hebrides, and they stopped for a picnic lunch in a strange, flat expanse of grass nestled between the cliffs and known as "The Table". By the time they finished, the sky had turned grey, and great pockets of frigid fog had formed among the rocks and escarpments, giving the area a mysterious, ghostly feeling.

They stopped to rest at the cairn that lay just below a series of bluffs in a clearing that afforded a fine view of the bay and beyond, or would have done, had it not been shrouded in mist.

"This is indescribable," Minerva said.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" said Albus. "My parents brought us here when we were small...I was eight, I think, and I've remembered it always. It's just as I remembered. I wanted you to see it."

"Thank you. Really."

"I'm happy to share it with you. I want to share every wonderful thing I've ever seen with you."

"I want that too," she said, "to share things with you."

He kissed her then, and they didn't speak again for a time.

They got back to the hotel as dusk was turning over into dark, and cleaned up before having a sumptuous dinner. Each settled down before the fire in their room with a book, Minerva with her new copy of *Theories of Transubstantial Transfiguration*, and Albus with a slightly battered-looking copy of *Ulysses*.

When Minerva asked him about his book, he said, "I've been trying to read this for the past three years. Haven't managed it yet."

At her raised eyebrow, he continued, "Whenever I get a bit of time to read for pleasure, I find I have to return to an earlier part of the book. It's a bit ... dense."

"Why not try something easier, if you're reading for pleasure, then?"

"Oh, I try to read everything that's been banned."

"Banned?"

"Yes. The English Muggle authorities have banned it on the grounds of obscenity," he told her. "I don't think I've reached the salient part yet, though. So far, it's not especially obscene."

Minerva just shook her head and opened her book.

They read for two hours before Albus tossed his book aside, declaring himself unable to keep his eyes open any longer, so they went to bed. He was asleep by the time she emerged from the bathroom, and she slipped in between the sheets carefully, trying not to disturb him.

They woke late the next morning and had to hurry to get to breakfast before the dining room closed. After packing their things, Albus paid the bill...refusing to let Minerva contribute, which irritated her...and they set off down the road, having told the desk clerk that they didn't need a ride back to Portree, as a friend would be meeting them just outside the hotel grounds.

Just before they Apparated back to Hogsmeade, Albus said, "I'm sorry we couldn't stay longer, but the Wizengamot is in session tomorrow morning. The weather forecast called for stormy skies in Northern Scotland this afternoon, so it's best we go back now, before it becomes too dangerous to Apparate."

"Don't apologise. This was a lovely treat. Thank you."

He looked at her for a few moments, then said, "You know, Minerva, if you don't have to be anywhere this afternoon, we could still spend the day together. Maybe even the night."

"At Hogwarts?" she asked, surprised. She had never spent the night with him in the Headmaster's quarters, as it had always seemed too risky. He was all too often called from his bed to attend to some matter of importance, either to the school or to the Ministry.

"No," he answered, "but there is somewhere we can go."

"Where?"

"Trust me," he said, prompting her to roll her eyes. He laughed and said, "If you would be so kind as to take your charming feline form, my lady, we can get started."

She looked at him sceptically, then disappeared. In the spot she had occupied was a tabby cat with peculiar black markings around its eyes. He Shrank both their valises and put them in his coat pocket, then lifted her, tucking her firmly under his arm, and spun away into the darkness.

When they landed moments later in a lane in Hogsmeade, it had turned unseasonably cold and was snowing lightly. "I shall need to put you down a moment, my tabby friend," he said, depositing her on the ground. She shivered as her paws met the light dusting of snow that already covered the street.

Albus used his wand to Transfigure his Muggle clothes back to a set of wizard's robes and a proper cloak, then scooped Minerva up and put her against his chest, buttoning the cloak up to his neck, concealing her.

"Warmer?" he asked, and she gave a muffled meow.

"Good," he said and set off down the street. Five minutes later, he was standing in a muddy lane, facing a dodgy-looking building bearing a mouldering sign featuring the porcine likeness of the inn's namesake.

"The Hog's Head?" asked a re-transformed Minerva, shaking her head in disbelief, after he had spoken briefly to Aberforth, carried her, still concealed in his cloak, to a bedroom above the tavern, and released the tabby, jumping back to avoid the angry swipe of her paw.

"Why not, my love? It's cheap, it's discreet, and I have an 'in', as they say, with the innkeeper. We can stay here...have a little privacy until I have to go back."

She looked around the room, obviously unimpressed with the housekeeping arrangements.

"I'm guessing there are no house-elves employed at the Hog's Head," she said, her lips thinning with disapproval.

"No, my dear, that's one of its many charms."

"And won't your brother wonder what you're up to in here?" She certainly wasn't keen on Aberforth Dumbledore knowing that they were together in a bedroom.

Albus said, "No. I simply asked him for a room in which to have an undisturbed nap on my day off. I've done it before when I've needed a short holiday from being Headmaster," he said, drawing her into his arms.

Her misgivings about the location dissolved as he touched her.

They made love most of the afternoon...after she had performed three separate Scourging Charms on the bedclothes...until they were both spent. The wind had picked up, and the snow was coming down harder, and she was glad to be huddled there in bed with him...even at the Hog's Head...rather than sitting by the fire at Charity's.

As they lay together, he noticed goose bumps on her skin and pulled the rough blankets and threadbare quilt up over her shoulders.

~oOo~

Tom brushed aside the cobwebs as he stepped out of the Vanishing Cabinet. The Charms classroom was just as he remembered it had been when that arse, Herbert Burke, had been his professor. He hadn't learned much from Burke, joke of a teacher that he had been, but Tom had to admit the one thing he *had* learned was very useful. It had been worth his while to conceal his contempt and cultivate the Charms master. He had known it the day Burke had shown him, in confidence, the magical cabinet that allowed the professor to travel from Hogwarts to his London flat undetected, and Tom had known that one day he would use it, without knowing what he would use it for.

He had recently acquired its brother from the aged and doddering former Charms master just before the man's seemingly untimely death, persuading Madoc Borgin to keep it in the shop and instructing him to tell anyone who recognised the rare object for what it was that he had got it from his late partner, Caractacus Burke, who had been Herbert Burke's brother. Borgin was under strict orders not to sell the cabinet.

Everything was falling into place.

Tom moved swiftly and silently, apparently unseen as he moved through corridors that were largely deserted with the Easter holidays. When he reached the seventh floor, he stopped near the tapestry and pictured what he needed. He smiled when the door appeared, and then went through it.

The room was just as he remembered it, full of towering stacks of broken furniture, knickknacks, and other detritus discarded over centuries.

He prowled around the room for a few minutes until he located what he was seeking. The Petrified body of the young Squib he had smuggled into the school all those years ago...enticed there with promises of carnal delights, the fool...was still in the stained cabinet, exactly where he had left it when the Squib had outlived its usefulness to him. The magical experiments he had performed on the young man had rendered him as mindless as he was gormless, and Tom had grown tired of having to feed and water and cleanse the thing regularly. Still, he had been delighted when he discovered the Basilisk's gaze could Petrify rather than kill. The Petrified might be useful, he had mused, in much the same way an army of Inferi could be...foot soldiers who could be stored away and brought out only when needed, requiring little in the way of maintenance, other than a convenient place to stash them. And they wouldn't smell as bad as their Undead counterparts.

Looking at the fellow's empty face now, fourteen years later, Tom decided to Transfigure him into something less likely to arouse suspicion in the unlikely event someone else gained access to the Room. He drew his wand and Transfigured the Squib's body into an ugly bust similar to many others that lined the corridors of Hogwarts.

Nothing of note to see, he thought as he looked at it. He placed it on a cupboard, and with a small smile, he Transfigured an old book into a blonde wig and put it on the bust.

Serves you right, you little poof. Didn't you tell me you usually went for blondes? Tom smiled at his own wit for a moment. Then his mood turned serious.

He put his hand into his robes and drew out the diadem. It was beautiful, and he could feel the unique magic of his own soul pulsing through it almost like a heartbeat. It was hard to put it down, so he held it for a moment, running a white finger lovingly along its circlet, before placing it reverently atop the bust. It was beautiful.

He frowned.

Too beautiful.

He drew his wand, and with a shiver of reluctance, cast a spell that dulled the jewels and tarnished the silver so that it appeared to be nothing more than a bit of costume frippery.

Tom stepped back to admire his handiwork. It was good. Nobody would ever suspect that this grotesque joke concealed one of the most powerful magical objects any living witch or wizard had ever seen.

Exiting the Unknowable Room, he didn't bother to Disillusion himself. Let Dumbledore know that his beloved Hogwarts was not so impenetrable as he thought. If caught, Tom would pretend he was here on official business...to enquire after a post.

Besides, he had a bit of unfinished business to take care of.

It had been Myrtle, of all people, who had alerted him to the existence of the Unknowable Room all those years ago. She had been a nuisance, an ugly, whiny third-year Ravenclaw, but he had needed an introduction to the Grey Lady, who spoke only with members of the House she represented. Tom had been certain he could get the ghost to speak with him if only he could get a Ravenclaw to vouch for him. So he had gritted his teeth and cultivated Myrtle, lending a sympathetic-seeming ear to her petty

troubles, and a firm, manly shoulder to cry on. He told her his "secrets"...that he too was lonely and an outcast due to his orphan upbringing. He confided with genuine-seeming chagrin that the only toys he had had as a child were the ones he had "borrowed" from other orphans lucky enough to have a bit of money left to them. He also told her of his "shame" when Dumbledore had discovered his pilfered treasures when he visited Tom at Wool's Orphanage.

It was then that she told him of the Room.

"I found it by accident one day when Olive was tormenting me about my clothes," she had whispered. "I took something of hers...that fancy hair clip she wore to the Yule Ball. I wasn't going to keep it," she added quickly, "I just wanted to try it on, but she discovered it was missing and set all the girls to looking for it. I was desperate for a place to hide it, and I was going to put it behind that tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy...you know, until I could return it safely...but he made such a terrible fuss, I thought I would be caught, but then a door just appeared out of nowhere!"

Tom had insisted she show him, which she did, of course.

It was purely by chance that unlovely, love-struck Myrtle had discovered the Room just when Tom was looking for a place in which to conduct his extra-curricular experiments. When they entered the Room together, it was immediately clear that the room was seldom, if ever, used. The dust and thick cobwebs festooning the piles of junk like party streamers told him so. It was perfect for his needs.

When Myrtle assured him that she had told no one else of its existence, her fate had been sealed.

Tom had made one error, however: he hadn't counted on her becoming a Hogwarts ghost. It was a youthful oversight for which he had cursed himself on numerous occasions since, and now he fully intended to rectify it. He had thought long and hard about how to tie up this particular loose end, and after some research, he had settled on a relatively simple Memory Charm. He thought it would work on ghosts. If not, he could always summon the Basilisk and try Petrifying her.

His research had told him that the Basilisk's gaze appeared to operate on the conscious itself rather than by simply inhibiting the other, physical functions, such as nerve impulse or muscle movement, unlike the various charms and hexes to immobilise or render a subject unconscious.

In *Entretiens Sur la Magie et la Métaphysique*, Malebranche had opined that the Petrification produced by a Basilisk was a state of a-consciousness rather than unconsciousness, divorcing the conscious, if not the soul itself, from the body. Malebranche had of course attributed this to the Basilisk's gaze separating the victim temporarily from God's grace...which was, he claimed, what made the Basilisk a Dark creature...and putting the physical form into stasis. It could not be undone by a simple counter-spell. Only magic that operated on the same dualistic plane could recover a victim from Petrification.

That buffoon, Slughorn, had unfortunately found a text that described a restorative potion made from the root of a quasi-sentient plant, thus rescuing those who had been Petrified the year Tom had found the Chamber of Secrets. It had been infuriating, but it had also taught Tom a valuable lesson: sometimes simple magic was best. The Memory Charm would be safer for this "loose end"...no potion could undo it.

As he was exiting the bathroom, having achieved his aim, satisfied that Myrtle's ghost would never *could* never...reveal what she once had known, he was confronted by Filius Flitwick and his wand. Putting his hands agreeably in the air and ignoring the small wizard's enquiry as to how he had got in, Tom replied smoothly that he had hoped to see his old mentor, Horace Slughorn.

"Professor Slughorn is away for the holiday," Flitwick said.

"What a pity. But since I've come all this way, perhaps I might see the Headmaster. He and I have some business to discuss."

Flitwick narrowed his eyes, keeping his wand arm tensed and ready. "The Headmaster is unavailable. I am Deputy Head...perhaps you'd care to discuss your business with me."

"No, I'm afraid I cannot. Will you let the Headmaster know I'm waiting to see him? I feel certain he will be anxious to see me."

Flitwick said nothing for a few moments, and Tom knew the wizard was carefully weighing the pros and cons of simply throwing him out or fetching Dumbledore from wherever the old man was holed up.

"If you'll come with me," Flitwick said finally, "you may wait in my office while I alert the Headmaster."

"Thank you," Tom said pleasantly.

Chapter Forty-Three

Chapter 43 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"Yes. I believe I will."

Albus and Minerva were awakened by a tapping at the dirty window. Albus rose, slipped on his outer robe, and used his wand to clear the frost from the windowpane. Seeing who their unexpected visitor was, he opened it, and Fawkes fluttered in, angrily shaking the snow off his feathers, obviously put out at having to fly in weather so hostile to his beautiful plumage.

"What brings you here, my friend?" Albus asked the phoenix.

Fawkes trilled and held out a small roll of parchment that he held in his talons. Albus unrolled it with a frown, which darkened as he read.

"What is it?" asked Minerva, sitting up and yawning. "Trouble at the school?"

"A bit," he replied, Scourgifying himself to rid his body of the most obvious signs of their activities. "I need to go back for just a little while."

When she began to get up, he crossed to her quickly and put a hand on her shoulder. "No, no. This shouldn't take long. Stay here and relax. I'll be back in an hour or so. Please don't leave the room until I return."

Minerva was silent for a few moments as he collected and donned the remainder of his clothing and smoothed his hair and beard with a quick spell.

"Why am I not to leave the room, Albus," she asked. "Has something happened?"

"Nothing serious, my dear. I just want to take up where we left off when I return." He went to the bed and kissed her quickly. "And of course, you daren't risk being seen so soon after I leave."

"I can always transform. Nobody..."

"No," he said, more sharply than he intended. Making an effort to soften his voice, he said, "Please, just stay here and relax and wait for me. It's only that I have an appointment I seem to have forgotten...I just need to see to it, then I'll be back and we can finish our lovely holiday, *hmm?*"

"All right," she said, settling back against the pillows. Her eyes told him she didn't quite believe his story, but she apparently didn't intend to make an issue of it.

As he passed through the bar, Albus was startled to see a group of men he knew to be Death Eaters gathered at a table in the corner. He had the urge to turn around, head back up to where Minerva was waiting, and get her out of there as fast and as far as possible, but he didn't want to alert them...or her...that he had noticed anything amiss.

Seeing Aberforth come in from the back, Albus went over to the bar. He leant over to speak into his brother's ear. "It's me, Abe."

Aberforth gave a small grunt to indicate that he knew damn well who it was, despite Albus's glamour.

"Don't look over, but how long have those men in the back been here?" Albus asked.

"Bout two hours, I reckon."

"Don't let them upstairs for any reason."

"You hiding stolen Gringotts treasure up there?" Aberforth whispered back.

Albus paused a moment before whispering, "No. But Minerva is up there."

Aberforth pulled back slightly to look at his brother's disguised face. Albus gave a slight nod.

Leaning back toward Albus, Aberforth whispered, "Yeh, all right. They don't go up. Dunno why they would, any road. You want me to toss 'em out?"

"No. And I'll be back in a little while. Just keep an eye on them for me until then."

Aberforth grunted again and said loudly, "No, I don't have any ladies like that in my bar. If yer lookin' for that kind of thing, you can clear out to Knockturn Alley."

"Easy, mate," Albus said. "No 'arm in asking, is there?" He heard one of the Death Eaters give a barking laugh and was reassured that Aberforth's quick cover story had worked.

When Albus arrived at the gates to Hogwarts, an agitated Filius Flitwick was waiting for him.

"Albus!" said Filius. "I'm so glad Fawkes found you."

"I wasn't far away. And Fawkes will always find me. It is part of his magic."

As they walked the path back to the castle together, Filius said, "I'm terribly sorry to have interrupted your holiday, but I thought you'd want to know."

"You did quite right, my friend. Who saw him?"

"Sir Nicholas, actually," said Filius. "Up on the seventh floor, strangely enough, so it naturally aroused his suspicions, and he came to me immediately."

"Good man."

"I caught up with Riddle on the second floor. I have no idea what he was doing there. He said he wanted to speak to you. I told him you were busy, but he said he'd wait. I didn't think it prudent to let him know you were away from the castle."

"Yes, quite right. Where is he now?"

"I had him wait in my office."

"All right. I think it would be wise to keep the children in their Houses until we know what he's about...how many are still here?"

"About twenty-five."

"Good. Get the Heads on it. Then send him to me in my office."

"What do you think he's doing?"

"I don't know. But I intend to find out."

~oOo~

Thirteen minutes later, the expected knock came on Albus's office door.

"Enter," he said.

The door opened to reveal, as expected, Tom Riddle. Albus noted that Filius had not escorted him from the outer door.

Riddle's appearance was noticeably altered from the last time Albus had seen him. His face looked more like an Impressionist painting of the once-handsome young wizard he had been than the visage of a living, breathing man. Riddle's eyes were bloodshot, and although such a sign might have been expected had he been down at the Hog's Head drinking with his followers, Albus was certain that was not the case.

What has he done to himself? Albus asked himself, taking care not to give any sign he had noticed the changes.

"Good evening, Tom," Albus said, as if he had been expecting this visit all along. "Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you," said Riddle, taking his seat.

Riddle accepted the drink the Headmaster offered, and they got down to the business at hand.

When the two wizards had finished talking, the line had been drawn in the proverbial sand. Riddle had admitted that he was working with Dark Magic and gathering followers, and Dumbledore had let Riddle know he had been watching him and that he intended to stand against him.

After the door had shut behind Riddle, Albus slumped slightly in his chair and resisted the urge to drink down the remainder of the wine in the goblet that still sat in front of him.

The look Tom had given when he'd scoffed at the older wizard's belief in the power of love chilled Albus more thoroughly than the snow had done.

"Nothing I have seen in the world has supported your famous pronouncements that love is more powerful than my kind of magic, Dumbledore."

Riddle's words taunted him as he left his office to find Filius. He couldn't help but think it was an allusion to Minerva...a challenge of sorts. His mind flashed on the faces of those men sitting in the Hog's Head...Dolohov, Rosier, Nott, Mulciber...sitting there while Minerva lay just one floor above. Why were they there?

Albus quickened his pace.

"What did he want, Albus?" asked Filius when Albus found him in his office.

"To come to an understanding."

"And did you?"

"Yes. After a fashion." Albus thought for a few moments. "Filius, I would like you to secure all the passages into the school."

"Shall I seal them?"

"No, not yet. They have proven useful in emergencies in the past; they may do so again. But I would like to find a way to alert us when they are used. Do you think you can do that?"

"Certainly, Albus. There are several charms that I think I can combine that might do the trick."

"Good."

As Albus hurried down the path to the gates, he chastised himself.

Again. I've done it again.

Once again, someone he loved was in jeopardy because of a relationship with him.

He reached the gates, opening them with a flourish of his wand. By the time the wrought iron had clanged closed behind him, he had only one thought in his head:

Get her away.

~oOo~

When Albus stepped back into the room at the Hog's Head, Minerva was shaken by the look on his face.

"What is it, Albus?"

"Oh, nothing important, my sweet," he said, obviously lying.

She decided not to push him; she didn't want to spoil the rest of the afternoon with a quarrel. She couldn't help noticing that he had not undressed again.

"I'm afraid, though, that we'd best finish our holiday. Why don't you head back to Charity's, my love," he said too brightly after a few moments, tossing her clothes on the bed too casually. "In fact, it's stopped snowing. Why don't you go see your father? Or perhaps visit your brother in Inverness this week...you haven't seen him in ages."

His unusually ham-fisted attempt to get rid of her...not just from the inn, but from Hogsmeade...scared her.

"What's going on, why must I bugger off all of a sudden?"

"I told you, it's nothing," he answered, a hint of irritation in his voice. She noted the missing endearment.

"Albus, please don't treat me like one of the students. I don't..."

"Merlin's beard, will you just go, witch!"

Once the shock of his raising his voice to her wore off, she ripped the bedclothes down and stood up, facing him full-on. She wanted to give him good look at her nude body before she left. He wouldn't be seeing it again anytime soon, she thought, furious.

"As you wish, Headmaster," she said and began to gather up her clothes without another word. She had stepped into her knickers and was tugging up a stocking...laddering it...when she felt his hand on her arm.

"I'm sorry for shouting."

She brushed him off, then perched her leg on the bed to charm the stocking to stay put.

"Minerva, please. I can't bear it if we part in anger."

She straightened up, facing him with her hands on her hips. "Then tell me what's happened."

He knew she would not relent. He was not accustomed to being interrogated by younger witches and wizards, most of whom were intimidated by his reputation. However,

he knew that he would have to become accustomed to answering *this* witch's questions, no matter how difficult, if he wanted to be with her.

"I had a visitor at Hogwarts. Someone I had not hoped to see. And then, downstairs, there were ... Minerva, I cannot talk to you when you're half naked," he said, stalling for time.

Briskly she turned, retrieved her brassiere from the bed, stuck her arms through the straps, and fastened the back.

"Now. Talk," she said, placing her hands on her hips again.

"When I went downstairs, I saw some men in the pub."

When he didn't continue, she said, "Yes, well, I believe men have been known to gather in pubs of a Saturday afternoon. Pray, continue."

"I recognised some of them as followers of..." He stopped again.

This was getting stale. "Followers of what?" she asked, careful to keep the patience in her voice.

He didn't want to say, "Tom Riddle". He knew that Riddle had frightened her years ago, and she had told him that he had pestered her when he got out of school, seemingly disappearing when she rebuffed him. He also knew that Riddle was not a man to let his quarry escape easily. Albus had heard disturbing rumours of the things he did to exact revenge on those who slighted him, particularly women.

"The Dark Arts," Albus replied instead. It was true enough. "I fear there may be trouble brewing, and I'd rest easier if I knew you were far away when it erupts."

She said nothing. Her ability to remain silent was one of her greatest weapons in a fight.

"Please, Minerva. Go now, and stay away from here...away from me. I'll tell you why later. I'll come for you. Please."

His tone told her that he was deeply concerned about this mysterious "trouble", and she suspected that it had to do with her. She was damned if he could shoo her off without telling her why.

"If you'll just tell me what the problem is, I can help. Something is frightening you...I can see that...but we can face it together..."

"No, Minerva, it's best if you stay out of it. It isn't safe."

"What isn't safe?"

He just shook his head. He couldn't tell her. The less she knew about Tom Riddle, the better. If only she would go ...

"Albus, please." She looked at him for a moment then said, "I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying here until you tell me what's happened."

"I can't. It's dangerous."

"All right," she said, grabbing her other clothes, "I'll go downstairs and find out for myself."

"No! I won't have it!" A flash of ambient magic shot through the room and rattled the window in its sash.

Minerva stood, staring at the man she loved, understanding they had reached a stalemate. He would not relent. He was too frightened, and that frightened her.

She could accede to his wishes and leave, knowing that he would never truly come for her...that he would always push her away in times of stress. She'd been down this road with him before.

Or she could defy him...go down into the bar and try to discover what the trouble was. That is, if he allowed her to go. He could fairly easily restrain her with his more powerful magic. If that happened, she thought, their relationship would be forever broken beyond repair. Would he do it?

In later years, she would wonder if it was love or cowardice that made her decision.

"Fine," she said, almost whispering. "I'll go now. Give me a minute to get dressed and transform."

The sudden and terrible paleness of her face and the way her eyes hardened robbed him of any sense of relief that she was going.

He forced himself to speak: "When I've sorted this out...when I've made sure everything is safe again, I'll come get you. It won't be long, Minerva. I swear."

"A man o' words, and no o' deeds, is like a garden fu' o' weeds," she said, and bent to pull on her other stocking.

"You know I can't understand you when you speak Highlands," he said, hoping that his feeble attempt at humour might soften her.

She charmed the stocking into place and rounded on him.

"It means, Albus, that I don't believe you."

Her words stunned him. "I only want to make sure you're safe. It's just for a little while. Please believe me."

She was suddenly Medea confronting Jason. "No, Albus Dumbledore, you will not do this to me again! You say, 'only for a little while,' then you'll find another reason to push me away. There will always be a reason it isn't safe for us to be together. Your obsessive belief that you're the victim of some kind of curse-by-proxy is just a convenient excuse to keep your fears locked away rather than having to face them down. Well, this time, I think I'd prefer to leave you to them rather than wait for you to abandon me."

He couldn't speak. For the second time in his life, he was utterly unmanned.

Her fury spent, Minerva turned to pull on her dress. When she turned back again, searching for her shoes, she was crying. It frightened him in a way that even confronting Gellert Grindelwald had not done. She was not a girl...*woman*, he corrected himself for the thousandth time...given to weeping.

The danger had shifted with the violence of an earthquake. The threat that Riddle and his Death Eaters might be planning to harm her was suddenly matched by the fact that he was losing her...allowing his fears to destroy her trust and her love. He took her by the shoulders and looked into her pooling eyes, willing her to see how much he loved her.

"I *will* come for you. I have no intention of abandoning you," he said. If she had been a Legilimens, she would have seen a dizzying mixture of love, need, and terror inside the great wizard's mind.

"My resignation will be on your desk in the morning, Headmaster," she said without breaking.

She gently removed his hands from her arms and turned to go.

"No!" he cried. The door she had pulled open slammed shut on its own.

"Let me go," she said, her face crumpling.

"Not until I've said this," he replied. "You're right about me. I am a coward. The idea of you in danger terrifies me. That was why I broke with you just before your graduation, and that's why I've tried to send you away today. I'm a coward, yes. And a fool. But even an old fool like me can learn. Teach me, Minerva. Turnabout is fair play; I helped you learn to transform, now it's your turn to help me. Teach me to be as strong and brave as you are, my Viking warrior queen."

"That's a pretty speech, Professor. I only wish I could be certain you meant it," she said. But she made no move to leave.

"I do mean it. If you will go, just for tonight, I'll come for you tomorrow, and I'll tell you what's happening."

Her face hardened again, and he could see she didn't believe him. He was desperate. He said, "I will not leave you. I will never leave you." She had to believe him. He had to make her believe.

She just shook her head.

Realising that his life was about to slip away unless he acted, he said, "I hadn't intended to do it like this. I had rather a lovely proposal planned ..."

"Albus?"

He took her by the shoulders again. "But the best-laid schemes of mice and men oft go awry, if I may borrow a few lines from your one of your countrymen."

"An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain, for promis'd joy," she whispered as he bent to kiss her, and she realised she was trembling.

He murmured against her lips, "Marry me, Minerva."

She pulled away and looked at him, searching his face.

He repeated, louder, "Marry me."

He waited, enduring a silence that seemed to stretch for aeons.

"Yes." She spoke with finality, as if affirming it to herself rather than to him. "I believe I will."

His heart finally resumed its normal rhythm.

It was his turn to tremble as she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him while a tiny sliver of time stood still.

When she had released his lips, she cocked an eyebrow at him and said, "Viking warrior queen' was a bit much."

They both laughed for a moment, and the sense of relief was nearly overwhelming.

Then she asked softly, "Will you tell me now what the trouble is? I'll go, if that's what you still want me to do, but can you just tell me why first?"

He drew her over to the bed and they sat down on the side of it.

"Tom Riddle came to see me today," he said.

"Tom? What for?"

"Ostensibly, it was to ask for a job, but I think it was really meant as a declaration of war."

"What do you mean?"

He forced himself to tell her then, all of it...about his suspicions and about Tom's visit. He told her about Mortimer Borgin and Alastor Moody, and some...but not all...of the rumours he had heard about Lord Voldemort and his followers, and the activities they supposedly engaged in. He told her of his worries when he had seen Riddle's followers downstairs.

"You can't think they were here because of me. Nobody knows I'm here," she said.

"I know. But I was afraid they might find out...Riddle seems to have a way of knowing things he shouldn't."

"Yes, I remember," she said. "But what do you think it has to do with me?"

"Possibly nothing. But from what you've told me, he was rather obsessed with you, and I don't think he's a man to let bygones be bygones. I'd just feel better if you were not here in case his followers get up to some of their antics. Since it's the holidays, it wouldn't be odd for you to take a few days in Caithness or Inverness, would it?"

"No," she allowed. "But what are you going to do?"

"Watch. Wait. Intervene, if they act to harm anyone in any way. I cannot control what they do in London or elsewhere, but I won't have it in my backyard."

"All right. I'll go see my father and brother for a day or two, if it would make you feel better."

"It would. And you can think about what you'd like to do for a wedding," he added with a grin.

"Oh, a wedding. I'm not sure I can manage that."

"Really?"

"All that fuss ... I think I'd rather just marry you in a register office."

"Suit yourself, but won't your family object? I should think your father would like to see his daughter married properly."

"Maybe," she said vaguely. "It's too much to consider at the moment."

"Of course your father will probably hex my bollocks off when he hears about it."

"I doubt it. He'll probably just die of shock."

"Now that's a cheery thought."

"Anyway, I don't want to tell him without you. Why don't you owl when you're finished with whatever you think needs doing here. Then you can come to collect me, and

we'll have dinner with my father and grandmother."

"If you like," he said.

"I do."

He kissed her again, then said, "We should go. I'll head down first...make sure everything is all right...then, if you don't hear from me, you can transform and go in, say, ten minutes?"

"All right," she agreed, and kissed him again. "Be careful."

"And you."

Minerva spent the ten minutes trying not to think about everything that had transpired that afternoon. She'd go to her father's, and then she'd think about it tomorrow, when her head was clearer.

She debated what to do with her valise, then Shrank it and opened the door. She popped into her tabby form, then took the miniature valise between her teeth and set off through the hallway and down the stairs into the bar area. She was out the door before any of the patrons noticed her. Padding quickly through the snowy lane, intent on getting to Charity's to collect a few things before Apparating to Caithness, she didn't notice the hooded figure hidden in the shadows opposite the inn.

Chapter Forty-Four

Chapter 44 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"If you were interested in doing what you should about Minerva, you'd have let her alone in the first place."

Thorfinn McGonagall was surprised and delighted when his daughter arrived on his doorstep.

"Why, Minerva! I didn't expect ye, but I'm awfully glad to see ye." Seeing her bag, he asked, "Are ye come to stay?"

"I thought I might for a few days, if it isn't inconvenient," she said. "My plans changed a bit, and I thought I'd take the opportunity to come see you."

He pulled her into a tight hug. "And a wonderful surprise it is, too."

When she had settled her few things in her old bedroom, she went downstairs to find her father and grandmother sitting in the library enjoying a bit of elf-made wine. She was heartened to see how much better her grandmother looked than the last time she had seen her.

As they talked of this and that, Minerva's mind was only half on the conversation. The third time she didn't respond to a question her grandmother had asked, Thorfinn and Morna looked at one another in surprise. Thorfinn leant across the tea table and caught his daughter by the chin, giving it an affectionate shake.

"You're a million miles away, lass. Anything ye want to talk about?" he asked.

"What? ... Oh, I'm sorry, Da. I guess it's just been a busy week, and I haven't quite left it behind yet. What were you asking?"

"Your grandmother was asking if you'd given any thought to what you're going to do over the summer holidays."

"Oh," Minerva said with a sheepish look at her gran. "I hadn't really thought. I suppose I can just stay at Charity's."

"Nonsense!" cried Morna. "Thorfinn, tell her she's to come home at summer holidays."

"Of course, Minerva. We'd love ye to come back here over the summer," said Thorfinn. "Unless ye get a better offer, that is," he said with a wink.

"Oh, Da," Minerva said. "Of course I'll come back here, at least for a little while. I'll probably need to think about finding a house near the school. It seems as if I'll be staying."

"Well, that's wonderful news!" said Thorfinn. "Has Dumbledore asked ye to stay on?"

Minerva had to stifle a smile. "Not in so many words, but he did say that he thought my contract would be renewed if I wanted it."

"And do you?" asked Morna.

"Yes. I've really grown to like teaching."

"And what about your research?" asked Thorfinn. "Will ye be able to do any of it while you're at Hogwarts?"

"Yes, Da. The contract stipulates that I can use Hogwarts's laboratories for my own research, provided I sign a royalty-sharing agreement."

"Ye should have a solicitor look at it before ye sign away your rights," said Thorfinn.

"It's not really any different from what I had to sign at Oxford."

"All the same," said Thorfinn. "I can have Maxwell have a look at it when the time comes."

Maxwell MacLaughlin was Minerva's mother's cousin and had acted as the family solicitor for many years.

"All right, Da, thank you," said Minerva, knowing it was easier to give in than to argue this point. Changing the subject, she said, "By the way, I'd like to ask Albus up for dinner one evening this week, if that suits you."

"Of course," said Thorfinn. "Any evening ye like."

"Thank you." Minerva noticed the look that had passed between her father and grandmother.

Later, when she was lying in bed in her old room, Minerva allowed the shock of everything that had happened that day to wash over her. She had been so close to walking away from Albus, to acquiescing to his desire to push her away out of fear. Instead, she had agreed to bind herself to him in a way that she had never really considered or intended.

Minerva had never thought much about marriage, at least not in connection with herself. She had never particularly aspired to having a husband or children, preferring to focus on her academic and career interests. When Doug McLaggen had asked her to marry him, she had been taken aback. She had...naïvely, she realised...assumed they would simply go on as they had done, never stopping to consider that he might want more out of their relationship. When he had presented her with his ring and his question, she had been forced to consider for the first time what she wanted from the relationship, and it hadn't been what Doug wanted.

And now?

She and Albus had never talked about marriage, except as an abstract idea back during their first affair when he had enumerated the many things he couldn't give her but that he seemed to think she should want.

Minerva recognised that his proposal had been an act of desperation. And what had her acceptance been? The same, perhaps, she thought. She loved him, of that she was certain. And she wanted to be with him, whatever the circumstances. If the price of having him as her partner was also being his wife, it was one she thought she could happily pay. It would certainly make things less difficult should the Hogwarts governors somehow get wind of their relationship. Any tempest that might arise if and when others discovered their relationship would be considerably lessened if it were discovered that she was the Headmaster's wife rather than his lover.

Still, she didn't harbour any illusions that marriage to Albus Dumbledore would be easy. He was a complicated man, and, for all his apparent chivalry, he was a man used to having others do his bidding. She was a woman used to being her own mistress, and it had been her chafing under Griselda Marchbanks's bit that had pushed her back to Hogwarts in the first place. It was just as well, she supposed, that she and Albus would be living apart for the foreseeable future. Merlin knew she loved him with her entire being, but she didn't want to lose herself in being with him.

~oOo~

Albus spent the two days following that eventful afternoon in a state of quiet apprehension. He turned the school mostly over to Filius during that time and spent hours checking the enchantments that protected the castle and its environs, testing and palpating its magic, to reassure himself that all was in order.

He brooded over the fact that Tom Riddle had managed to get into the castle undiscovered, and he cursed himself for his lackadaisical attitude towards the several secret passages that existed between Hogwarts and the outside. He had occasionally checked on them during his time as deputy, at Armando's behest, and it had always appeared that they had been forgotten for years. There had never been any physical disturbance nor any sign of magical activity to indicate that anyone had used them, and he and Armando had thought this meant that none of the era's students had discovered them.

Stupid. Complacent, he thought now.

As he had told Filius, he wasn't quite ready to stop them all up yet. Over its long history, Hogwarts had come under attack or served as a refuge from outside strife on enough occasions to convince him that having more than one way in or out of the castle was prudent. The school was a touchstone in the British wizarding world. In the centuries since its founding, it had come to pass that the majority of witches and wizards from England, Scotland, Wales, and even Ireland had entrusted their children to its care. It was a testament to the fortitude, character, and skills of Heads and teachers past that, in times of uncertainty and unrest, many grown mages looked at Hogwarts as their safe haven and to its guardians as their protectors.

I have failed in my trust, Albus thought as he trudged again through the passage behind the fourth-floor mirror, looking for signs of recent use. *I have let evil walk right into this place.*

He was thankful, not for the first time nor the last, that Filius had come to Hogwarts. There was not, Albus thought, a more powerful or skilled Charms master in all of Europe...maybe the world. Filius hid his strength behind a genial demeanour, but there was a core of steel underneath. If anyone could devise stronger enchantments to protect and guard the castle and all its inhabitants, it would be the diminutive man Albus had met all those years ago. And no one, he thought, would defend it more fiercely or ably.

From the moment he had learnt of Armando's death...and before, if truth be told...Albus had been formulating a plan. He intended to seek out and engage, if at all possible, not only the best teachers, but the most powerful witches and wizards he could find. The upheavals of the Grindelwald wars, and Albus's growing suspicions about Dark activity even closer to home, had convinced him that Hogwarts needed their power and that he himself needed their allegiance. Allegiance was far easier to secure when one's allies were also one's employees, and especially if they lived with one day in, day out.

That had been in the back of his mind when he had urged Armando to hire Julian Meadowes after the retirement he had tried and failed to talk Galatea Merrythought out of. If Julian didn't have quite Galatea's prowess with practical defence, there wasn't a wizard around who knew more about Dark Magic and, Albus thought, who wouldn't necessarily be averse to using it for good, should it come down to it. Meadowes shared Albus's opinion on the importance of intent in determining the ultimate outcome of any spell, and men who thought that way were rare. Julian had also been desperate for work, given his situation...with a foreign-born and magically untrained wife who had been horribly damaged by the recent war, and a young son who was showing no sign of magic...and he was unlikely to find decent employment in the private sector, given his reputation for obsession with what everyone considered evil spells. His gratitude at Albus's intervention in securing him the post at Hogwarts all but ensured that he would be willing to walk through fire for his benefactor.

Of course, Albus hoped it would never come to that.

And Minerva.

She was powerful. Probably the most powerful mage...witch or wizard...he had ever encountered besides himself. More powerful than Gellert, he thought, and probably more powerful than Riddle, although the latter seemed intent on stretching the boundaries of his already-potent magic in ways that Minerva, thank the gods, would not. He shuddered to think what might have come to pass had Minerva McGonagall elected to ally herself with Tom Marvolo Riddle. Albus thought...no, he *knew*...that Riddle's interest in her all those years ago had run along those lines, and he suspected that his apparent continuing interest was at least in part to prevent her from joining forces with Albus himself. He had frightened and intimidated the boy Riddle had been, but their recent interview had shocked Albus at how much the young man had changed since then.

Tom Riddle was no longer afraid of Albus Dumbledore.

Why?

Talented and powerful though he was, Riddle was still not a match for Albus magically. Albus could fell him with a few strokes of his wand...his duel with Gellert had shown him that he was capable of blasting through even the strongest of protective charms...yet Tom had come right into Albus's territory like a male Horntail challenging a rival for cow's favours.

Regardless of why, Albus reminded himself, the question of the moment was *how*? And more importantly, how to prevent it happening again.

Once he had satisfied himself that the secret passages were undisturbed, he applied a glamour and went into Hogsmeade.

He spent an afternoon and overnight patrolling the village, looking for signs of Death-Eater activity, and found nothing. The following day, he removed his glamour and trudged down the muddy lane to his brother's pub.

He stood at the bar until Aberforth appeared from the back, looking unsurprised to see his elder brother.

"Do you have a minute?" asked Albus.

Aberforth gave a rough nod and shouted to the three patrons sitting at separate tables, "Oi! I need to take a piss. You lot stay away from the back of my bar...I've got charms that'll lose you your fingers if they touch my liquor or my till. Got it?"

The lack of response seemed to reassure him, and he gestured Albus to follow him up the stairs.

When they got to the private sitting room, Aberforth said, "Those tossers left the same day they come in, if that's what you want to know. Paid their bill and didn't bother anyone, leastways, not here. If they did anything else, I didn't hear about it, and I would have."

"Thank you. I appreciate your keeping an eye out."

The brothers looked at one another for a few moments before Aberforth said, "If that's it, I've got a bar to run."

"Actually, Abe, there was one other thing I wanted to discuss with you."

"Yeah? Well hurry up about it. I was lying about those charms."

"I wanted to ask if you would have any objection to my giving Mother's ring to Minerva."

Aberforth's eyes narrowed as he peered at his brother. "Pull the other one."

"I'm quite serious."

Aberforth snorted. "She agreed?"

"She did."

"She up the duff?" Aberforth asked, one corner of his mouth turning up at the look on his brother's face.

Albus's temper flared for a moment, then he tamped it back down almost automatically. This was a dance he had done with his brother many times, and each knew the steps by heart. "No," he said simply.

"Silly chit," muttered Aberforth.

"Be that as it may," said Albus coolly, "my question remains. May I give the ring to Minerva?"

"What the hell are you asking me for?"

"The ring belongs to you as much as it does me."

"That's a lie," spat Aberforth. "You were the one named in the will...you got everything except my share in the house."

"Yes, but you know as well as I do that Mother's intention was that I should use the money to care for you and... to care for you, and that anything else should be divided between us."

It was several moments before Aberforth spoke again. "That ring was meant for Ariana."

It took all Albus's strength to keep any slivers of his magic from escaping the confines of his body and pinging around the room, as had occasionally happened when he was under great strain as a young man.

"Yes," he said. "But she's gone."

Aberforth's mouth twitched for just a second, then he said through clenched teeth, "I know that as well as anyone," and Albus knew the contest was over. He had won. What the prize was, however, was something neither of them could have said.

"Yes. I know you do," said Albus softly. "And if you don't want me to give the ring to Minerva, I shan't. It can stay in the vault forever, if that's what you want."

The brothers glared at one another. It was Aberforth who broke first. He pulled a grey rag from his belt and began to push the dirt around the grimy table with it.

"*Gah!* Go on and give it to her, then, and much good may it do you. If she's smart, she'll toss it right back in yer face, but I reckon she thinks she's in love."

"Thank you," said Albus. "I think Mother would be pleased to know it had been passed on."

"Mebbe. Any road, I haven't any use for a wedding ring." He gave the table a few more angry swipes. "When you going to marry her?"

"We haven't decided yet," said Albus, relieved that the discussion of their mother's ring was apparently finished.

"Giving her time to back out, then, are you?"

"Don't you think I should?"

"*Heh.* If you were interested in doing what you should about Minerva, you'd have let her alone in the first place."

"Very probably."

Aberforth tucked the dirty rag back into his belt. "Need to get back to the bar."

"Yes," said Albus. As Aberforth passed through the door, he added, "And thank you."

He received no reply.

Later that afternoon, Albus Apparated to Diagon Alley and went to Gringotts to collect his mother's wedding ring from the Dumbledore family vault, where it had been since his father's imprisonment in Azkaban nearly sixty-six years previously. He had to light his wand to see it in the dim light deep in the bowels of the bank's enchanted vaults. The ring was a simple, wide band of yellow gold with a Runic inscription that ran around the outside surface. Albus cast a quick spell to polish it. The inscription on the inner surface was nearly illegible with wear, but Albus knew well enough what it said: *P.W.D. to K.B.M. 10 October 1875*. He thought he would charm the inscription to replace it with his and Minerva's initials and the date of their wedding, once it was determined.

When he had returned to Hogwarts, he owed Minerva at her father's home to enquire when it might be convenient for him to visit.

His owl returned the same evening with Minerva's invitation to come to dinner the following evening, and if he were able and so inclined, to spend the night at Castle Isleif. Her father and grandmother would be delighted to see him, she wrote.

The next morning, Albus made an apologetic request to Filius to mind the castle for another day or two. He had business in Caithness.

Chapter Forty-Five

Chapter 45 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"Are you going to tell me that it's the old man's blue eyes and the way he whispers sweet nothings in your ear that make you want him?"

Minerva Apparated to the tiny wizarding High Street in Inverness, conjured an umbrella, and Transfigured her cloak into a plain mackintosh before stepping beyond the street's concealing charms and into the rain that had been falling steadily since noon.

She walked to the Muggle bookseller where she had asked Albus to meet her so she could Apparate them back to Caithness. She was a little early, so she spent a few minutes browsing through the stalls and was surprised to find a book entitled *Alchemy*, by an Eric John Holmyard. She leafed through it for a few minutes and decided to buy it; a Muggle perspective on the magical science might be very interesting. She took the book to the desk and paid the Muggle money..."one pound, twelve and two," the clerk said...and took the package.

She was looking at a shelf of poetry when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned to see Albus, his hair and beard shortened by a glamour, wearing a long Muggle coat and homburg. Her heart gave the by-now familiar flutter, as it had done every time she'd seen him since around the time she'd turned seventeen.

"Hello," he said.

"Well, hello," she answered.

"Find anything interesting?" he asked, looking at the shelf in front of them.

"Not really. Just the usual...two rows of Robbie Burns and a half row of everything else."

"No Willie McGonagall?" he asked, earning himself a glare. "But you did find something," he said, indicating her parcel.

"Yes. A book on alchemy, actually."

His eyebrows went up. "That's a surprise."

"Yes. Have a look through it when we get home. I think you'll find it interesting."

"I will, thank you."

"You may have to fight my father for it, though. It's right in his line"...she lowered her voice..."mixing Muggle and magical ideas."

"I don't think I'll be looking for anything over which to fight your father," said Albus. "He'll be liable enough to want to thump me as it is."

"Are you nervous about telling him?"

"Aren't you?" he asked, in lieu of answering her question. This time, she found it more endearing than annoying.

"A bit, I suppose. But I don't think he'll thump you, or even hex you. I just think he'll be surprised."

"Pleasantly or unpleasantly?"

"Pleasantly, I should think. It's just that we've never really talked about my getting married."

"Not even when Mr McLaggen proposed?"

"No. That wasn't something I discussed with my father. I knew right away that I couldn't marry Doug." After a moment she added, "I was still in love with someone else."

He looked around briefly. Seeing nobody nearby, he kissed her quickly.

"Shall I assume everything back in Hogsmeade is all right?" she asked.

"No sign of trouble."

"Good. Shall we go?"

They left the bookseller's and walked two blocks until they found a deserted alleyway from which to Apparate. When they emerged just outside the barrier created by the charms that protected the McGonagall home and its grounds from intruders, magical or Muggle, Albus didn't let go of Minerva's waist but pulled her to him and kissed her again. He cast a wide Impervious Charm to keep the rain off them and said, "Wait just a moment, Minerva."

She gave him a questioning look, thinking that he was hesitating out of nerves, and he slipped his hand inside the pocket of his Muggle coat to withdraw a small box. He handed it to Minerva.

"I'd like you to have this before we go in."

She took the box and opened it to reveal a gold ring. She looked up into his face and saw that he looked like a nervous little boy. Putting a gentle hand to his cheek, she said, "This is beautiful, Albus. Thank you." She hadn't even considered that he might give her a ring.

"It was my mother's, actually," he told her. "I hope you don't mind."

"No. I'm ... I'm overwhelmed that you would give this to me. Are you sure?"

"Very sure. My mother always intended to pass it on. She would want you to have it. Can you read the inscription?"

She took the ring from the box and held it close to her face, then a bit farther away, squinting. "I'm beginning to think I need glasses. Is it Runic?"

"Yes. Can you make out what it says?"

"Is this a test, Professor Dumbledore?" she asked with a wry smile.

"You did score 'Outstanding' on your Ancient Runes N.E.W.T., Miss McGonagall. Surely you can translate a simple epigraph?"

"Hmm," she said, turning the ring several times. "Futhorc, isn't it?"

"Very good, my dear. Now what does it say?"

"Give me a light from your wand, Professor, and I'll try to suss it out."

He lit the tip of his wand and held it over where she was peering at the inscription.

She translated, "*Love...I got that right off...in man ... birth ... no ... is born ... with man... death ...* no, it's a verb again ...*dies not ...* something ... *eternal.*" She stood thinking for a moment. "So, the gist of it is that love is born within us, but doesn't die when we do and is eternal. Although I'm sure there's a more elegant translation."

"Very good, Miss McGonagall. Fifty points to Gryffindor."

"Shall I put it on?"

"Yes. If you would like to, that is. My parents' initials and their wedding date are also inscribed on the interior, but I thought we could replace it with ours."

Minerva slipped the ring on her finger and put her arms around Albus's neck, kissing him. She withdrew her arms and looked down at her finger again, and said, "But, Albus, I don't dare wear it in public. It's definitely a wedding ring, and I really don't want anyone asking questions about it."

"A concealment charm should address that difficulty, don't you think?"

"Of course. Silly of me not to have thought of that. Although it's difficult to do such a focussed charm, and I am a bit rusty." She took her wand and pointed it at her finger, saying, "*Abscondito.*" The ring shimmered out of sight. She held her hand up for Albus to inspect.

"Very good. I can't see it at all," he said.

"I'll need to learn to do that one wandlessly." She took his hand. "Ready to go in?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

When they reached the entry hall, a house-elf took their wet coats, and Albus took a moment to remove the glamour from his beard and hair.

Thorfinn McGonagall greeted them at that moment, rushing in and extending his hand to Albus.

"Headmaster Dumbledore! Welcome to our home. I'm delighted ye could make it."

"I thank you for the invitation, Mr McGonagall. And please do call me Albus."

"And I'm Thorfinn," replied Minerva's father, shaking Albus's hand. "Come in. Sit by the fire in the library awhile until ye warm up. Quite a cold snap we've been having, isn't it? We've had to charm the snawdrops and the crocuses to keep them from freezing."

As they walked towards the library, Minerva leading the way, Albus said, "Yes, our Herbology master has had quite a task charming all the more delicate plants that couldn't be moved into the greenhouses. He has a Whomping Willow sapling, and I'm afraid the poor fellow has had a devil of a time getting it moved indoors. He daren't Levitate it in its current stage of development, he says, so he and our assistant groundskeeper had to do it by hand. It may still be an infant tree, but they came away with some terrific bruises."

"A Whomping Willow, you say?" came a voice from the library as they crossed the threshold.

Albus looked and saw that it had come from a tall, elegant witch with grey-streaked black hair, and he could see immediately from whom Minerva had got her upright carriage and graceful bearing.

"Albus, this is my mother-in-law, Morna MacLaughlin. Morna, please meet Albus Dumbledore," said Thorfinn.

Albus took the woman's proffered hand and kissed it. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Madam MacLaughlin."

"The pleasure is mine, Headmaster Dumbledore."

"Please call me Albus. And yes, I was mentioning to Thorfinn that Herbert Beery, our Herbology master at Hogwarts, has a Whomping Willow sapling."

"Does he?" said Morna. "I must say, that's most intriguing. I haven't seen one in ... oh, it must be since before the turn of the century."

"Gran is an amateur herbologist," Minerva explained. "Probably could have been a mistress of Herbology, had she wanted to."

"But I didn't, and that's enough about that," said Morna crisply. "Minerva, sad to say, never showed much interest in it, but my grandson often sends me interesting cuttings from wherever he's deployed. But Minerva has other talents," she added, smiling warmly at her granddaughter. "As you well know, Albus."

"Indeed," he said.

"So how did your Professor...Beery, was it?...come by the Willow?" Morna asked.

"He brought the seeds back from Persia two summers past. He wanted to see if he could grow it in our northern climate."

"That was rather daring of him," said Morna, '*Salix bruta* likes a Mediterranean climate, if I remember rightly. And it's very rare...quite a loss if it doesn't survive."

"Oh, yes," said Albus, "But Professor Beery is a most talented herbologist, and he has raised that willow as carefully as he would his own child. I doubt any newborn baby was ever tucked in as snugly as Herbert's willow."

Minerva gave slight chuckle at this, and the group turned to her. She explained, "I was just remembering Hagrid telling me about moving the tree the other day. He was being pummelled by the thing left and right, apparently, and Herbert kept following along beside him, saying, 'Careful, man, don't hurt the willow!'"

"Oh, dear," laughed Morna. "Is this Hagrid fellow all right? I understand even a young Whomping Willow can inflict some terrible damage."

"Oh, rest assured that our assistant groundskeeper is quite well. He's a very large, strong fellow, you see," said Albus.

"I should hope so," replied Morna.

The four of them talked a bit more, then, as the rain had stopped, Minerva offered to show Albus around the grounds, and the two walked out into crisp air that was fragrant by the salty winds sweeping in from the Pentland Firth about a mile beyond.

"When do you think we should tell them our news?" asked Albus as they walked.

"After dinner, I think. Da normally takes a snifter of something in the library. That's usually a good time to bring up anything important. He's always in a good mood when his belly is full."

When they had returned to the house, Minerva's grandmother had retired for a "wee lie-down", and Albus, Minerva, and Thorfinn enjoyed some lively conversation on topics ranging from music to Transfiguration science to politics. Thorfinn was quite interested in Albus's work on the International Confederation of Wizards.

"Is the Confederation going to take up the question of the International Statute for Secrecy again?" he asked.

"It would appear so," said Albus.

"Ye sound discouraged."

"Oh, not discouraged, exactly. Just ... less than optimistic that we will accomplish anything. I doubt any truly serious consideration will be given to loosening the provisions."

"So ye think the Confederation should relax the regulations."

"I do, to a degree. As it stands now, it makes any collaboration between Muggles and wizards extremely difficult, if not impossible."

"Oh, aye, I agree. When I was working on my last book...it was about the future of Muggle-wizarding relations...it proved impossible to get permission to speak to any Muggles, and nearly so to talk to Squibs and Muggle-borns who were living in the Muggle world."

"Yes, I read your book," said Albus. "I was very impressed, especially at the breadth of the material you covered."

"Well, I was fortunate to have access to some truly original thinkers, despite the obstacles," Thorfinn replied, "including, I'm not too modest to say, my own son and daughter."

Minerva said, "Oh, now ..."

"It's true, my dear," said Albus. "The chapter you wrote with the Muggle-born scientist was among the best in the book, I thought. In fact, I must say that it helped frame my own opinions on the Statute and its limitations. It reinforced for me how much further advanced both our societies would be if there were greater opportunities for collaboration."

"Yes, and I think the potential benefits are far greater for wizarding society than for Muggles," said Minerva, warming to the topic. "After all, Muggles are never going to have magic; they may benefit from new knowledge gleaned by magical means...if we are ever allowed to share it...but any practical applications that depend on magic will remain the province of wizards. Muggles will have to work out their own ways of exploiting our discoveries. Wizards and witches, on the other hand, can benefit from Muggle technology. Goodness knows we don't have magical applications for every problem, and until we can devise some, we are just as dependent on mundane technology as Muggles. It's only our inherent prejudices against non-magical methodologies that keep us from benefitting from what they've already developed."

"Just look at travel, for example. When I went to Salem, it took me five days on a ship...a Muggle ship, by the way; there aren't many wizarding ships making the crossing. We can't Apparate or Portkey over such a long distance, so mostly we don't go. But Muggles have come up with a way to cut that time to less than a day. They've been crossing the Atlantic in aeroplanes since before their last war. It only takes them about fourteen hours to get from London to New York. I'd imagine, if we would only consider learning from their technology, that we could develop versions of these aircraft and enhance them with magic. But our laws largely prohibit that kind of collaboration."

When she had finished, she realised that both men were looking at her with amusement.

"End of lecture," she said, embarrassed.

"It's something you obviously feel quite passionately about," said Albus. "And, as always, your arguments are most cogent. May I ask you to help me draft my address to the Confederation?"

"It would be an honour," said Minerva. "Oh, while we're on the topic, Da, I picked up a book in Inverness that might interest you. It's about alchemy, and it's by a Muggle...or at least, someone who has looked at it from a Muggle's vantage point. I'll leave it with you if you like, and you can owl it to me when you've finished."

"Thanks, Minerva. I'd be most interested to read it," said Thorfinn.

Just before they went in for dinner, Albus produced a bottle from the interior pocket of his voluminous robes.

"I've brought a bottle of elf-made Müller-Thurgau from Hogwarts's cellar. It's unusual but quite good, I thought. If it isn't suited to our dinner, I hope you'll consider adding it to your collection."

"I thank ye, Albus," said Thorfinn, taking the bottle. The recent excise duties have made decent elf-made wine prohibitively expensive, so this is a kingly gift. I, for one, look forward to having a bit of it with our fish. I'll just have our kitchen elf chill it, if you'll excuse me a moment."

Despite Minerva's earlier reassurances about her father's reaction to their engagement, Albus felt the tingle of nerves all throughout dinner, and they stepped up their assault on his composure when Thorfinn invited them to join him in the library for an after-dinner cognac.

As they sat talking and drinking, Albus tried to catch Minerva's eye. When there was a brief lull in the conversation, he finally succeeded, and she gave him a smile, set down her glass, stood, and crossed to where he was sitting in a worn leather club chair. To everyone's surprise, she seated herself on the arm and clasped one of Albus's hands in hers.

"I have some news," she said.

"Oh?" said Thorfinn in a tone Albus recognised. It was the one Minerva used when he told her something she already knew.

"I'm going to marry Albus."

Albus held his breath in the silence that followed, and Minerva squeezed his hand tighter in hers.

"That's news indeed!" cried Morna. "When did this come about?"

"Oh, we just decided this week," said Minerva. "But we've been seeing one another for some time."

Albus took a sidelong glance at his would-be father-in-law and was pleased to see the man's smile.

Minerva said to her father, "Aren't you going to congratulate us?"

"Och, of course, Minerva ... Kneazle just got my tongue," said Thorfinn, standing. He went to his daughter and embraced her, then offered Albus his hand.

"Congratulations, Albus," he said warmly as he shook the taller wizard's hand. "I must say, you're either a brave man or a foolish one."

"Both, I imagine," replied Albus, earning him a light smack on the elbow from his wife-to-be.

"This calls for a toast, I'm thinking," said Thorfinn crossing back to the bar trolley. "Just a moment while I top everyone up."

"Oh, no more for me, Da," said Minerva. "I'll fall over."

"Nor me," said Morna.

Thorfinn added a splash of brandy to his and Albus's glasses and raised his. "To Minerva and Albus!"

"Minerva and Albus," repeated Morna, and the group drank.

"So you see I had an ulterior motive in wrangling an invitation," said Albus.

"And a fine one it was, too," said Morna. "And when do you think you'll want to do the deed?"

"We hadn't really thought," said Minerva with a glance at Albus. "We wanted to tell you first, before deciding on a date."

"You'll have the wedding here," said Morna.

"Oh, I ... *er* ..." stammered Minerva.

"Did you have someplace else in mind?" asked Morna.

"No, it isn't that," Minerva replied. "I just ... I don't think we want a big wedding. I just thought...we just thought...we'd do it in a register office somewhere."

"A register office? Oh, Minerva, you can't," said Morna. "Not a big wedding, of course, but don't you want your family around you?"

"Of course, but..."

"Well, that settles it. You'll be married properly. Here," Morna confirmed. The she said, "Of course, if you had somewhere else in mind, Albus ..."

"No, no. I am yours to command in this, dear lady. And Minerva's, of course," he said with an apologetic smile at Minerva, who pressed her lips together in a thin line and said nothing.

"There. You see how reasonable Albus is being, Minerva?" said Morna. "A small wedding here. With just family and close friends. Exactly as it should be."

Minerva's grandmother, it seemed, had carried the day, as nobody else raised any other objections.

"Will the Board of Governors give ye any trouble, do ye think, Albus?" Thorfinn asked.

"Oh, they may make some noise initially. But there are no rules stipulating that staff members cannot marry. Of course, we will need to maintain all discretion around the students..."

"Of course. That's to be expected," said Thorfinn. "Will ye be moving to the castle, then, Minerva?"

"We haven't really talked about it," said Minerva with another glance at Albus. "I think, for the time being, I'll keep my room at Charity's. Then, I suppose, we'll have to work out about our living arrangements." She was not anxious to discuss this now, in front of her father and grandmother.

"In any event," said Albus, "I think we both prefer to keep our relationship purely professional at Hogwarts."

"And we'd appreciate it if you wouldn't mention this to anyone," said Minerva quickly.

"No, not without your leave," said Thorfinn.

Morna broke the brief silence that followed, saying, "Well, all this excitement has done for me. Minerva, come see me to my room."

"All right, Gran," Minerva said. She knew the invitation meant her grandmother wanted to speak with her in private, and she felt a shiver of unease at what might be on the agenda. She looked uncertainly at Albus for a moment.

"Go on," he urged her. "I'll wait until you're down again to leave."

"You aren't staying?"

"Alas, no. As pleasant as this has been, I need to get back to the school."

Morna crossed to Albus, and she tugged on his sleeve to get him to lean down so she could kiss his cheek. "I'm forward perhaps, but now that you'll be joining the family, you'll just have to put up with it," she said, releasing him.

"It's a duty I look forward to," replied Albus.

When Minerva and Morna had left and the library door was closed behind them, Albus watched Thorfinn as he nursed his drink. He had an idea that Thorfinn was watching him, too.

At length, Albus said, "This must have been quite a shock to you."

"Aye," said Thorfinn. He sipped his drink. "And no."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm surprised Minerva is thinking to get married. She's never talked of it, even as a wee girl. I suppose that's understandable, growing up with only her widowed father and grandmother. She never got to see much of marriage."

"No, I imagine not."

"But she's loved ye a long time, I think," said Thorfinn, looking steadily at Albus, who forced himself not to react, other than to say, "Oh?"

"Aye. Since she was girl, I'd wager."

"Did she tell you that?"

"No, but it was easy enough to put together. I figured it was no more than a schoolgirl's fancy, but then when we all thought ye were dead..."

"In 1945."

"Aye. She grieved so, Albus. I thought she'd get over it quickly, but she didn't. She stopped eating, never left the house except to go back and forth to London for her training. Her grandmother and I were worried. She wasn't herself. Amelia...Amelia Bones, who was her flatmate in London...she finally came to the house, she was so worried herself. She hadn't seen Minerva except in class, and she said Minerva barely spoke, wasn't able to do her spells properly...her magic seemed off, Amelia told me, and that frightened me."

"Yes. Severe emotional upset can have an effect on one's magic," said Albus. "Thorfinn, I am sorry. I had no idea. If I had known, I would have tried to contact her while I was in hospital."

"But of course ye didn't know. How could ye?"

Another small stone of guilt dropped into Albus's belly. He had thought about Minerva during his convalescence in Dresden, but his thoughts had been completely selfish, mostly reminiscences about the time they had spent together. He hadn't really thought about how his ostensible disappearance might affect her.

"No," he said quietly. "I didn't know."

"So ye see, Albus, that her loving you hasn't come as a complete shock. And of course, I'm of the opinion that any man would have to be a great fool not to love my Minerva."

"An opinion I share. I am very fortunate."

"I will confess that I was a bit concerned when she decided to take the job at Hogwarts. I knew she wasn't completely content at Oxford, but she'd never expressed any desire to teach children before she told us she was going to take your job offer. I didn't even know she'd applied. I was thinking, I don't mind telling ye, that she was doing it just to be near to you."

"I assure you, Thorfinn, I had no idea she even planned to apply."

"Oh, no. I didn't think ye did," said Thorfinn. "And she seems happy with her work."

"Yes, she's said as much to me. I wouldn't try to keep her at Hogwarts if she weren't happy."

"Glad I am to hear it."

"You have concerns? About our marrying?"

"No more than the concerns any father has when his child chooses a mate, I think," said Thorfinn. After a few moments, he added, "She won't be an easy wife. I'm sure ye know that. But then I expect ye won't be an easy husband."

"I only want to make her happy."

"I know. But Minerva's responsible for her own happiness. I only ask that ye love her and that you're good to her."

"I do love her. Very much. And I plan to do my damndest to be good to her."

"That's all I expect of ye."

Albus hesitated a few moments, then said, "I should tell you, Thorfinn, that there is another reason we prefer to keep our relationship private. I have enemies. If it became widely known that Minerva was my wife, it might put her in some danger. I must be honest with you about that."

"What does Minerva say about it?"

"That she is capable of defending herself," said Albus, and the two men smiled at one another in understanding.

"That she is," said Thorfinn.

"If you were to object to our marriage on that basis, I would certainly understand."

"Oh? And what would ye do about it?"

"I would not marry her."

"Don't be daft, man!" said Thorfinn forcefully. "Don't throw away your happiness...and Minerva's...for fear. Aren't ye Gryffindors meant to be brave? I expect ye to marry Minerva, if that's what ye and she want, whatever I might think of the notion, and what's more important, she expects it. But for what it's worth, Albus, I think it's a damn fine idea."

Albus had been surprised by the other wizard's sudden flare of temper, but he was heartened at his words.

A slow smile spread across his face, and he said, "I'll take that as your blessing, then."

"Do that, Albus. Do that."

~oOo~

"So, you're in love with Albus Dumbledore," said Morna as she and Minerva stepped into the bedroom. "He's a fine man, I think."

Minerva smiled. "Yes, he is."

"I will admit that I was surprised to hear you're planning to marry."

"But not unpleasantly, I hope?"

"Oh, no, not at all. As I say, I think he's a fine fellow. And he certainly is an important and famous one."

"Yes, I suppose he is. That isn't why I want to marry him, though, Gran."

"I wouldn't think so. I think it will make it a challenge for you, though. You've always been uncomfortable with fuss, and he's a man to generate it."

"We'll manage."

"I expect so."

Minerva took her grandmother's shawl from her shoulders, folded it, and put it in the wardrobe. When she turned back to Morna, the elder witch said, "It isn't my business, my lamb, but you can tell your old grandmother ... are you expecting?"

Minerva was taken aback. "No! Why do you ask that?" she said sharply.

"Now, don't give me your temper, my girl. I just wondered because this idea to marry seems so sudden. Not only have you not mentioned marriage...ever, if memory serves...but you've not mentioned stepping out with Mr Dumbledore, either. And you seem in a hurry to do it...a register office? So you'll have to forgive me if I've come to wrong conclusions."

"Oh, Gran," Minerva said. "I'm not pregnant. I just don't like to fuss, as you said. And I never mentioned Albus because ..."

"What, Minerva?"

Minerva spoke quietly. "I suppose because what I feel for him is so strong. It's just intensely personal. And of course, there are our respective positions to think of."

"Well, I'm happy to hear it. A baby on the way is a blessing, but it's a poor reason to get married, in my opinion. I'm glad I don't have to talk you out of it."

Minerva laughed suddenly. "Oh, Gran! How could you think I'd let that happen? Didn't you teach me to do the contraceptive charm each month from the time I was thirteen years old?"

"Aye," said Morna, joining in the laughter. "And your father was furious. It's the one time I've seen him behave completely irrationally."

"You told him?"

"I thought I should. It's a complex spell for a young girl to master, and I thought your father had a right to know."

"I suppose."

Gesturing for Minerva to come sit next to her on the bed, Morna said seriously, "The point is, Minerva, your father and I weren't married, but we were partners of a sort. The decisions I made didn't just affect me. That was a lesson I learned after I married your grandfather, and a difficult one it was, too. I married late...well, late for those times...and I'd been used to thinking only about myself. Then, when I became Jamie's wife, and later, when your mother came along, I had to make choices that I mightn't have done when it was just myself. Do you see?"

"I do," said Minerva. And she did. She'd already made a few of those kinds of choices, she thought.

Morna patted her granddaughter's hand. "Good. And now, I'll say goodnight, I think. Go down and rescue your fellow."

Minerva kissed her grandmother's cheek and went down to join the men.

~oOo~

Two days later, Minerva was coming out of Portage's Cauldron Shop after buying a small copper cauldron for Charity Burbage. Charity enjoyed baking and had complained on a few occasions that her old pewter cauldron just didn't make a good meringue, even with the constant self-whisking charm. She had been very kind to Minerva, and Minerva had been wanting to get her a small gift to show her appreciation. The new cauldron had been a bit more than Minerva had originally intended to spend, but, she reasoned, it wasn't as if she were hurting for ready funds. Her salary wasn't large, but she'd never been much of a shopper, and she'd already built up a considerable savings.

She had thought she might spend her savings on a small house in or around Hogsmeade once it became clear that her contract at Hogwarts would be renewed. Now that she and Albus were to be married, she wasn't certain. They would have to discuss it, she supposed.

Considering the question, she'd turned to head towards the Leaky Cauldron's Apparition point when she was pulled back suddenly by a hand on her arm and whirled around to come face to face with Tom Riddle.

She couldn't suppress her shocked intake of breath, both at the surprise of being accosted and at his appearance. Her heart was pounding, and she automatically focused on her breathing to calm herself.

"Minerva. What a surprise," Tom said drily.

"Let go of me, Tom," she said, shaking her arm free of his grip.

"Is that any way to greet an old chum?"

She turned and began to walk quickly in the opposite direction.

"Off to hop into Dumbledore's bed?" he called after her loudly, stopping her momentarily.

She glanced around and saw that two passers-by had stopped and were looking at her. She made a decision and steeled herself, giving the gawkers her recently perfected professorial glare, sending them scuttling on their way, then she strode back to where Tom stood smirking.

"I wouldn't slander Dumbledore's name, if I were you, Riddle," she said, hoping her voice didn't betray her discomfort.

"Slander? I don't think so. I have several witnesses who can attest to having seen him go upstairs at the Hog's Head Inn. And I saw you coming out later. Of course, you were a bit longer of tail at the time, but those markings around the eyes are a dead giveaway."

She could only stare at him. So he knew she was an Animagus. It wasn't exactly a secret; there had been a little blurb in the *Daily Prophet* when she had registered... "*Youngest Animagus in Fifty Years*"...but the only place in which her Animagus form had been described was in the Ministry register. Which meant that Tom Riddle had been checking up on her.

"What do you want, Riddle?"

"You wound me, Minerva. I want nothing from you."

"Then why follow me?"

"I am merely ... curious."

She waited for him to continue.

"Why would such a talented witch become a schoolteacher?" he asked.

"I enjoy teaching."

He barked a laugh. "I have a very hard time believing that, Minerva. In fact, I couldn't believe it when I read about it in the paper. I don't recall patience and a love of your fellow children as among your salient characteristics when we were at school. So I asked myself what other reason you could have for burying yourself up at Hogwarts. And I must admit, the conclusion I reached was not very pretty. You are once again under the thumb...among other things...of that meddling fool of a Headmaster."

"I don't see what business it is of yours."

"It's my business because you insulted me, Minerva. I gave you every opportunity, but you chose that old man over me." He took several steps towards her, and she had to force herself not to back away from him.

"I'm sorry if I hurt your ego, Tom, but there are plenty of other Nereids in the sea, as they say."

"Don't flatter yourself. It isn't your meagre feminine charms that interest me. Your power attracts me. We are alike in that, are we not? Or are you going to tell me that it's the old man's blue eyes and the way he whispers sweet nothings in your ear that make you want him?"

He leant in close to her and whispered, his lips inches from her ear, his hot breath making her shiver, "Because I won't believe you."

She drew back, and he continued, "I have plans, Minerva. Great plans. And you could have helped me, with your power and talent. But you've chosen to squander it to be the concubine of the wizard who would stand in my way, and that is very much my business.

"That's your decision. So you can take a message back to your lover from me. Tell him to call off his guard dog. He doesn't scare me, but he makes my friends nervous, and when they're nervous, unfortunate things happen. Unfortunate things like..." He lifted a hand to his left eye and made a popping sound. "We wouldn't want any more accidents, would we?"

She was shaking with rage. "I'll tell him so such thing. Your threats mean nothing to me, nor to Dumbledore."

"Really? And what do you suppose would happen if someone just let it slip to the Board of Governors that the Headmaster is sleeping with his new Transfiguration mistress?"

She felt the blood leave her face.

"There's no prohibition against relationships between staff," she said.

"Perhaps not, but it would look bad, wouldn't it? The governors are nothing if not conservative in their views. And I imagine the Headmaster carrying on an affair with his much younger subordinate on Hogwarts's grounds with the children toddling about might violate the morals clause of his contract."

"You have no way of knowing how or where Albus and I conduct our relationship."

"Don't I?" he asked, staring at her intently, reminding her, as was no doubt his intention, of the last time he had broken into her mind.

Before thinking about it, Minerva held her left hand up in front of his face, releasing the Disillusionment charm on her ring. "It will be a moot point very shortly," she said, and she knew immediately that it had been a mistake.

His initial surprise was quickly replaced by the old, familiar predatory look behind his eyes as he said, "Well, well, well. Old Dumbledore has decided to make an honest witch of you at long last. Congratulations, Minerva."

"So you see, Tom, there will be nothing for the governors to object to."

"I'm sure they will be as delighted for you as I am," he said. "Unless, of course, they find out that he's been bedding you since you were a student. What do you suppose they would make of that information? I also wonder how long it would be before some helpful soul leaked that titbit to the *Daily Prophet*. What would happen to your precious Dumbledore then? And to you? I don't suppose the cream of wizarding society will be eager to send their children to a school headed by a paedophile, nor have them taught by a common whore."

Her palm connected with his lineless face almost before she knew she had moved.

His fury was belied by his even tone. "You'll regret that one day."

"You don't frighten me, Riddle," she said, and they both knew she was lying. "If you spread gossip about Albus and me or try to harm us in any way, he will strike you down. He could snap your magic like a matchstick or have you filed away in a cell in Azkaban, and you know it."

"Still hiding behind Dumbledore's robes, Minerva? How very un-Gryffindor of you!"

He seized her by the arm again, digging his fingers into her flesh. She refused to let him see her pain.

"Albus Dumbledore won't be around forever. I can wait. I'm very, very good at it. I have all the time in the world. An eternity, you might say. And when he's finally mouldering away in his grave, I will come for you. Count on it."

An hour later, she could still feel the ghost of his icy fingers on her flesh.

Chapter Forty-Six

Chapter 46 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

Seven.

Tom sat brooding in the sparsely furnished dining room of Sebastian Nott's Staffordshire house.

Upon learning of Minerva's hiring at Hogwarts, he had immediately assumed that Dumbledore was bedding her once again; there really was no other reason for her to abandon everything to become a teacher, of all godforsaken things. Even so, it had been a surprise when he had seen her, in feline form, but instantly recognisable to anyone who knew about the strange markings around her eyes, following Dumbledore out of the Hog's Head. Tom wouldn't have believed her the type to meet a lover for an afternoon fuck in a seedy inn. Then again, Dumbledore seemed to have ways of persuading her to do things that might otherwise seem completely out of the question for a girl like Minerva McGonagall.

He silently cursed himself for his near-obsession with her. It had been a mistake to speak to her as he had. He had had little to gain from it but the satisfaction of frightening her...and he had done that, at least...and now she would probably tell Dumbledore of his threats. The old man wouldn't likely do much, but he would be on his guard, and more careful about Minerva.

Tom had not expected the old man to marry her.

This was very bad news indeed. If they had a magical bonding, each would be able to draw on the other's magical strength.

Would Dumbledore do it? Would he bind Minerva to him in that way?

It was still common enough among the older, pure-blood families, but the old man was not a pure-blood, and, as far as Tom knew, he had never expressed any admiration for the kind of traditions his father's family might have passed down. There were many people who frowned on the traditional blood-bonding ceremony, considering it Dark Magic.

Then again, Tom thought, Dumbledore had always shown himself surprisingly flexible on the subject of Dark Magic. Not to mention the subject of one Minerva McGonagall. And he was no fool. To bind her by blood would ensure not only her fidelity, but it would all but guarantee that her magic could never be turned against him.

Yes, Tom thought, if their positions were reversed, he would do everything in his power to ensure that a witch like Minerva could never raise her wand against him.

Damn!

The irony of his own recent difficulties in this arena were not lost on Tom.

Some of his earliest supporters, men he had thought were loyal to him, had deserted him of late, once it had become clear that both Dumbledore and the Aurors...or one Auror, anyway...had their eyes on them. They were cowards, to be sure, and not worth his consideration, but still ...

The desertion of Sebastian Nott's brother had been particularly galling. Graham had been at school with Tom, two years his junior, and had worshipped him.

Tom had made sure to stay in close touch with the boy after his graduation; he was clearly magically gifted and very intelligent. Tom had cultivated him upon his return to England, and at first, Graham Nott had seemed eager to become one of Tom Riddle's foot soldiers, fighting for pure-blood supremacy.

But then he had met that Prince girl, and he had started to change. He started to question Tom in ways that he never had...indeed, in ways no one else dared. The final break had come when Tom had announced his transformation to Lord Voldemort. Nott had scoffed! At *him!* Had called him mad.

And for just a moment, Tom had questioned himself.

Nott had Disappeared before Tom could curse him. He had found and killed the traitor quietly one evening...it didn't do to leave loose ends hanging...but the whole affair had unnerved him. In truth, Graham Nott was not the only one who had stopped coming to meetings; the other deserters had simply been quieter about it. And he couldn't kill them all. Not yet, anyway.

Tom needed a way to ensure, if not loyalty, then constancy. He had heard rumours of enslavement marks used by the great wizards of eras past to ensure that those who had pledged their support could not renege on their promises. He had looked through the wizarding libraries of the world for more specific information to no avail. Librarians were ridiculously squeamish, it seemed, about keeping books of Dark Magic about. Riddle knew that Dumbledore had more than a few interesting tomes stashed away in

his private collection...Tom had sounded Gellert Grindelwald out on that very topic recently...but there was no chance of getting hold of them, of course.

So he had set Macnair on it. He had had little hope that the dim-witted wizard would find anything, but it wouldn't hurt to have someone scouring the less reputable wizarding quarters of the world for books that might lead Lord Voldemort to what he wanted.

But now, here the man was, telling him he had found the very kind of spell his lord had wanted.

Will wonders never cease?

"My lord," Byron Macnair said, interrupting Tom's thoughts, "do you believe the spell will work?" The wizard's eyes sparkled with neediness.

Macnair was clearly hoping for a word of praise or some other bone from Lord Voldemort's table, and the sycophantic fervour with which he...with which they all...looked at their lord chased away Tom's doubts.

These men would be willing to die for him. He would ensure it.

This was power.

Voldemort smiled to himself. "There is only one way to find out, isn't there, Byron?"

"Y ... yes, my lord."

"Give me your arm."

Voldemort watched the man blanch, and his fear was a balm for Tom's soul.

Souls, Tom giggled to himself.

"Do you hesitate, Macnair?" he asked, cocking his head at the man as if examining a particularly peculiar specimen. "Are you reluctant to bind yourself to my service?"

"No, my lord!" The arm shot out, although it was shaking.

Tom grasped it, grinning into the man's frightened face. He withdrew his wand from his robe pocket and ran the tip of it across the smooth, white flesh of Macnair's forearm almost tenderly.

The spell Macnair had found came from a very old, very rare book on ancient Sumerian magic, and it had allegedly come down to Darius the Great all the way from Sargon of Akkad. The book claimed that both rulers had used the spell to bind their most trusted servants to them in times of uncertainty to ensure that their loyalty remained untainted. It allowed the caster to make a "living mark" on the flesh of the servant, but only if the servant willingly took it. The mark would permit the master to call his servants to him; if they resisted his call or broke their oath in any material way, the mark would scorch and burn their flesh until they complied with their master's will. Useful, to be sure, but Voldemort was more interested in the symbolism of the thing. Each of his followers would bear a living reminder of their master, etched into their flesh.

Voldemort had given much thought to the form the mark should take, and now it seemed the gods were smiling on his choice. The book, originally written in the Akkadian language, had, astoundingly, been translated into Latin centuries later, and it told of Sargon's defeat of Lugal-zage-si and the submission of the Uruk nobility to their conqueror. Sargon had reportedly administered the living mark to his new followers in Parseltongue.

The original incantation had been lost, but an Akkadian approximation was included in the book, and the ancient translator had helpfully included it in Latin, along with the instructions. It would be an easy enough thing for Voldemort to say it in Parseltongue.

Perfect.

Voldemort laid his wand tip on Macnair's arm and began.

When he had finished, he gripped the arm tightly as the flesh began to smoke and burn, watching, curious to see what would happen. It smelt of overcooked bacon.

To his credit, Byron Macnair didn't cry out as Tom expected. He whimpered and trembled but otherwise stayed still and silent as the black marks began to bubble up from within his flesh to settle into the simple design Tom had envisioned as he hissed the incantation.

It was done.

It was beautiful.

"See, my friends!" he cried. "Macnair has been the first to take my Mark. Who will be the next?"

They all clamoured for it, even as Voldemort sensed their fear. It was intoxicating.

By the end of the afternoon, seven more wizards had taken the Mark: the three Lestranges, Avery, Rosier, Mulciber, and Nott, of course.

Nott had been uneasy about his position with his lord ever since his brother's desertion, which was why he had offered his home, new and nearly unlivable, to the group for their headquarters and to host Lord Voldemort for as long as his lord cared to honour Sebastian and his young wife with his presence. And rightly so. It was only due to Voldemort's good offices that Nott was now his father's sole heir. Nott was so anxious to prove his loyalty that he called his wife, Megaera, in to take the Mark after him.

Lord Voldemort sat there enjoying the girl's terror for a few moments before he gracefully accepted her demurral due to early pregnancy. So good did he feel after the afternoon's events that he called for a round of elf-made wine from Nott's cellar to toast to the news of an impending addition to the Nott and Carrow families.

He had nearly forgotten about Minerva and Dumbledore.

Later, as he brooded by the fireplace in Nott's library, he considered his next course of action.

It was tempting, very tempting, to go to the Hogwarts Board of Governors with news of the Headmaster's affair with his Transfiguration mistress. All it would take would be a whisper in the correct ear...Madam Burke's, for example...and Dumbledore would be called on the carpet to defend himself. Tom was not naïve enough to believe Dumbledore would be dismissed over the issue; he had enough supporters among the governors and in the Ministry to weather the inevitable storm, but Minerva would almost certainly lose her place, and Tom wouldn't put it past the old man to refuse to dismiss her, in which case, the Headmaster would be out too.

Even lovelier was the thought of the scandal Tom could ignite with a word or two to the right person at the *Daily Prophet*. That idea had clearly frightened Minerva.

But to what advantage? That was the question.

As pleasant as the idea of Minerva and the old man being raked over the coals of public opinion was, it would serve Tom little in the long run. Dumbledore might be prevented from heading a school full of young girls, and Minerva might be branded the whore she undoubtedly was, but it would ultimately do little to diminish either's power. In fact, if freed from the fetters of that school, they might just decide to come after Lord Voldemort...what else would they have to occupy their time?

Tom had to reluctantly admit that he was not yet ready to confront Dumbledore directly and openly. Lord Voldemort was powerful...Tom had learnt much magic in the years after leaving Britain...but he was wise enough to know that the old man's disadvantage in years was an advantage in experience. The threat that Dumbledore had issued all those years ago, when Tom had first discovered his secret lechery, still lurked in the back of his mind.

It would be better, Tom decided, to wait. Build his army and ensure his immortality. Then he could face Albus Dumbledore from a position of overwhelming strength and cement his place as the most powerful wizard in the world by defeating him utterly. And if Minerva survived the battle, so much the better for Tom and the worse for her.

His fingers unconsciously stroked the pebbled leather cover of the diary he held in his robe pocket. It had been a gift from that old hag, Mrs Cole, at the orphanage on the occasion of his sixteenth birthday. He had brought it with him to the girls' bathroom that fateful night he had summoned the Basilisk, thinking to record his observations of Myrtle's death in it. He had been fascinated by death at the time, and he had spent many an afternoon in the Unknowable Room after the foolish girl had showed it to him, recording what he saw when he killed the small animals he caught in the castle and on the grounds.

What would Minerva say if she knew about all those cats? He laughed to himself.

But the eyes of the cats and other small mammals he executed had never unlocked any of death's secrets for him. Not even when he learnt the spell to create an Inferius; their eyes stayed just as dead and impenetrable as they had been in the moment after death.

A human, he had thought, might be different.

So when he went to kill Myrtle, he had gone prepared with his diary and his quill. When the Basilisk had appeared, and as it had done its lethal work, he had looked intensely at the girl's stupid, surprised face and into her eyes, and he had seen ... nothing. It was as if someone had simply turned out a light behind them, just as it had been with all those other animals. His momentary joy at having been able to successfully command the giant serpent had been eclipsed by disappointment and rage.

He had then tried to bring Myrtle back as an Inferius, hoping against hope that a former human might be able to tell him something that those animal Inferi had not, but it hadn't worked. Tom knew now that it was because dim, needy Myrtle had not gone on in death but had stuck around in ghostly form...although, as he subsequently discovered, she had apparently buggered off down the toilet and stayed there for months in her fright and outrage before venturing out to begin her reign of petty terror and vengeance against her schoolgirl tormentors, never guessing that her charming Slytherin friend had been responsible for her death. Stupid, even in death, was Myrtle.

The Inferius spell had failed, and Tom had stood, panting slightly in his frustration. When he went to re-sheath his wand, his fingers had brushed against something hard in his pocket, and he remembered the diary. He withdrew it and opened it to the first page...the page on which he had copied the information from *Secrets of the Darkest Art* on the creation of Horcruxes.

Why not? he had thought.

Why not try to make his first Horcrux? It was an auspicious occasion after all, his first murder.

He had known the instant he had finished the last word of the incantation that it had worked. He had felt a great rending...an agony that was not physical, but that felt as if his *self* was being clawed apart by a million demons, and for just a moment, he had seen into the abyss, into hell, into *nothingness*, and he had been stricken by terror so deep that he thought he must go mad with it.

Is this death? he had thought.

But no. He had come back to himself, lying on the cold, damp floor of the bathroom, with a dull ache in his head and the sinking feeling that he had pissed himself. Upon sitting up, he discovered he had, and had shat himself into the bargain. He used his wand to clean up, then picked up the diary.

He had almost dropped it again. It had seemed to pulse in his hand...again, not a physical sensation, but a spiritual one...and as he held it longer, a sense of peace seemed to wash gently over him. It was a little like the morphine the Muggle doctors had given him when he'd had his appendix out at age eight. And like the morphine, he'd found that he missed it...very much a physical sensation this time...when he didn't have the diary with him.

Later, when he'd had more time to work out his plans, he'd been a little angry with himself for using so pedestrian an object...a Muggle object!...in which to keep a part of his soul, but there was nothing for it. He'd decided to remove his entries...he'd memorised the Horcrux spell, and his observations on death were no great loss...and kept the diary with him as much as possible. At least no one would ever suspect it could house anything more important than a few random scribbles.

Seven.

The number kept thrumming through his head as he thought about his Horcruxes now. It was the Mersenne safe prime. Rome had seven great kings and seven hills, as did Constantinople. There were seven great sages of ancient Greece, and ancient Thebes had endured the siege of seven great generals and was defended by another opposing seven. There were seven deadly sins in Christian theology.

Seven was the most powerfully magical number. It was the number of parts into which he would divide his soul for safekeeping.

Tom already had five precious vessels for it. For most men, it would suffice. For Lord Voldemort, it wasn't enough. And he wanted the sword. How beautifully appropriate would it be if the old man were finally vanquished by the Sword of Gryffindor, infused with the soul of the man who was the Heir of Slytherin?

Yes, Tom thought, he would wait.

He had time.

~oOo~

Minerva didn't tell Albus about her encounter with Tom Riddle. The last thing she wanted was to spook him further, so she said nothing, but she was especially vigilant and cautious as she went about her business.

The following Saturday, they played chess as usual...Minerva beating Albus for the first time...and they had their customary drink afterward.

They sat in front of the fire, and when she had put down her glass, Albus moved across the settee to embrace her. They kissed for a minute, but when Albus moved his hands to caress her breasts through her dress, which had become their habitual prelude to lovemaking, Minerva put her hands against his chest and gently pushed him away.

"What is it?" he asked. "If it's the wrong time of the month, I could..."

"No," she said. "I just think perhaps we ought to be more careful. I mean, everyone knows I come to your quarters on Saturday evenings; it would be too easy for them to make certain deductions."

"Hardly everyone."

"Well, enough."

"Some of the staff, certainly, but none of them would say anything. And nobody can prove that we do anything other than play chess." Taking her hands he said, "What is it, Minerva?"

She shrugged. "I've just been thinking about what you told me about the morality clause in your contract. It seems imprudent for us to violate it."

"Perhaps. But if we are careful..."

"Yes, but I would hate for anything to come up just when we've decided to make things ... well ... legal. It seems a foolish risk."

"I see," he said.

She watched him, wondering what he was thinking. When he finally spoke again, she was surprised at what he said.

"Minerva, if you no longer ... desire me, I shall understand. I am not a young man, and..."

She pulled him to her abruptly and kissed his mouth.

"You are a foolish man," she said when they broke. "How can you even entertain the idea that I would not want you? Have I not shown you how much I do?"

She was truly astonished that he could harbour such doubts, and she reminded herself yet again that, powerful wizard that he was, he was also a man, with a man's weaknesses and insecurities.

"I want you," she said, "in every conceivable way. But I don't want you to be hurt by our relationship."

He opened his mouth to object, but she cut him off.

"Let me speak, Albus. Remember when you broke off our affair because you didn't want it to harm me? Well, now the shoe is on the other foot. I don't want our relationship to damage your reputation just when you have finally taken your place as Headmaster. All I am saying is that we should consider moving our physical relationship away from here...at least until we're married and the governors can say nothing about it."

He brought her hands to his lips and kissed the knuckles of each. "All right, my dear. If it will make you more comfortable. In light of that, how soon do you imagine we can be married?"

"If we are condemned to having a proper wedding, I'm afraid it will be several months. Einar and his family won't be back from France until mid-May, and my father leaves for his tour of North America the week before term ends. He won't return until mid-October. Of course, we could simply do it in a register office with a couple of witnesses, as I suggested initially," she said hopefully.

"Won't that disappoint your grandmother and your father?"

"Oh, I suppose."

"Then we should wait."

"Oh, gods, Albus. How on earth am I going to survive a wedding, of all blessed things?"

Albus chuckled at her distress.

"What?"

"You spent several years chasing Dark wizards...almost died doing it...and you're worried about a ceremony with a few flowers and toasts?"

"I just ..."

"What?"

"Hate to fuss. It should be private...just between us."

"It will be. But the people who love you want to be with you...stand up with you, if you will."

"I know," she sighed. "And I suppose I sound terribly churlish."

"No, my love. You are simply a private person. It's one of the many things I adore about you." He kissed her cheek. "So it sounds as if we'll need to wait until the Christmas holiday, perhaps?"

"So it seems." After a few pensive moments, she asked, "When should we tell people? And whom shall we tell?"

"Oh, I think the staff should know. And the governors, eventually. Beyond that, it's your choice, my dear."

"Other than my family, I think just Amelia and Marlene. And Edgar, of course."

"Edgar?"

"Edgar Bones, Amelia's brother. And his family."

"Ah, of course. I had almost forgotten that you are now related to the Bones family by marriage."

"And you'll want to tell Aberforth," she said.

"Actually, he already knows. I asked his permission to give you my mother's ring."

"And he was delighted for you, I'm sure. Offered you his congratulations?"

"Something like that. I should also like to tell Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel. Other than that, there's no one I feel the need to inform."

"You don't think..." She stopped abruptly, a horrified look on her face.

"What, Minerva?"

"Will it end up in the papers?"

"It could, I suppose," he said. "But I will make it quite clear to those who are informed that they are not to speak to any reporters. And I am not entirely without influence with the editor of the *Daily Prophet*. While I doubt I could persuade him not to run a story that was of any real importance to the wizarding world...nor would I attempt to...I might be able to ask him to refrain from writing about our personal relationship. He owes me one or two small favours."

Minerva found this information both astonishing and encouraging, but she doubted Albus would be able prevent the *Prophet* from running the story should Riddle make good on his threat to divulge what he knew about what had happened when she was in school. She didn't know Hector Fleet personally, but she had heard, primarily from

Amelia, who did, that he was a man of integrity and devoted to his profession. Such a man could hardly be expected to kill a shocking story about the Headmaster of the most prestigious wizarding school in Europe simply as a favour to an old acquaintance.

There was nothing for it, she thought, but to wait and hope. After all, if Riddle had not gone to the press by now, perhaps he didn't intend to. Perhaps he was waiting for a better time.

"Try not to worry, Minerva," Albus said. "While I would also prefer to keep our relationship private, it would not be the end of the world if it were to become known."

"After we're married."

"Yes."

She sighed again. "I do wish we could do it sooner, then."

"As do I, my dear. Particularly if it means I'm to be deprived of your favours until then."

"As I recall, you said the morals clause only prohibits us from doing anything here," she said. "There are other places, you know."

"Yes, but if we were to go to the Hog's Head or some similar place too often, it might begin to arouse suspicion."

"Oh, no. Not the Hog's Head. Anyway, the idea of your brother's smarmy grin every time we showed up would put me right off," she said, thinking of Riddle's claim to have observed them coming out of the inn on the night Albus had proposed. "I was thinking more along the lines of a Muggle inn."

His eyebrows rose in surprise.

"Really?"

"Why not? It would be far easier to go unnoticed than if we tried meeting somewhere in the wizarding world."

"We couldn't go away every weekend, though."

"No," she admitted. "But you could take the occasional evening off, couldn't you? Surely even the Headmaster is entitled to a day of rest once in a while."

Suddenly he was grinning at her, a familiar glint in his blue eyes. He sidled close to her again and put his arms around her. "I must admit, Minerva, the idea of meeting you for the occasional secret tryst is somewhat titillating," he said, burying his mouth in her neck.

"Oh, I agree, Headmaster. Very titillating indeed..." The rest of her response was lost as he took her mouth again.

He released her a minute later with a deep sigh. "Ah, well, my dear. I suppose I shall have to be content with that for the evening. Would you like another drink? Or perhaps some tea?"

"No, I don't think so," she said. "I think I should just get home."

She didn't exactly want to leave, but his kisses had made her unsure that she would be able to resist making love to him, despite what she had said earlier.

Unbeknownst to both of them, each was having the same thought as she stepped through the door: It was going to be a long few months.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Chapter 47 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"I happen to know that Minerva's been in love with him for griffin's years."

Minerva's brother and his little family arrived back in Scotland on 19th May, and the McGonagalls gathered for a family dinner the following weekend. Einar was obviously surprised to meet Albus Dumbledore there.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Professor," he said, shaking the elder wizard's hand.

"The pleasure is mine, Mr McGonagall." To Katherine, Albus said, "Mrs McGonagall, I must say you don't look at all changed from the day you left Hogwarts. And this must be Morrigan."

The eight-month-old began to cry, perhaps frightened by Albus's long beard or his high hat...or perhaps she simply didn't like his looks...and her mother said, "Oh, now, this is Professor Dumbledore, and he's a very nice man. I promise, he doesn't bite."

Albus withdrew from his pocket a copper Knut and pointed his wand at it, saying, *Mutatio Draconem!* The Knut became a plush purple dragon, albeit a very benign-looking one. Albus held it out to the child, who reached for it immediately. After looking at it quizzically for a few moments, Morrigan put one of the toy's ears in her mouth and

started gnawing at it vigorously.

"She's teething," Katherine explained. "But I think you've won her over."

As she chewed, the child's enormous brown eyes were fixed on Albus.

Over dinner, Einar told the group about the detail he had done in Paris and the differences in the way Muggle relations were handled in France.

"They aren't nearly as zealous with Obliviation as we are," Einar said. "They only send a crew when there's been a large-scale incident. When it's just a few people, they figure the story will run its course, and most Muggles will chalk it up to a touch of barminess on the part of the witnesses. They've only got two Obliviators in their whole department."

"Fascinating," said Albus.

"I do hope you can convince our Ministry to take the same attitude," said Morna. "I'm quite certain there were several Muggles in Tinworth when I was growing up who were made quite funny by repeated Obliviation."

"You grew up in Tinworth, Madam MacLaughlin?" Dumbledore asked

"Yes, it was my mother's family's home. Although we left when I was nine and relocated to Mull to be closer to my father's mother, who was unwell."

"My father was born in Tinworth. Much before you were, of course," Albus said.

"Not so very much more, I suspect," said Morna. "In any event, I don't remember a Dumbledore family. Are they still in Tinworth?"

"No. My father was the last of his family to live there. He settled in Mould-on-the-Wold after completing his apprenticeship. He died some years ago, and my late mother moved the family to Godric's Hollow."

The brief silence told Albus that the elder members of Minerva's family, anyway, knew the circumstances of Percival Dumbledore's death.

After a moment, Thorfinn asked, "Did ye know Bathilda Bagshot, the historian?"

"Yes. She was our neighbour. Still is, as a matter of fact."

"'Tis a small world, then. I studied with her after leaving Hogwarts."

"A small world indeed. She helped our mother with our early magical education."

"You have brothers and sisters, Professor?" asked Einar.

"Just one brother, Aberforth."

Thorfinn asked, "Is he still in Godric's Hollow?"

"No. He lives in Hogsmeade now."

"That must be nice to have him nearby," said Katherine.

Albus simply said, "Yes."

"You said Madam Bagshot is still your neighbour," Morna said. "Does that mean you've kept your family's home in Godric's Hollow, Albus?"

"Yes. The house still belongs to me, in part."

"Will you and Minerva make your home there, do you think? When you're not at Hogwarts, I mean."

"Gran," Minerva said, "I don't think this is the time to discuss it."

"Wait," Einar said. "What do you mean 'make their home there'? Why would Minerva live in Godric's Hollow with Professor Dumbledore?"

"Because they're going to be married. Why else?" said Morna with a satisfied smile.

"*Married?*" squeaked Einar, turning to Minerva. "You and Professor Dumbledore?"

"Yes. Albus and I," said Minerva. "And I'll thank you to close your mouth. It's most unattractive the way you're gawping, Einar."

"Well ..." said a very flustered Einar, "excuse me, Minerva, but this is a bit of a shock. And when exactly were you going to tell me this?"

"Tonight, actually. I was going to tell you after dinner, until Gran let the Kneazle out of the bag," Minerva said, glaring at her grandmother, who was still smiling beatifically.

"Congratulations, Minerva, Professor," Katherine McGonagall said with a pointed glance in her husband's direction.

"I think, under the circumstances, you should call me Albus," Dumbledore said. "You as well, of course, Mr McGonagall," he said to Einar.

"Einar," said Einar faintly. "Call me Einar."

"Very well, Einar," said Albus. "This is rather a surprise, I understand."

"No. Well, yes. That is ... Minerva is ... you're ..." stammered Einar.

"Perhaps, Einar, it would be best to just offer your congratulations," Thorfinn said.

"Yes. Right. Congratulations, Professor," said Einar. "And best of luck," he added, grinning at his sister.

"Thank you," Dumbledore said.

As they were leaving, once they had got past the protective barrier around the McGonagall estate, Albus said to Minerva, "Well, that was rather awkward, wasn't it?"

"Yes. And I'm sorry. Gran can be difficult at times. I don't know what she was thinking, blurting it out like that."

"It's no matter. But your brother was rather taken aback."

"Only because he worships you. I'm sure he thinks I'm not nearly good enough for you."

"Don't be silly, Minerva. He obviously adores you."

"Oh, I didn't mean that there's anything amiss in our relationship," she said. "It's just that he's my brother. He knows my foibles and weaknesses in a way you don't. Yet."

"I look forward to encountering them." He looked around, and, seeing no one, drew her into his arms and kissed her.

~oOo~

As summer went by and the beginning of the autumn term loomed, Minerva decided to look for a small house in Hogsmeade.

With the pressures of a school full of children eased for the summer, she and Albus had been able to spend quite a few afternoons, several nights, and even another weekend at out-of-the-way Muggle inns around Scotland, but the reality of meeting in small rooms for a few hours at a time soon eclipsed any romance it had once added to their trysts. Besides, it was becoming bloody expensive, and Albus always insisted on paying, despite her protests. He wasn't hurting for ready funds, Minerva thought, but neither was he a wealthy man, and the unnecessary expense was beginning to stick in her thrifty craw.

And there was the matter of their living arrangements once term began again. As a day teacher, she had no compelling reason to occupy rooms in the castle, and although the governors could not object to her sharing quarters with Albus once they were married, it would mean their relationship would be on display for all to see, something she thought they both were keen to avoid. Moreover, Minerva wasn't sure she wanted to live at such close quarters with anyone, even Albus. She and Amelia had got on well enough as roommates back in their London days, but since then, Minerva had found she liked living alone. After years in her small flat in Oxford, sharing a house with Charity Burbage, even as seldom as Minerva was there, had been an annoyance, despite the fact that Charity had been a mostly unobtrusive landlady.

When she broached the subject of getting a house to Albus, he agreed that it would be a good idea, so Minerva set about trying to find a suitable property. She was disappointed, however, to find that they would be unable to get a Floo connection to Albus's quarters or, indeed, any part of Hogwarts. The school's security enchantments prevented it, and Albus was, as he put it "disinclined" to tinker with the arrangement. He had become much more concerned with security, she thought, since Tom Riddle had got into the school, and Minerva could hardly blame him.

She decided to look for a house with a small garden in the back; not that she was keen on gardening, but it would allow for more privacy if she and Albus could Apparate to and from the putative house from a relatively private space.

Within a week, she had found a prospect. It was a very small but well-kept cottage at the south-eastern edge of the village and boasted a tiny garden just off the kitchen. There were two bedrooms, a small sitting room, and a dining room, which she suspected she'd end up co-opting as a makeshift office, as she had done in her flat in Oxford.

The witch who was selling the cottage wanted thirty-two hundred Galleons for it, which seemed outrageous to Minerva's rather parsimonious sensibilities, but when she talked it over with Albus, he assured her that the price sounded fair.

"But you haven't seen it," said Minerva.

Albus said, "No, but based on the selling price for other similarly-sized houses in the area, thirty-two hundred doesn't seem excessive. Is it in good condition?"

"It seems to be," conceded Minerva, "but I would like you to see it before I make an offer."

"My dear, what reason would you give the owner for bringing me?"

He had a point.

"I imagine you're right," Minerva said. "But it seems odd for me to buy a house without you even seeing the place. I had hoped you might want to spend some time there with me."

"I shall, rest assured. If you like it, I'm sure I will as well."

"It's small."

"I won't mind having to be close to you, then," he said.

She thought he was being a bit too glib, and said so.

"Minerva, if it suits the purpose...having a comfortable place for you to live where I can visit on days off and holidays...and you like it, it will suit me just fine, I am certain. In any event, I don't see that either of us will be spending a great deal of time there."

"Summers," she said.

"Well, yes. But if we find ourselves bumping elbows, you can also come to the castle during the summer, as I do have to be there at least some of the time. Besides, I thought we could travel some during the summer, if you like."

She did like. She liked very much.

So the offer was made and accepted, and Minerva found herself the mistress of a property for the first time in her life. By the last week of August, she had moved her few things from Charity Burbage's cottage, and she set to work finding some furniture...at least enough to make things comfortable for the time being; she could always Transfigure anything else she needed until she could find proper furnishings. To her amusement, Amelia Bones turned out to be a keen shopper, and she helped Minerva select a dining table, some chairs, a settee, and a brass bed.

When the magical delivery serviceman had unShrunk the bed in the larger bedroom and received his gratuity of two Sickles with the tip of his hat, Amelia said, "Right. That's that, then. Now all you need are some bedclothes and someone to share them with."

Amelia was looking at Minerva, a typically mischievous twinkle in her eye, no doubt expecting an eye roll or other such indication of disapproval from her prim friend.

So she was surprised when Minerva said, "Actually, Amelia, I do have someone in mind."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes."

Minerva turned and pretended to be dusting the floorboard with her wand.

"Well? Who is it?"

Minerva took wicked pleasure in saying, "I'll tell you about it at tea on Sunday."

"You wouldn't want to toy with a high-ranking member of Magical Law Enforcement, Minerva," said Amelia in mock warning.

"'High-ranking' is it now?"

"Higher than you managed, my dear Miss McGonagall," said Amelia, "before you ran away to join the academic circus."

"Yes, well ... I rather prefer the monkeys at Hogwarts to the ones at the Ministry. I still hold out some hope of socialising mine."

Amelia laughed. "You really aren't going to tell me about this mysterious beau, are you?"

"Not today, no."

"Witch."

In truth, Minerva hadn't quite made up her mind to tell Amelia about Albus, but she'd kept the secret from her dear friend for so long, it seemed, and there was little reason to hide it anymore. The Kneazle would be out of the bag come December, in any event.

The following Sunday, Minerva sat in the flat Amelia shared with Marlene McKinnon, whose scone had made it only halfway to her mouth, which now hung open in surprise.

"Well, say something," Minerva said.

"You sly thing!" Amelia cried. "You never even told me you were together!"

"I know, and I'm sorry," said Minerva. "We didn't tell anyone. We thought it best to be discreet."

Amelia looked at her partner, saying, "Oh, close your mouth, Lena. It's *not* that shocking."

"Sorry, but it is to me." Marlene glanced at Minerva. "Well, not *shocking* exactly, but really, really surprising. He was our teacher, so it's just odd to think of him as Minerva's..."

"Bedfellow?" Amelia finished.

Marlene and Minerva both glared at her. "I was going to say *husband*," Marlene said.

"Oh, well," said Amelia. "I guess it's not such a shock to me, since I happen to know that Minerva's been in love with him for griffin's years."

"Really, Amelia," Minerva objected.

"You have," said Amelia, "don't try to deny it. I have access to Veritas serum, you know."

"Just how long have you been seeing him, Minerva? Don't tell me you decided to step into the Transfiguration professor's *..erm* ... shoes at Hogwarts because you fancied him," Marlene said with a smirk.

"Oh, don't you start," Minerva said to her.

Amelia laughed at her friend's discomfort. "Relax, Minerva. We're just taking the piss. We're delighted for you, aren't we Lena?"

"Of course," Marlene confirmed.

"Thank you."

"So, is it true about Dumbledore's wand?" Amelia asked. "I've heard he can do *amazing* things with it."

"That's it," said Minerva, standing. "If I'd wanted adolescent attempts at humour, I'd have stayed at Hogwarts."

"Oh, now, don't get all starchy on us," said Amelia. "Besides, you deserve a little teasing for having kept me in the dark for so long."

Minerva could hear the undercurrent of hurt under Amelia's words, and she sat down again.

"I suppose I do," she said. "But you do understand why we needed to keep things quiet, don't you?"

"Sure," said Amelia. She added, "But I can keep a secret, you know, Minerva."

Merlin, she was really hurt.

"I know you can. And I'm sorry for not telling you earlier. I just have a hard time discussing these things, as you know."

"I know. And it's fine," Amelia said, and Minerva felt that all was mended, or mostly mended. Amelia wasn't one to hold a grudge, and of course, she didn't know precisely how long Minerva had truly been keeping her secret.

~oOo~

Three days before term began, Albus came to see the house, and Minerva was surprised to find that he had brought Filius with him.

"Filius has kindly offered to help us set the wards for the house. He's far more skilled than I, and I daresay he's better than most professional services," Albus said.

"That's very kind of you, Filius," said Minerva.

"It's my pleasure, Minerva," replied the Charms master. "I stopped trusting the so-called professional services when the best-known of them hired one of my former apprentices. Emphasis on the 'former'. The young lady in question was utterly hopeless, yet they hired her not two months after I had dismissed her for incompetence." Filius shook his head at the memory.

"Disconcerting indeed," said Albus.

"Service just isn't what it once was," said Filius. "Now, what kinds of enchantments did you have in mind, Minerva? The sky's the limit, as they say."

The three discussed it a bit, and, at Albus's urging, Minerva settled on a fairly restrictive set of protective charms. Like many witches and wizards, she had already decided to prevent Apparition directly into the house itself; unlike most, she also opted to prevent anyone but herself and Albus from Apparating into the yard. Albus insisted on the added security, but Minerva's motives were equally ones of privacy. She didn't want anyone to be able to see into the back window from the small yard. All other visitors would have to ring the front bell, on which Filius also cast a complicated enchantment that would reveal if the visitor had altered his or her appearance, either through use of a glamour or Polyjuice Potion.

"That's most impressive," said Albus.

"Thank you," said Filius. "It's a charm of my own invention, actually. I'm quite proud of it. Although, to give credit where credit is due, Horace did help me in working out some of the kinks related to the potion detection."

"Now, Minerva, I can also add a few charms that will alert you to specific visitors as they approach the perimeter of the wards. It will also tell you who has come by in your absence, but for that, I will need something from each individual you wish me to add. A piece of hair is customary, but anything biological will do."

"Oh, I need to think about that," said Minerva. "My family, I suppose, and a few friends."

"Very well," said Filius. "Why don't you just collect what we need from everyone you'd like me to add, and I'll come back and set the charm, all right?"

"Yes, thank you."

Filius hesitated for a moment, unsure if he should speak, but he decided that, in this case, discretion was not the better part of valour. "I also would recommend, wherever possible, to add to the charm anyone you feel might be a threat to your safety." His glance at Albus was heavy with meaning.

"There are those individuals, of course," said Albus. "But alas, one can hardly ask one's enemy for a lock of hair."

Filius couldn't help smiling. "As it so happens, Albus, I may have the very thing we need."

From his robe pocket, Filius produced a small envelope. "During our security breach this spring, I managed to take a few hairs from the head of ... the intruder." He opened the envelope and withdrew a small tuft of short, black hair, holding it up for Albus and Minerva to examine.

"Filius Flitwick, my clever fellow!" exclaimed a delighted Albus. "How ever did you manage it?"

"Oh, it was easy. A very focussed slicing charm, performed wandlessly and wordlessly, followed by a silent *Accio* did the trick," said Filius, blushing now.

"Well done, man! I might have known you'd think of that," said Albus.

"Is that really Tom Riddle's hair," asked Minerva, peering at it with a look of mild disgust.

"Indeed it is," said Filius.

Later, after Filius had left, Minerva asked Albus what Filius knew about Tom Riddle.

"I have not shared all my concerns about Tom with him," Albus said, "but he's quite aware of what a threat I believe Riddle to be to the school, and he suspects something of Riddle's interest in you. "

"You haven't told him about that, Albus, have you?" said Minerva, distressed.

"I didn't have to, my dear. He knew that Tom performed Legilimency on you at the duel, and he's quite capable of filling in the blanks himself."

"I see."

She didn't know exactly why it bothered her, but the idea of anyone else knowing about Tom's seeming obsession with her made her very uncomfortable.

More than forty years in the future, Minerva would find that her privacy had become just another casualty of the war between Albus Dumbledore and Tom Riddle, but by then, it would hardly matter to her anymore.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Chapter 48 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"You're a man of science. Why don't you investigate?"

Minerva's thirty-second birthday fell on a Friday, and Albus surprised her by showing up just after her last class of the day with instructions to Apparate directly back to the cottage. He would meet her there shortly, he said.

When he walked in the door leading from the garden, he asked, "Do you have a Muggle evening dress?"

"No," she answered. "Why?"

"Then you'd best Transfigure something, my sweet."

"Where are we going?"

"My dear," he said, walking toward her and taking her by the shoulders, "will you ever learn to simply trust me?"

"I trust you. It's just that it would help me know what to Transfigure if I knew what we were going to be doing."

"Sitting, for the most part."

She went to her bedroom and pulled a set of plain, royal-blue dress robes from her wardrobe. After putting them on, she looked in the cheval mirror for a few moments, at a loss. She barely paid any attention to wizarding fashion, much less Muggle dress trends. What to do?

Relying on her hazy recollection of a Muggle gown she'd seen her grandmother in when she'd taken Minerva and Einar to the Muggle theatre, she started with the top of the dress. She tried a few things before settling on a square neckline with a form-fitting bodice. She looked critically at the skirt, then decided to make it slightly fuller.

Appraising her reflection in the glass, she made a few minor adjustments to the length of the sleeves and the fullness of the skirt until she was satisfied.

It would have to do.

It suited her well enough, she thought, and it vaguely resembled the things she'd seen women wear in London. She wished she'd had time to consult Amelia; while her friend was no fashion-plate, she had to move among Muggles all the time and would likely have a better idea of what would pass muster among them for evening wear. Minerva's transformed effort wasn't a Monsieur Malkin, that was certain, but it fit well enough.

She Transfigured her boots into a matching pair of shoes and went back down to join Albus.

In her absence, Albus had changed his ordinary robes into a Muggle tuxedo jacket with a notched collar and striped trousers, complete with pleated shirt, black tie, and cummerbund. His greying hair was short and slicked back, and his beard and moustache had been Transfigured into a Van Dyke style.

She was not accustomed to seeing him in such form-fitting attire, and a wave of desire swept through her as she regarded him. It was easy to forget how well-made he was; normally, she only saw him in his wizard's robes or naked, and neither sight was quite as arresting as he appeared to her now.

"Oh, Albus," she said, "you look wonderful."

"As do you, my love." He cocked his head as he looked at her.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing. You look lovely. But if you would permit me a slight alteration ..."

"All right," she said, wondering what he was going to do.

He waved his wand over her chest. She suddenly felt a lot cooler and realised he had changed the gown to sit off her shoulders and removed the sleeves.

"Albus..." she started, but he simply said, "Now that looks a bit more like it."

"But ..." she gestured to her chest, which felt very naked indeed.

"Lovely," he said, moving to her and kissing her forehead. "Believe me, Minerva, it's what all the ladies were wearing when I was in Paris last month for the meeting of the International Confederation."

"It seems an awful lot of skin to be showing."

"Such beautiful skin," he said, leaning down to kiss each bare shoulder.

"Well, if you're sure ..."

"I am. You look wonderful."

"Then I'd better go back up and see to some different underthings. I don't think what I have on under this works any longer."

"Go ahead. We have plenty of time."

Sure enough, when she unzipped the bodice of the dress, she found that the straps to her bra had disappeared, leaving the garment practically hanging off her chest.

She debated simply going without but concluded that she looked decidedly underdeveloped, so she fished an old chemise out of a drawer, and after a few failed experiments, managed to Transfigure it into a sort of brassiere without straps, cursing herself all the while for not paying more attention to some of the charms her gran had once taught her. She was certain there had to be a charm for keeping one's bosom looking ... perkier under one's clothes. Now that she was thirty-two, she thought, it might be time to investigate such matters.

She knew she had succeeded, however, when she went back downstairs, and Albus's eyes were drawn immediately to her chest.

"Better, I take it?" she said with a smirk.

"Beautiful, my dear. Shall we?"

She took the cloak he had already Transfigured from loden wool to blue satin, and they went into the garden to Apparate.

When they re-materialised in an alleyway, they frightened a young woman and her gentleman friend half to death, and the Muggles scurried off, the woman giving little yips of fright and the man cursing as he tried to button his trousers while he ran.

"Oh, dear," said Minerva.

"I'm afraid we rather ruined their evening. But ours should be somewhat pleasanter," he said, and she didn't have to see his face in the dim light to know that his eyes were twinkling.

They walked two blocks to a Muggle restaurant, and as he steered a surprised Minerva to the door, she said, "Isn't it a bit early for dinner?"

"Yes, my dear, and I'm sorry, but curtain is at seven tonight."

"Curtain?"

"Yes. We're going to Covent Garden this evening, and the performance is rather long."

Over dinner, Minerva and Albus discussed the problem of how to keep their marriage a secret...or relatively secret. Albus was surprised when she suggested a Muggle ceremony.

She explained quietly, "Muggle marriages are valid in our world, aren't they?"

"Yes, but..."

"Well, then, if we marry à la Muggle we have a legal marriage that does not automatically get registered with the Ministry. If something comes up that requires proof of our marriage...if the Board of Governors finds out about our relationship, for example...we only need produce the appropriate documents."

Albus thought it over and conceded that the idea was good. Many Muggle-borns had both magical and Muggle marriage ceremonies, but only one was necessary for a marriage to become legally binding in the wizarding world.

"Your grandmother will still insist on a wedding, though, Minerva. I don't think she'll let you out of it that easily."

"Oh, we'll do something at my father's house when we finish with the Muggle registrar," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

When dinner was finished, Albus got them a Muggle taxi, which sped them from the restaurant to the carriage entrance of the Royal Opera House at a pace Minerva found positively alarming. An automobile ride in the country was one thing; a dash through the narrow, crowded streets of London was quite another.

"*Götterdämmerung*?" Minerva read from the bill posted outside the theatre.

"Yes, have you heard it?"

"No, never."

"It's a bit long," said Albus, "but I think you'll enjoy it."

As it turned out, the performance lasted more than five and a half hours, and Minerva was riveted through each minute.

In the final act, as Brünnhilde sang of joyfully greeting Siegfried as his wife in death and flung herself into the fire, Minerva heard sniffing beside her. She was astonished to see Albus dabbing at his eyes with a handkerchief, and she took his other hand and squeezed it.

When the lights had come up again, Minerva turned to him, her eyes shining. "Thank you so much, Albus. That was indescribable."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. Not everyone likes Wagner, but I took a chance. Filius told me that the soprano was not to be missed. He was kind enough to arrange the tickets. The principal bassoonist is a friend, apparently. They knew one another in Vienna before the war."

"That was very kind of him. And he certainly was right about the soprano." She looked at her programme. "Birgit Nilsson. She is extraordinary."

After retrieving their cloaks from the coat-check and stepping out into the cold London night, they hurried around the corner to cross Russell Street and slipped into a small passage between two buildings to Apparate back to Hogsmeade. When Albus asked, "Are you ready, my dear?" Minerva said, "Not just yet."

She took hold of his cloak and pulled him down for a kiss. Her hands moved across his back and down to rest on his bum, and she pulled him close up against her. Breaking the kiss, she whispered, "Do you remember doing this in the alley in Tewkesbury?"

"How could I forget it?"

"You were so passionate. I thought you were going to take me right there. The thought excited me."

"Did it?" he murmured into her neck.

"Yes. Do it now, Albus."

He lifted his head in surprise. "Here?"

"Yes."

"My dear, I..."

She kissed him again. "You want to. I can feel it."

"Of course I want to, but..."

"Then do it. Nobody will see us. And if they do, we can just ... disappear."

She found the pull to his zipper and unzipped his trousers, slipping her hand inside.

"Minerva..."

He reached down to still her hand, and she withdrew it. He held her wrist for a few moments, and she thought he was going to tell her to stop, but instead he backed her up a few inches until her back was pressed against the cold wall. As she gathered her skirt up, he opened her cloak and pulled down the bodice of her gown until her breasts were exposed, licking at her nipples as he fumbled for his wand. He found it, and she felt the chill of the moist night air against her centre as her knickers disappeared. She heard him cast a quick Disillusionment Charm before stowing his wand back under his jacket.

He knelt in front of her, hands at her thighs, and she knew what he was going to do. She held her skirt up with one hand, and when the other moved down to weave through his hair, she was surprised to find it stiff and unpleasant to touch. She had forgotten that his hair had been shortened and slicked back, Muggle-style, and she took a moment to be thankful that wizards didn't generally bother with such foolishness. Then his tongue made her stop thinking altogether.

After a minute, he stopped...how did he always know when she was on the edge?...and stood, lifting her with the aid of a whispered charm, urging her to wrap her legs around him.

As he took her, she thought of that night in Tewkesbury, and of the Muggle soldier on VE Day.

"Fuck me ... fuck me ... oh, gods ... oh!" Her words seemed to spur him on, and when it was over, and he had caught his breath, she said, "Good boy. Now, do you think you can take me home and do it again?"

She couldn't see his smile, but she could hear it in his voice when he said, "I expect so, if you give me a few minutes."

He zipped his trousers and put his arms around her, murmuring, "Happy birthday, Minerva," against her mouth as he turned them before she even had a chance to pull the bodice of her dress back up.

They Apparated to her garden, and after adjusting her dress to cover her breasts, she opened the door, and they stepped into the kitchen and moved swiftly through it to the darkened sitting room. Minerva used her wand to close the curtains, enveloping them in near-total darkness. She felt him come up behind her, his arms encircling her waist and his mouth moving across her shoulders ... her neck ... her jaw ...

He murmured a spell, and suddenly their clothes were gone, and she felt his bare skin warm against her back and his hands moving over her breasts. She tilted her head back to rest against him and covered his hands with her own as they caressed her, and they stood like that for a few moments, Minerva enjoying the solid feel of him against her.

She turned in his arms and put her hands on his shoulders, burying her face in his chest, inhaling his scent...sandalwood and verbena, she thought, mixed with something that was intangibly Albus...and tasted his slightly salty skin with her tongue. She moved her hands down to play over his chest as she knelt down to press her mouth to his

belly. She found the softness there endearing in contrast with the rest of his body, otherwise fit and still firmly muscled; it spoke of countless hours spent reading and writing...and probably enjoying too many sherbet lemons, she thought fondly.

After a few minutes of pleasuring him with her mouth, she released him, stood, and asked, "Do you think you're ready now?"

"What does it feel like, witch?" His voice was low and hoarse. "The question is, are you ready?"

"You're a man of science," she said, "why don't you investigate?"

He did, and found she was very ready indeed.

"Fuck me again, Dumbledore," she whispered.

He crushed his mouth against hers, then steered her, lurching, to the settee, urging her to bend over the arm. He took her there, whispering in her ear...filthy things she'd never heard from his mouth but that sent her into a whirlwind of renewed excitement. She wasn't sure what she herself was saying...probably nonsense...but she could hear her voice above his as they moved.

An explosion of white lights danced before her eyes as she felt her knees buckle. He held her to keep her from collapsing to the floor as he strove towards his own release.

When she recovered, he had finished, and she felt his lips tracing a line of kisses down the length of her spine, making her shiver. Then his hands went to her waist and he helped her stand.

"Was that what you had in mind, Minerva?" he asked softly as he turned her back around to face him.

She cupped his cheek with her palm. "Yes, my darling. That was ~~was~~ exactly what I had in mind." She moved her hand up to his hair. "Perhaps you should change this back, though. As handsome as you look, I think I prefer your natural hair and beard."

He grasped her hand and brought the palm to his lips. "Your wish is my command, my dear. I will need my wand, however," he said, looking around.

"Where did you send our clothes?"

He gave a small chuckle. "You know, I'm not quite certain. I was somewhat distracted." He kissed her lips quickly, then moved carefully around the other side of the settee to find their things, lighting a single candle on the table with a flick of his wrist, washing the room in soft yellow light that cast his shadow, long and thin, over the wood floor.

Minerva was about to go into the kitchen to see if their clothes had landed there, but she was startled by a shout from Albus.

She whirled around to see him facing the corner near the door, and at first she thought he had seen an intruder, or maybe a Boggart, but she was perplexed when she heard him say soothingly, "It's all right. I won't hurt you. But do come out and explain yourself."

Minerva moved up next to Albus and was amazed to see a tiny, wizened elf step reluctantly out from under the small table on which she usually kept papers and other things she meant to take with her when she left each morning.

"Glynnie!" she cried.

"Yes, Mistress Minerva. Glynnie is very sorry to have startled Mistress Minerva's tall friend," the elf said, eyeing Albus up and down.

"That's quite all right, but what are you doing here? Is my grandmother all right?" Minerva asked, anxiety squeezing her chest.

"Mistress Morna is well, Mistress Minerva is not to be worrying," said Glynnie. "Master has written from America to say that Glynnie is to come and help Mistress Minerva at her new house." She held out a small roll of parchment, and Minerva recognised her father's seal.

Minerva looked at Albus, who appeared as if he were trying not to laugh, which annoyed her. How could he find this funny? They had just ... just ... in front of Glynnie!

"Albus, do you think you could find our clothes, please? Just Summon them."

"Glynnie will get them, Mistress." With a snap of her long fingers, a large pile of mixed clothing materialised, hovering in front of the couple.

"Thank you ... Glynnie, is it?" Albus asked, the amusement still evident on his face.

"Yes, sir," said the elf, looking back at Albus with a wry smile. "And Mistress Minerva's close friend would be ...?"

"Albus Dumbledore," he replied with a small bow.

"Tis a pleasure to meet you, sir," Glynnie said, returning the bow.

"Glynnie, do you think you could excuse us while we dress?" said Minerva.

Glynnie gave Minerva a look that plainly said she thought the two mages were slightly barmy, but she said, "Of course, Mistress Minerva."

She Disapparated with a small *pop*, and Albus let go with the laugh he had clearly been trying to hold in.

"Oh, Albus, it isn't funny!" Minerva said. "She must have seen us! What she must think ..."

"Minerva, she's a house-elf, not a child. And if I'm any judge, I'd say she's a house-elf who's been around a while. While it may have been uncomfortable for her to actually watch us, surely she isn't shocked at the idea of people making love."

"You don't understand. Glynnie has known me since I was a baby. It's as if ... as if your friend Bathilda Bagshot had seen us. And it isn't as if we were just in bed, we were ... oh, Merlin ... the things I said ..." She put a hand to her forehead as if to cool it.

He could see that she was really distressed. "Here," he said, sifting through the hovering pile of clothes to find her gown, "put this on. You'll feel better, and then we'll talk with your elf. I'm sure it's not as bad as all that."

Minerva grimaced but took the gown, and they both dressed, Albus bothering only with his pants, trousers, and shirt, which he didn't button.

After breaking the seal on her father's letter, Minerva unrolled it and read. "I can't believe it," she said.

"What?"

"He's giving Glynnie to me. A combination housewarming and birthday present, he says."

"That's very generous."

"Yes, but Glynnie has lived at our house in Caithness all her life. And besides, what would I do with a house-elf? This place is so small, and I'm rarely here."

"Can she cook? You'd surely find that helpful," he said. "Provided you acquire some cooking utensils."

Minerva ignored the jibe and looked at the parchment again. "Da says Glynnie isn't ready to stop serving yet, but she needs a smaller area to look after now that she's getting on."

"Well, then, perhaps you should talk to her. Find out what she wants to do."

"Yes," sighed Minerva. "Glynnie," she called, and the elf appeared a moment later.

"Yes, Mistress?"

Minerva had to think for a moment. She didn't want to offend Glynnie, so she said, "Glynnie, I'm very happy to see you, and I know I'd enjoy your company, but there really isn't very much to do here. I'm not sure you'd be happy. Besides, isn't your family in Caithness?"

"As Mistress Minerva well knows," Glynnie said, "Pilcher's with Master Einar and his family, and Zadio is in Cromarty, still with her father's family. And he's been gone this ten year. So it is no more trouble for Glynnie to visit her children from here than from Master Thorfinn's house. And as for your house, Mistress Minerva, Glynnie will be happy to see to it for you. Glynnie is old and Glynnie is tired, but she is still a good house-elf and can be of good service."

"Oh, I know that, Glynnie," said Minerva. "I just want to be certain that this is what you want. I hope my father consulted you before sending you here."

"Mistress Morna spoke with Glynnie before Master Thorfinn's letter came. Mistress Morna is old like Glynnie. She knows how it is with the aching joints and the draughty house."

"I see," said Minerva. In truth, she really did not want a house-elf, even dear Glynnie, with her in this tiny space. Especially when Albus came. But it seemed as if it was in Glynnie's best interest. Minerva's grandmother expected a great deal from the McGonagall house-elves, but she also cared deeply about their welfare. It was likely she had noticed Glynnie's discomfort and suggested to her son-in-law that the elf be sent to Minerva. Glynnie's comment about arthritis was her typically quiet way of saying she wanted the change.

"All right, then," said a reluctant Minerva, "if you're sure you'd like to live here with me, I'd be pleased to have you."

"Thank you, Mistress," said Glynnie with a bow.

After she had organised a bed for the elf under a cupboard in the kitchen..."Nice and cosy, and no draughts," Glynnie proclaimed it...Minerva said, "Glynnie, Albus is my ... close friend, as you say, and he will occasionally come to visit here. I would appreciate it if you could ..."

"Not to worry, Mistress Minerva. Glynnie understands. She will go away when Mistress Minerva wants to mate with Albus Dumbledore. Glynnie hopes Mistress's matings are successful. She would like to care for one last wizard baby before she dies."

Minerva didn't quite know what to say to that. "Oh ...um ... thank you, Glynnie." As she turned to go, she stopped and said, "You will not mention anything you may have seen or heard this evening to anyone, will you? Even your friends?"

"No, Mistress. Glynnie will say nothing about it to anyone."

"Thank you."

Minerva didn't think Glynnie was the sort of house-elf to gossip about the family she served, but she knew of some who did. Moreover, house-elves seemed to be less private than wizards and witches about sex...as a child Minerva had got an unintended education when she had run across one of the younger McGonagall elves *in flagrante delicto* with another elf she hadn't recognised when she had wandered into the kitchen one night looking for a glass of milk.

The elf had simply said, "What does Mistress Minerva need?" without stopping his enthusiastic rogering of his equally unconcerned companion. Eight-year-old Minerva had dashed from the room and the next day had tearfully asked her father if Pilcher had been punishing his friend for some infraction.

Thorfinn had flushed bright pink and told her no, it was not punishment. He added only that from that point on, Minerva should summon Glynnie if she needed anything from the kitchens at night. Later that afternoon, Minerva's gran had sat her down and told her the facts of life, simply and without equivocation, for which Minerva had been grateful and relieved, if slightly revolted at the idea.

Trying to repress the memory, Minerva said, "Thank you, Glynnie," and made to go. Turning back, she added, "And welcome to our home. I hope you'll be happy here."

"Thank you, Mistress Minerva. What time would you and Albus Dumbledore like breakfast?"

"Later, I should think. Nine?"

"Very good, Mistress."

As she climbed the stairs, Minerva thought about Glynnie's remark about having a baby. It had been an uncomfortable reminder of the conversation she had been avoiding having with Albus.

The only time she and Albus had ever spoken about children was during their first affair, and then only when Albus had been enumerating all the drawbacks to their relationship. He had said then that he could not give her a husband and family. Now that he had apparently changed his mind on the first point, what did that imply for the second?

Minerva had known that she didn't want children with Doug or with Alastor and that she certainly didn't want them alone...but did that mean she didn't want them at all? She wasn't sure. The idea of marriage had not been in her mind until Albus had sprung it on her. And she had agreed without really thinking about it. She loved him, and if he wanted it, and if it would smooth their path in some respects, she would marry him. But the question of having children deserved more thought. And yet, she hadn't ever brought it up, and neither had he. What did that mean?

When Minerva joined Albus in the small bedroom, he was already snoring, so she changed into a nightdress and slipped in beside him, but it was some time before she was able to fall asleep.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Chapter 49 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"How long are you going to keep punishing him?"

Surprisingly...to Minerva, anyway...it was Einar McGonagall who came up with the solution to what she thought of as the "wedding problem".

The family had gathered at the McGonagall home to welcome Thorfinn back from his extended trip to North America. Over dinner, Thorfinn enquired as to his daughter's wedding plans, and she replied that she and Albus had decided to marry in a Muggle register office.

"Oh, Minerva, no!" said Morna. "I thought it had been decided that you'd do it here. Not in some dingy register office."

"Now, Morna. Please remember that I married Elisabeth in a Muggle office. It isn't the end of the world," said Thorfinn.

"I am sorry," Morna said. "I meant to cast no aspersions on your marriage to Elisabeth. It's simply that..."

The other McGonagalls were dumbfounded when the usually composed witch couldn't finish her sentence but snatched up her napkin to dab at suddenly wet eyes.

A concerned Minerva got up from her seat and went to her grandmother, kneeling by her chair.

"Gran, what is it?"

"*Och*, nothing but foolishness. Do forgive me. You and Albus must do whatever you think is right, of course."

"Yes, but something is upsetting you. Please tell me what it is."

Morna put her hand on top of her granddaughter's, which was resting on the older witch's knee.

"All this wedding talk...it just reminds me of your mother."

Minerva was taken aback. "How so?"

"Foolishness, as I said," said Morna. "Morrigan...silly thing...but she used to talk about your wedding." Morna looked around the faces at the table. "She was sure you'd be a boy, you see," she said, looking back at Minerva. "And when it turned out you weren't, she was so delighted." Turning quickly to Einar, she added, "Not that she didn't want a boy, of course. But she'd always hoped she'd have at least one daughter. I think she'd missed having a sister, or perhaps some female cousins to play with growing up ... all those boys ...

"So when you came along, Minerva, she always joked that she only knew boys' games to teach you. And Merlin knows she didn't hold with dressing you in frills and frippery just because you were a witch. But she did confess to having fantasies about her daughter's wedding ... that it would be as lovely as her own had been ... something you two could share when you were grown. She'd saved her dress, you see, the one fancy thing she'd ever willingly worn, I think, and so lovely in it she was, too."

Now, everyone at the table had to wipe their eyes...it was almost comical.

"Gran, why didn't you tell me?" asked Minerva. "I had no idea it meant so much to you."

"No, and why should you? It's your wedding, and you must do as you see fit."

"We can have a proper celebration here. It isn't that I don't want it," she said, although that was only half true. "It's just that Albus and I don't want it to become public knowledge, and we thought the best way to avoid that was to avoid a wizarding ceremony."

"Of course. It makes sense," said Morna. "That's what you must do."

"May I make a suggestion?" offered Einar, and everyone turned to look at him.

"Please do," said Thorfinn.

"Why not have a Muggle ceremony here?"

Silence reigned for a few moments, then Thorfinn said, "How would we do that? We can hardly invite a Muggle registrar here."

"No," agreed Einar. "But what about a Muggle minister?"

"I fail to see the difference," said Thorfinn.

"The difference, Da, is that I *know* a Muggle minister. He's the brother of one of the chaps I work with. We've been fishing together...the Muggle way. It's quite relaxing."

"I shall never understand your fascination with Muggles..." Morna began, but Thorfinn interrupted her.

"But in this case, it's brilliant," he said to his son. "As your friend's brother isn't subject to the International Statute."

"No," said Einar. "That's the beauty of it. He knows all about our world, and thanks to the Muggle-born clause, he can mingle with us, but he can't tell anyone in the Muggle world."

Einar stole a nervous glance at his father. He knew that Thorfinn didn't exactly approve of the way the Muggle-born clause of the International Statute for Secrecy was written, but even Thorfinn had to admit, it was better than nothing.

It allowed first-degree Muggle relatives...and others, with special permission...of Muggle-born witches and wizards to interact with the wizarding world. However, they had to agree either to be placed under a charm which would prevent them from disclosing what they knew or to be Obliviated.

It was a choice of coercion for most, Thorfinn often said, coming, as it usually did, along with the hard-to-absorb news that a beloved child was a witch or wizard. If the parent of a Muggle-born witch or wizard refused, he or she would receive a visit from an Obliviator post-haste, and his or her child denied admission to Hogwarts, all but dooming the unfortunate Muggle-born to a sort of shadowy half-life on the margins of wizarding society. An untrained witch or wizard was certainly free to interact with the magical world but would be nearly helpless to cope with it. Understandably, most parents meekly accepted the provisions of the clause, even if they didn't like it.

"Would he be willing to marry us?" asked Minerva, still uncomfortable with the idea of the Muggle clergyman but willing to explore it after having heard her grandmother's revelation about her mother.

"He might. He did Thomas...that's my friend...and his wife's ceremony at her parents' house so they could have a marriage that was valid in both the Muggle and wizarding worlds. It was lovely." Einar frowned. "Lot of praying, though."

"A few Muggle prayers wouldn't hurt anything," said Thorfinn. "What do you think, Minerva?"

"I think I should talk with Albus."

She did, and he thought it a marvellous idea.

Swearing all involved to secrecy, Einar arranged a meeting between Albus, Minerva, and his friend's brother, the Reverend David Dunbar, who proclaimed himself delighted to have the honour of solemnising the marriage of "the great Albus Dumbledore".

It turned out that the Muggle clergyman was just as enamoured of the wizarding world as Einar was of Muggles.

"Dumbfounded I was when it turned out Tommy was a wizard, eh? I was fair jealous when he went awa tae Hogwarts, I dinna mind tellin' ye."

When Albus asked if he didn't mind that neither he nor Minerva was a member of his church, Dunbar replied that it "didna fash" him, and that he was pleased that a witch and wizard wanted to "stand up before God".

Albus looked uncomfortable. "I feel I must tell, you though, Reverend, I am not at all certain I believe in God."

To Minerva's relief, a broad smile broke out over Dunbar's face. "'Tis nae matter, Professor Dumbledore. The important thing is that God believes in ye."

As it turned out, Dunbar was also an educator...a lecturer at Christ's College in the University of Aberdeen...and would be free to come to Caithness after the Christmas holiday began.

And so, the thing was set.

Albus and Minerva would be married the Muggle way on Christmas Eve 1957 by this most strange intermediary, a Muggle minister of the Kirk of Scotland.

~oOo~

One Monday afternoon in mid-November, Aberforth Dumbledore was surprised to see Minerva McGonagall coming through the doors of his tavern.

There were five men giving the Hog's Head their custom, and their nine eyes watched her as she walked up to the bar and asked in a low voice, "Do you have a minute?"

"Aye. But you'll need to wait until I get these kegs changed out," he replied, cocking his head at a barrel that was hovering just behind him.

"All right."

He used his wand to Banish the two other empties to the back room, then went to fetch their replacements. When he returned, Levitating the full kegs behind him, he saw that Minerva now had company.

One of the regulars had sidled up to the bar and was talking to her, while Minerva was looking as though she smelt something bad. Which, come to think on it, she probably did, considering how close the man was standing to her.

"Oi, Preece!" Aberforth called as he directed the kegs into place with his wand. "In case you hadn't noticed, there's a lady standing at my bar, and she don't want to talk to you any more than she wants to smell you. So sod off."

The man walked away, none too steadily, muttering under his breath.

"Thank you," Minerva said. "That was gallant, but unnecessary."

"Oh, I know. You can take care of yerself, Miss Minerva McGonagall. Isn't that what you told me once?"

He smiled when she pressed her lips into a thin line.

"Indeed," she said.

"Any road, I didn't do it for you. I can't afford to let my bar get a reputation as an establishment where a fine lady like yerself can't come for a drink without getting bothered by the likes of that rubbish. So, what'll it be, Miss Minerva McGonagall ... sorry ... *Professor* McGonagall?"

"It's Minerva. And nothing, thanks, Mist... Aberforth. I just wanted a word."

"You come into my bar, you get a drink. No charge for you. I don't want it getting back to my brother that I don't know how to treat one of his ... employees."

"I really don't want..."

Aberforth interrupted her by putting a glass on the bar with a sharp crack. "Here," he said, Summoning a bottle, "have a Gillywater. Nice, respectable drink for a nice,

respectable schoolteacher. Nobody can call you a souse if yer drinking Gillywater of an afternoon." He blew a puff of dust off the bottle, unscrewed it, and poured, then pushed the glass at her.

"Thank you," she said. She picked it up but didn't drink. "Can we speak privately?"

"Aye. In back though, not upstairs. That way, I can keep an eye on the bar through the window," he said, nodding towards the door that separated the bar from the kitchen and back room.

"Fine." She followed him into a cramped kitchen that smelt of cabbage.

"Make yerself scarce," Aberforth said to a house-elf who had been cleaning glasses and peeling potatoes with simultaneous charms.

"A house-elf?" Minerva asked, surprised, after the creature had Apparated away.

"Yeah. Used to work for old Dippet at the school, but there was some dustup with one of the students, and the father made a stink. Dippet had to give him clothes, so I took him on here."

"That was good of you."

Aberforth snorted. "He's cheap, and that's all I care about. Doesn't poke his nose into my business. What did you want to say to me? I've got customers to attend to."

"Of course." Minerva removed from her bag a slip of parchment and a jar of broom polish and held them out to him.

"What's this?" asked Aberforth, frowning.

"It's the location of my family home and a Portkey."

Aberforth took them and looked at the parchment. "And exactly why am I to come to Castle Isleif on Christmas Eve?"

"Because Albus and I would like you to come to our wedding."

He said nothing for a moment.

"Albus know about this?" he asked.

"No," she said, after a moment's hesitation. "But I know it would mean a lot to him to have you there."

"Mebbe it's escaped your notice, Professor, but there's no love lost between my brother and me."

"I'm aware of that, but..."

"Do you know why?"

"Yes. Some of it, anyway."

"Then you'll know why I can't accept yer *kind invitation*," he said, holding out the items to her.

She didn't take them. "How long are you going to keep punishing him?"

He masked his surprise with a mirthless smile. "Long as it takes, I reckon."

"For what?"

"For him to stop playing the hero," said Aberforth, not quite meeting her eye for the first time since she'd met him.

"Is that what he does, do you think?"

"Sure. Defeater of Grindelwald, Order of Merlin, First Class ..."

"That's what others say about him."

"And what do *you* say?"

"I say he is just a man. One who has done many things ... some great, to be sure ... and some less so."

"So he hasn't dazzled you with his great power? His talent? His *kindness*?" asked Aberforth, practically hissing the last word.

"I don't think I'm 'dazzled', no."

"So you see 'im plain, do you?"

"I think I do. And you're wrong, he doesn't see himself as a hero. Not at all."

"Not so's he'd admit it, any road," said Aberforth. She thought he was going to walk out of the room then, but instead he surprised her by asking, "Tell me, Minerva, do you think he loves you?"

She realised with some shock that she recognised the game now. She decided she wasn't going to play it.

"That is between him and myself."

"Sure," Aberforth said genially. Then: "Shall I tell you what I think? Since you've been so kind as to invite me to be part of it?"

"I don't think..."

"I think you're part of another of his grand schemes. It's no secret yer a canny witch. Powerful, too. I can feel it. Anyone comes close to you can, I reckon, if they know what they're feeling. One thing my brother isn't is a fool. He wants to make sure you don't end up on the wrong side o' things.

"There's Darkness brewing out there, I can see it, and Albus knows it, right enough. It's the only reason he ever shows his misbegotten konk in my bar. He knows I hear things. So he keeps me close, passes me a few Galleons now 'n then to keep my head above water, keep this place running. Keeps MLE from shutting me down so he can keep his ear to the ground.

"And now he's got you reeled in good and proper. So you can't turn on 'im. And the only thing I wonder, Professor, is whether he planned it all from the beginning. Did he

start in on you when you were a girl because he knew how things were going to play out? Did he think he was going to *save you* from Darkness by taking you under his wing...and into his bed, if necessary...before you were old enough to know any better?"

The unmistakable sound of ambient magic crackled around them, and Minerva clamped down hard on it. Forcing her teeth to unclench, she said, "I don't know, Aberforth. You'd need to ask him. I ..."

Or is it that you think you're going to *save him*?" Aberforth's eyes sparkled in an unnerving imitation of his brother's famous twinkle.

A row of dirty glasses on the counter behind him exploded in a shower of glass and sticky liquor.

He wiped the look of surprise quickly from his face and smiled broadly, knowing he had hit his mark.

She was not yet good enough at the game.

"I'm sorry," Minerva said, withdrawing her wand to clean up the mess. "Are you cut?"

"I'm fine. I'll do it myself," he said, drawing his own wand. *Tergeo*."

More in control of herself now, Minerva said, "I don't think the glasses are salvageable. I'll replace them, of course."

"No need," said Aberforth. "I'll just put it on my brother's tab."

"Along with everything else, I expect," Minerva said without bitterness. She suddenly felt unutterably sad for the ruined man standing in front of her. She wondered what it must be like to live only for spite and recrimination and the chance to reap the same pound of flesh, over and over again. She also wondered what miracle had kept Albus from the same fate.

"Keep those," she said to Aberforth, indicating the parchment and the Portkey. "If you change your mind, the Portkey will activate for three minutes at five o' clock on the twenty-fourth. As I understand it, you are the only family Albus has...at least until he joins mine. We would welcome you too, Aberforth. If your own pride could stand it."

With that, she turned briskly and walked out the doors to the bar.

Aberforth looked down at the parchment and jar of broom polish for a moment before snatching them up and putting them in his robe pocket.

Chapter Fifty

Chapter 50 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"I don't have to make a decision. Does that make me a coward, do you think?"

Albus could not decide whether he preferred Saturday evenings or Sunday afternoons.

Saturdays were for chess and conversation. Albus and Minerva had continued their traditional game after dinner in the Great Hall on Saturdays, and she had quickly become a formidable opponent, which gave Albus great pleasure. It had been some time since he had had an opponent who could be counted on to beat him half the time. Even Filius, who was a fine chess player, had become somewhat predictable. Not so, Minerva. He could never be certain exactly what she would do in response to any of his moves. It was emblematic of the intricacies of her mind, he thought. As well as he thought he knew her, she still had the capacity to surprise him in ways large and small.

Which she did one Sunday evening over haddock in Mornay sauce at her cottage.

Sundays were for slipping off the mantles of Headmaster and professor and being just Albus and Minerva together. Since the start of the autumn term, Albus had been visiting her at the house on Sunday afternoons, staying for dinner when circumstances at the school didn't preclude it. They would eat whatever Glynnie had prepared for them before she popped away after greeting Albus at the door, saying, "Will Albus Dumbledore ask Mistress Minerva to summon Glynnie after he leaves?"

In between bites of fish, Albus asked Minerva about the elf's behaviour.

"I'm getting the sense that your Glynnie doesn't much like me," he said.

"Why would you think that?" asked Minerva

"She disappears for the duration as soon as I come in the door. Do you think she disapproves of us?"

"Not at all. She leaves because I asked her to make herself scarce whenever you come."

At his questioning look, she said, "This is a very small house, Albus. I simply prefer to have it to ourselves when you come 'round."

"I see. And how did she take it?"

"In stride. She wished us 'successful matings'," Minerva said with a laugh.

"Well, this afternoon was certainly successful in my book."

"I don't think that's quite what she meant," said Minerva. "She said she'd like a baby to look after."

Her gaze upon him was steady, and he knew she was asking a question. What surprised him was not the question itself but the roundabout way she was posing it. She was normally so direct with him that when she wasn't, it made him prick up his ears.

"Minerva," he said, putting a hand on hers, "we should probably have spoken about this before."

"I know. And now it's getting late. We can discuss it another time."

Her attempt to end the conversation after having brought it up so obliquely told him how uncomfortable she was with the subject. She rarely avoided an issue; he suspected he could probably count on the fingers of one hand the number of times he had caught her at it.

In truth, he had avoided the topic as well. Before Minerva, it hadn't been anything to think about, an idea with no connection to himself. And after she had re-entered his life, she had rapidly become as essential to him as air. The thought of anything that might divide them...his past or a future in which competing desires might drive a wedge between them...was nearly intolerable.

Judging by her obvious discomfort with the topic, Minerva was as leery as he was of discovering something that might divide them, but they must consider it, he thought.

He said, "No. You brought it up. You must have some feelings about it."

"I don't know. I suppose I've just wondered if you wanted children."

His first impulse was to turn the question around on her...again...but he checked it, feeling that this time, she would get angry at his old, almost instinctive trick.

"What I want isn't the real question, Minerva. And in any event, I'm not sure I have an answer to it. If I did, it was so long ago that I cannot recall it." And here it was, there was no avoiding it: "I have known for a long time that I cannot have children."

His heart nearly dropped out of his chest at her shocked look.

This is it, he thought, *I'm going to lose her*. Her forced himself to look at her face, and when he saw her shock turn to puzzlement, he realised how what he had told her had sounded, and relief buoyed him.

"No, I don't mean that I am physically unable to have them," he said. "I mean that it would not be right...morally."

"You mean it would be too dangerous."

"Yes. And not just for them, but for me. And you. Children make one vulnerable in ways I cannot afford. Do you understand?"

She nodded, and he believed that she did understand. It occurred to him then that the discomfort he had seen in her might not be fear that he wouldn't want children, but fear that he would.

He asked, "Are you disappointed?"

"No. Relieved, I suppose," she said, confirming his suspicion.

"You don't want children, then?"

"I don't know. But knowing that you don't want them...or at least, won't have them...makes it easier. It means I don't have to make a decision. Does that make me a coward, do you think?"

"Not at all. But, Minerva, just because I will not have children, it is not foreordained that you should not have any."

It hurt to say it, but if they were going to have this conversation, they'd have all of it. He didn't want her to wake up thirty years from now to regret having spent them with him.

She looked back at him with a mixture of curiosity and exasperation. "Foreordained? No. But that's an odd way to put it. I may be ambivalent about the idea of having children, but I am far from ambivalent about the subject of who the father of any of my putative children would be. I may not have a choice about the former, but I certainly have a vote in the latter."

He couldn't help saying, "But you might change your mind."

"As might you."

"Anything is possible." As he said it, he recognised that the subject was closed; they had moved from uncomfortable discussion of an answerable question to pleasant debate of its intangibles.

And that was the end of it. Minerva seemed to relax, so Albus did too, and they finished their dinner and the bottle of wine he had brought over discussion of the upcoming meeting of the Board of Governors, at which Albus planned to put forward the suggestion that a new position be created: flying instructor.

"Do you think they'll agree to it?" Minerva asked.

"Oh, I should think so. Especially since I already have a candidate in mind, and I know it's one they'll approve of."

"You have? Who is it?"

"Archie Sinclair."

He was pleased by the look of delighted surprise on Minerva's face.

"Sinclair? Really?" she asked.

"Really."

To say that Archie Sinclair was well known was an understatement. He had been a national hero for Scotland when, at the age of eighteen, he had been asked to play Chaser on the Scottish National Quidditch team straight out of Hogwarts, before ever playing a professional game. That year...1936...thanks largely to Sinclair's aggressive style, the Scottish team had reached the semi-finals for the World Cup, only to be beaten when the Indian team's Seeker caught the Snitch in record time, prompting a near-riot of fans who were upset at having paid many Galleons to see two minutes and seventeen seconds of Quidditch actually played.

Sinclair himself had become controversial in his native Scotland when, after his team's defeat in the World Cup semis, he signed with Puddlemere United rather than with a Scottish team. He'd subsequently helped his team to five British and Irish League Cups and two European League Cups before a 1952 injury forced him to retire from active play in favour of becoming assistant coach.

"How ever did you convince him?" Minerva asked.

"I didn't, exactly. I simply dropped a word with a friend in Magical Games and Sports, and he passed it on to Sinclair. Apparently, he and his wife had a baby earlier this year, and he wants to stop travelling so much. The idea of teaching intrigues him, or so my friend says. And I am assured that the relatively small salary won't be a deterrent. Fortunately, Sinclair didn't spend all his Quidditch earnings; evidently, he's rather a thrifty sort...like many of his countrymen," Albus added with a sly grin at Minerva, who ignored it, being far too interested in the topic at hand to rise to his bait.

She said, "Well, that should make it a much easier sell to the governors, anyway."

"Indeed. Easier than Muggle Studies was, in any event." *And that, Albus thought, is an understatement.*

He had been privately astonished by his predecessor's agility in handling the fractious Board of Governors, and never more so than when Dippet had convinced them, despite some initially staunch opposition from predictable quarters, to fund the new position. Albus and Armando had come up with the idea of "Muggle Studies" on Christmas Eve 1936 over mulled mead. Both men had been depressed over the news from Eastern Europe and very concerned about the increasing levels of anti-Muggle sentiment in their own backyard. Early exposure to Muggle culture from a sympathetic teacher, they reasoned...a bit optimistically, as it turned out...might mitigate it in the future.

Armando had been masterful, Albus thought, eventually putting the more stubborn members of Hogwarts's Board of Governors so on the defensive that, by the end of the meeting at which the idea had been proposed, they were all bending over backwards to demonstrate that *they* weren't supporters of this naughty, Muggle-hating *foreigner*, Grindelwald...*certainly not*...and that many of their friends...no, their *best friends*...were Muggle-borns.

After observing his predecessor work his magic at that meeting, convincing this group of governors to approve a flying instructor position should be a walk in the park, Albus concluded.

Later, as Minerva saw him to the door, Albus said, "I'm afraid you mustn't count on me on Saturday evening. The meeting often spills over into drinks and dinner with some of the governors afterwards, and I'm not sure what time I'll get back."

"It's all right." Minerva kissed him quickly. "Go forth and raise funds, Headmaster. You can come by here on your way back to let me know how it went. I'll wait up."

"You needn't."

"Of course I needn't. But I'll want to. Besides, you'll need to unwind a bit after all that hot air you'll be breathing," she said. "I'll give you tea and rub your neck."

He grasped her hands and kissed the back of each one. "I'll see you tomorrow, Professor."

"Tomorrow, Albus."

He Apparated from the back garden to the Hogwarts gates, opening them with an elegant flourish of his large hands.

As he strode up the path to the castle, he thought how strange was the notion that someone might "wait up" for him. That there was someone who cared how his day had gone, not just for the news of how he had or hadn't achieved his aims and what that might mean for the various and sundry people who depended upon him, but for his own sake.

Albus thought about their history together, his and Minerva's. Back when she had been eighteen and declared her love for him, he had told himself that it was a passing fancy, a schoolgirl crush...but he had allowed himself to be enraptured by it just the same. Why?

Perhaps, he thought, because it had been such a very long time since he had felt ... beloved.

It was a feeling, he realised, that he hadn't experienced since his mother had died. Before then, if he were to tell the truth. Albus had never doubted his mother's love for him, but she'd had so much else to contend with...Ariana's condition, Aberforth's increasingly troubling behaviour...that Albus had been a bit of an afterthought, someone not to be worried over, a boy who could take care of himself and everyone else, if need be. He had never resented this...had revelled in it, in fact, in his teenage years...but he suddenly knew that he had missed it, the feeling of being first in someone's thoughts, and the idea stopped him mid-step.

And now he was beloved once again.

Still, he told himself. She loves me still. She has always loved me. As I have always loved her.

He could only hope that nothing would change that, but experience had taught him that one could count on nothing. Love was powerful...perhaps the most powerful force in the world...but one had to be careful with powerful forces. They could protect and nourish, but they could also lead to grievous harm.

Children make one vulnerable, he had told Minerva, but the truth was that it was love that ruthlessly exposed one's viscera, that sometimes drove one to commit the worst of sins. Albus had only to remember his own father to understand that.

The man who had tortured three Muggle teenagers into near-madness had been driven to it by love for his child.

Albus hoped his love for Minerva, and hers for him, would make him a stronger, a better, man. It certainly felt so now. But times change, he knew. Darkness falls, and sometimes, despite our best intentions, we are pulled in with it.

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.

The line sprang into his head suddenly, making him shiver despite the Warming Charm he had cast on his cloak upon leaving the cottage.

He had no doubt who the "rough beast" of Yeats's poem was in his mind

Whatever was to come, Albus thought, they would face it together. Love would surely make them stronger. Vulnerable, yes, but all the more powerful for it...more willing to fight to protect it.

The greater good had been enough motivation for him in the past, but now he was finding his centre had shifted. And he would do his damndest to ensure it held.

~oOo~

The idea for the curse came to Tom suddenly.

Romulus Lestrangle had been nattering on to Mulciber and Rosier about his son Rabastan and his accomplishments when something caught Tom's attention.

"What? What was that you said?" he barked at Lestrangle.

Lestrangle turned mid-sentence to his master. "My lord, Rabastan hopes to achieve several O.W.L.s and..."

"No, not that, you fool, what you said before ... about this Defence teacher."

Tom enjoyed watching how Lestrangle's eyes darted nervously to his companions' faces. "My lord ... just that Rabastan has discovered why the subject is being taught so poorly. The professor is apparently the father of a Squib."

"Really?" Tom said, mostly to himself, wondering why he had not discovered this before. Then again, he had not really had any interest in the teaching position, so he had not bothered to find out much about its current holder. A mistake... no, Voldemort didn't make mistakes, he reminded himself. An oversight, perhaps.

"Yes, my lord," Lestrangle continued, warming to his subject now that his master seemed interested. "Apparently, Meadows...the professor...is married to a foreigner of unclear magical heritage. They produced a Squib. Not surprisingly, I think. In fact..."

"No one cares what you think, Lestrangle," Tom said. "Tell me, how did young Rabastan discover this interesting information?"

As it happened, Rabastan Lestrangle had been turned out of the D.A.D.A. class when Meadows discovered he had been using the information gleaned in lectures and his textbook to invent some nasty hexes, which he had been practicing on first- and second-years in the Slytherin dormitories. Naturally, none of his "subjects" had complained, but Madam Soranus had...vociferously...when one girl ended up in the hospital wing thanks to one of Rabastan's experiments.

Since his expulsion from class, Rabastan had "done some research" on Julian Meadows. Romulus did not elaborate on what his son's research entailed or how it was conducted, but he didn't need to; Tom had some shrewd guesses. Perhaps this young man would be one to watch, he thought.

Romulus was saying, "How can Dumbledore expect children to learn about the Dark Arts when his professor does not allow his students to practice them..."

Tom raised his hand to silence him. "Enough. I have work to do. Leave me. All of you."

The three men hurried out of the room, and Tom summoned one of Nott's house-elves to fetch a glass of wine. When it was duly delivered, he settled down next to the enormous stone fireplace to consider what he had learned.

Tom had found his Defence Against the Dark Arts courses informative and most useful...and extremely frustrating in their limited scope.

Galatea Merrythought had been a wonderful teacher, Tom had to admit, and she clearly possessed a body of knowledge on both the practical and theoretical aspects of the Dark Arts that was as deep as it was broad. Tom had wanted to approach her, to persuade her to take him under her wing so he could explore the limits of her understanding, but she had been altogether too close to Dumbledore. Tom wouldn't have been able to manipulate her as readily as he had, say, Slughorn, into sharing information that was off the beaten path of the Hogwarts curriculum, so to speak. Anything unusual Tom had asked of her would have got back to Dumbledore, he was certain.

And in the end, it hadn't really mattered, had it? Tom was bright and talented enough to discover what he needed to know without Merrythought's help, although the guidance of such a knowledgeable teacher might have sped the process up.

But most students were not as gifted as he was. Not by the widest margin imaginable.

And not many shared Lord Voldemort's outlook on things. Not yet, anyway.

So perhaps it would be best, Tom mused, if Hogwarts's students were prevented from learning much defence. Best if the vast majority of them never came within an ocean's breadth of understanding the Dark Arts, in fact.

The more ... visionary ... of them would find their own way, just as young Tom Riddle had. And if they were of the right mind, they would find help if it was needed. Help that was quite outside the influence of that meddling old fool of a Headmaster.

But how to disrupt the inconvenient education of the dull, dim-witted masses?

By removing the teacher, Tom thought.

Professor Merrythought had retired at the end of Tom's sixth year, and it had taken a few months for her replacement...Professor Meadows, Tom now recalled...to become truly competent in the classroom. Meadows would be replaced, of course, but it would take time. And his replacement could be dealt with in turn.

Then it came to Tom: a curse, not on the individual, but on the position itself.

Such magic was incredibly delicate and difficult...far more so than simply cursing an individual would be...but far from beyond Tom's...Lord Voldemort's...capabilities. It would need an adaptation of one or two of the complex curses developed by the more enterprising of wizards past. Curses designed to wreak revenge on the families of those who had crossed them. Curses that had doomed entire bloodlines in one way or another. Tom had made an extensive study of these during his travels. The Romani versions were particularly powerful and inventive.

Tom performed a feat something like self-Legilimency to reach back into his memory to retrieve what he had learned about such curses.

Three hours later, he had it.

He was almost sure it would work. He only needed to cast the spell physically on the first of the doomed D.A.D.A. professors. Once certain preliminary preparations were made, the curse would pass directly from the first to the next the moment each teacher signed the contract. The key would be to vary the effects; where many of his like-minded predecessors had gone wrong, he thought, was in making the spell too obviously a curse. If each victim was dispatched in the same way, it would be all too easy to figure out. And although Tom was confident that any curse he placed would be extremely difficult to break, he couldn't be positive that Dumbledore wouldn't be able to figure it out. Best not to kill the victims, then, he decided. At least not directly. That might provoke open warfare between Dumbledore and himself, and that he did not want.

Not yet, old man. But someday ...

~oOo~

That's funny, Julian Meadows thought. *Wasn't it raining a moment ago?*

He looked up into the dark sky. The stars were obscured by clouds, but there was no indication of rain. Julian held out his arm, examining the sleeve of his cloak. No sign of moisture.

Odd.

He removed the glove from his left hand and ran his fingers over the nap of the wool on his other arm.

Dry.

Perhaps what he had felt before was mist or some moisture that had gathered on the trees and dripped onto his face. He took a few steps forward, then stopped.

Where was I going?

It took him a moment to recall that he was on his way home after a day's teaching. He shook his head to try to clear the cobwebby feeling in it.

I need more sleep, he admonished himself.

Concentrating on his front yard...and it took him a few seconds longer than it really ought to have done for him to picture it in his mind...he closed his eyes and turned into the pressing darkness of his Apparition.

Romulus Lestrangle and Laurence Rosier stepped out from behind the enormous Scots pine that had hidden them from view as they watched Meadows.

"What do you think?" asked Rosier.

"I think it's a job well done," said Lestrangle.

"Yeah, but we should've wet him down a bit before Rennervating him. It was raining when we picked him up, remember?"

"Maybe. But it was a difficult enough job waking him and Obliviating and Confounding him from over here without worrying about the weather."

"Certainly, but he noticed. What if he puts it together?"

"He won't," Lestrangle said. "You saw him, he just went on his merry way. Chalked it up to overwork or something. Let's head back and give our report. I'm freezing my arse off here."

"Too right."

With that, the two wizards popped out of sight, and the only witness that would remember they had ever been there was the fox that was cowering inside a hollowed-out log near the large pine, hiding from the strange, dark-hooded figures that had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, bearing a third figure, whom they had propped up against the iron gates two yards away from where she hid.

Poking her small, black nose out, the fox sniffed the air for danger. Sensing that it was gone, she manoeuvred her aching, gravid body carefully out of the log and lumbered along the ground and between the bars of the gate, hoping she'd make it to the forest before another of those two-legs came along. She'd intended to have her kits in the comfort and shelter of the log, but the area no longer felt safe. It smelt of wickedness.

She shivered and forced her weary legs to move onward.

Chapter Fifty-One

Chapter 51 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"I don't need to kill you, Tom."

Albus had just finished signing the letter officially offering Archie Sinclair the position of Hogwarts's first flying instructor when he was startled by the sound of his brother's voice from across the room.

"You busy, Albus?"

Albus got up and went to the fireplace where Aberforth's head was hovering and flickering in the greenish flames that heralded a Floo call.

"A bit," he replied, kneeling on the hearth.

"Are you alone?" Aberforth whispered.

"Yes."

"Good. Thought you might want to know that one of those tossers has shown up in my bar again."

A kernel of anxiety sprouted in Albus's belly.

"How do you know it's one of them?"

"Recognise him from before. He's memorable."

"What's he doing?"

"Having a ginger beer," Aberforth scoffed. "Waiting out the storm, I reckon."

Albus glanced out the window where the rain was splattering a sharp tattoo against the glass. The storm had moved in suddenly and ferociously early this afternoon, sending Professors Beery and Kettleburn into parallel frenzies trying to protect their various charges from the onslaught. The afternoon Herbology classes had been enlisted to help move the more delicate plants into one of the greenhouses, while Silvanus had dismissed his classes, and he and Hagrid reinforced and covered over several of the magical stock pens. Filius had cancelled his own classes to help his colleagues cast reinforcing and protective charms around the greenhouses and pens.

Albus said, "I imagine so, yes. Nobody is going to be Apparating in this weather."

"You want me to do anything about him?"

"No. Just keep an eye on him for me. I might come by...under cover...to see what he's up to."

Aberforth nodded, and the fire gave a little flare, then he was gone.

Damn.

It might be nothing, of course...probably was...but Albus wasn't going to take any chances. He and Filius still had not figured out how Riddle had got into the school last spring, a fact which continued to drive Albus nearly mad. If one of Riddle's Death Eaters was in Hogsmeade, it was altogether too close for Albus's comfort.

He tried to shrug off his fatigue as he went to his desk and wrote a brief note to Filius to let him know that he was leaving Hogwarts for what he hoped would be a brief errand.

After sending a house-elf to deliver the note to the Deputy Headmaster, Albus took his cloak from the stand in the corner. He had decided to use the small door from the west wing rather than the main entrance in order to be less conspicuous in leaving, but it had the disadvantage of being farther from the path to the front gate. Before stepping out into the squall, Albus cast Warming and Impervious Charms, and, after a few moments' thought, decided to cast a Disillusionment rather than an Invisibility Charm in order to conserve his energy for the walk to the Hog's Head.

Nearly forty-five minutes later, Albus arrived in Clagg's Row, having been buffeted by wind to the point where he seemed to be taking two steps sideways for every one forward. He pressed himself under the eaves of a building and looked about on the off-chance that some other unlucky sod had reason to be out in this weather. Seeing no one, he cast the Invisibility Charm and made his way down the muddy lane, his boots making squelching noises that he could hear even above the wind and rain. He didn't bother with a Silencing Charm, as there would be no one out to hear the noise, but every few steps, he turned to Vanish the tracks made by his invisible feet, although they'd probably have been washed over by the time anyone ventured far enough out into the lane to notice them.

He reached the Hog's Head and crouched down to peer between the broken slats of one of the shutters. The window was filthy and the interior dark, so he couldn't make out anything but a few hazy figures. Albus considered slipping in the back way but decided against it. If the Death Eater left, he'd go by the front door, and it would be difficult, if not impossible, for Albus to slip out behind him unnoticed, even with the Invisibility Charm in place.

It was an hour and a half before the storm died down enough for people to begin venturing out, and another twenty minutes until Albus saw the man Aberforth had undoubtedly been referring to step out of the doors from the inn and into the lane.

He was heavily cloaked, but it was unmistakably Tom Riddle. Not only had Albus caught a glance of his eerily smooth face as Riddle looked left and right down the street, but the way the young man moved was distinctive. It was as if his joints weren't quite made of bone and sinew, but of water or oil. There was a serpentine quality to his movement, Albus thought, although he recognised this as a biased assessment. Riddle didn't so much turn and walk as undulate around, and Albus wondered again what the young wizard had been doing to himself in the years since leaving school. Whatever it was, it was changing him, that was clear. And terrifying. If Riddle's experiments in "pushing the boundaries of magic", as he had put it, had wrought such outward changes, what had they done to the more important parts of the man...his mind? His soul?

As Tom glided past, Albus felt one brief moment of stinging envy despite everything. What discoveries Riddle must have made!

Damned. He is surely damned, Albus reminded himself. He didn't believe in hell, but he assuredly believed that a man could suffer the torments of a hellish existence in this lifetime and that he could condemn himself to a kind of everlasting purgatory in which all the terrors and tribulations of a lifetime continued to weigh him down after death, preventing him from moving on; Albus's conversations with Hogwarts's ghosts had convinced him of it.

What are you so afraid of, Tom?

Thinking Riddle was going to Apparate away, Albus was about to unmask and confront him when Riddle surprised him by reaching into his cloak pocket and pulling out a scrap of parchment, which he studied for a moment before stowing it away again.

Riddle drew his cloak more tightly around him and set off down the lane in a southerly direction. Albus let him get about five yards ahead and followed after him, quickly and quietly casting a Silencing Charm to muffle the sound of his steps.

Dread began to mount in Albus, quickening his breath and stealing the saliva from his mouth as he followed behind his quarry. By the time Riddle turned into Lochdraoidh Lane, the sound of Albus's heartbeat had nearly drowned out the sound of the rain. He knew the Invisibility Charm was beginning to fail with his distraction; he could see his arms and legs flickering in an out of being as he walked.

Riddle stopped in front of Minerva's house and withdrew a small box from his robes. He checked the parchment again and put it back into his pocket.

Albus knew it was time when Riddle took a step toward the gate; if he touched it, Filius's charm would activate, and Minerva would know Riddle had been there.

Albus ended the Invisibility Charm and shouted: "Tom Riddle!"

Riddle whipped around fast enough that the hood of his cloak fell. Even so, his wand was out before he completed the turn towards Albus.

When he saw that Albus's wand remained in his pocket, Riddle lowered his, saying, "Following me, Dumbledore?"

Albus crossed the lane to stand beside Riddle.

"What are you doing here, Tom?"

"I came to visit a mutual friend."

"She isn't here. It's Thursday. She's teaching. As you well know." Albus stepped around to stand between Riddle and Minerva's gate.

"My mistake, then," Riddle said, taking a step back into the lane, just as Albus had intended.

"What is that?" Albus gestured at the box Riddle still held in one hand.

Sliding it back into his cloak pocket, Riddle said, "It isn't any of your concern."

"You're wrong there. If it's something you planned to leave for Minerva, it's very much my concern."

"Are you her keeper now, too?"

"What is it, Tom?" Albus stepped closer, and Riddle took a step backwards. Albus could see him castigate himself for the show of weakness.

Riddle said nothing, and this time when Albus stepped toward him, he stood his ground.

"A souvenir from your travels, perhaps?" Albus asked. "If it's charmed or cursed, MLE could have you up on charges. A few months in Azkaban would slow your studies down considerably."

Riddle gave a barking laugh. "No, nothing like that. My, you are suspicious when it comes to Minerva, aren't you? Tell me, are you planning to keep her under lock and key once you're married? Like Peter-Peter-Pumpkin-Eater?"

Albus kept his face impassive, but his shock was considerable. How did Riddle know about the marriage?

Later, Albus thought. I'll think about that later.

"What's in the box, Tom?"

"A small gift. Call it a wedding present, if you like. And not cursed. A harmless token, in fact. There's no law against a man giving his old school chum a gift, Dumbledore. I doubt even you could make a case for Azkaban on the basis of what's in this box."

"Show me, then. Prove it."

"I don't need to prove anything to you, old man."

Albus could feel the subtle shift in magic in the air, and he grasped hold of Riddle just as the young man began the turn to Apparate. Albus focused his energy as the darkness pressed in on them, and several seconds later, his feet slammed into the wet ground with enough force to drive him to his knees. Riddle crashed down on top of him, and the two men lay in a riot of tangled limbs and yards of damp, musty-smelling wool. Albus hoped nothing was broken...they had hit very hard. He had no time to assess any damage, however, because Riddle was immediately up, wand drawn.

"Where are we?" he screamed, and Albus was surprised at the panic in Riddle's voice until he saw that the young man was bleeding heavily from his wand arm, which was shaking badly.

Splinched.

As he drew his own wand and got to his feet, Albus took a quick mental inventory of his own person. There was no pain, other than a dull ache in his ankles, which had taken the brunt of the hard landing. Apparently, the Splinching was from Tom's initial attempt to Apparate rather than from Albus's redirection.

"We're in a field near the village. Let me heal your arm, Tom," he said, raising his wand.

"Don't do it, Dumbledore," Riddle said, brandishing his wand with obvious effort. "I can curse you just as well with the other arm," he added, switching his wand to his uninjured side.

"I wouldn't recommend it," said Albus. "Just hand over the box, and we're done here. I'll let you go home and lick your wounds."

The moment Riddle opened his mouth, Albus cast his protective charm. Riddle cast a curse Albus hadn't heard of, but it hit Albus's defensive shield with a force that sent him backwards a few faltering steps. Still, his protection held. He didn't counter but waited to see what Riddle would do next.

With a wide arc of his wand and a roar, Riddle sent a fire-dragon at his opponent. The heat singed Albus's beard, but it wasn't difficult for him to propel it back, forcing it to whirl around the two duellists, sending up clouds of steam where it met the snow-dusted grass. Albus quickly cast another protective charm as Riddle danced about, hurriedly building his own protections. Albus briefly considered sending the fire-dragon back at Riddle, but he opted instead to Vanish it in an implosion that sucked the air briefly from the area and left Riddle clutching at his throat, his lips opening and closing like a fish for a few moments.

"Stop now, Riddle, before you get hurt," Albus said, advancing on his adversary.

Tom ignored Albus's plea and regained his breath, firing another curse in a language Albus thought was Bengali. It must have got through, because, for just a moment, Albus felt his own throat tighten. Something designed to occlude the airway, then. After a moment's concentration, Albus's wordless Hindi counter-spell ended the curse, and he continued to advance on Riddle.

"Stop!" Riddle shouted. He cast another series of protective charms around himself, then aimed his wand back at Albus. Before he could cast, though, Albus's *Petrificus Totalus* blasted through his protections as if they were tissue. They didn't even give off light as they dissolved, Albus noted with satisfaction. Apparently, Tom had spent most of his time on complex offensive spells rather than in strengthening his defensive ones. A young man's mistake, Albus thought.

Riddle couldn't move. Albus relieved him of his wand with a quiet *Expelliarmus* and came to stand directly in front of him.

"Simplicity first, Riddle, eh? You've forgotten what Professor Merrythought taught y...*Petrificus Totalus*!"

Riddle had made a tiny movement of his arm; he'd obviously managed to end Albus's very powerful petrification hex even without the use of his wand or his voice...much as Minerva had done during the championship duel all those years ago.

Impressive, Albus admitted to himself. Even Gellert Grindelwald hadn't managed to break through one of Albus's hexes, and he had been as powerful as Albus, or nearly so. Riddle had clearly been working on concentrating his power, on focussing it.

Albus revised his assessment of Riddle a bit. He was not the boy he had been, but a man, Albus reminded himself...a wizard, with a grown wizard's ability to control the considerable gifts Nature had given him. Many wizards never managed it. Albus had often thought that his own greatest asset was not his power, but his will and ability to channel it. Tom Riddle was not quite as powerful as Albus Dumbledore, but he clearly possessed the same drive and focus. It would make him a formidable adversary. But not yet.

Albus reached into Riddle's cloak pocket and withdrew the box.

"I'll have this for now," he said, putting it in his own pocket. "If it turns out to be as harmless as you say, you'll get it back via Madoc Borgin."

Albus released the hex and handed Riddle his wand without lowering his own.

Riddle took the wand, his eyes never leaving Dumbledore's face.

"Don't ever let me catch you skulking around here again." Albus added. "Stay away from Minerva. Or I promise you, you'll have a lot more than a minor Splinching to worry about."

"You can't kill me, Dumbledore."

"I don't need to kill you, Tom. You've learnt some impressive magic in your travels, no question. But you're still just a pest to me. A fly I could swat without batting an eye. You've just seen that, I think. And if you keep buzzing around, I'll do it."

"And rot in Azkaban. Maybe in your father's old cell?"

"Maybe," Albus said without blinking.

"You won't always be around to protect her, Dumbledore. You'll have to die sometime."

"As will we all. But not today, apparently." Albus said, "Go now. Have that arm seen to."

Riddle clutched his wounded arm, turned, and disappeared.

Albus lowered his wand and followed suit.

~oOo~

Albus resisted the temptation to open Riddle's box. When he had returned to Hogwarts, he summoned an elf and gave him two tasks: first, to ask Professors Flitwick and Meadows to come to his office as soon as classes were done for the day, and second, to bring him a large pot of the strongest, hottest tea he could make.

Albus eyed the blanket of parchment that was spread haphazardly across his desk. When the elf returned with the tea, Albus decided to take it to his quarters and warm up in a hot bath rather than finish his work at the moment.

The combination of hot tea and warm water managed to thaw his nearly frozen fingers and toes and soothed his electrified nerves and aching muscles. He soaked and sipped for nearly forty-five minutes, willing himself not to think about Riddle and what had transpired that afternoon.

By the time Filius and Julian appeared in the Headmaster's office, Albus felt clear-headed enough to explain calmly what he needed from them.

"Are there any specific curses you'd like me to look for?" Julian asked, turning the box over to examine the bottom of it.

"No. It could be anything," Albus said. "The person from whom I confiscated it has some knowledge of esoteric magic."

The glance Filius gave him told Albus that his deputy now understood his concerns about the mysterious box.

"A student?" Julian asked, surprised.

"No," Albus said.

Julian waited, as if expecting Albus to explain further. When he didn't, Julian turned his attention back to the box. "May I?" he asked, drawing his wand.

"Please do," said Albus.

Julian laid the box on the table and began.

Ten minutes and nearly twenty spells later, Julian said, "I can't find anything on the box itself. There might still be a curse on whatever's inside, though. I'd have to examine it separately."

"Thank you," said Albus. "Filius, will you have a look at the box before I open it?"

Filius did so, and, like Meadows, pronounced the box clean of any charms he could discern.

"Very well," Albus said. "You might want to stand back when I open it."

"Albus, let me open it. I'm the Defence master, it really should fall to me," Meadows said.

"No, Julian, but thank you. As this is not, strictly speaking, school business, it is not your responsibility."

He took the box from Filius and gestured the two other wizards to back away.

When they were across the room, Albus said, "Here goes nothing."

At Filius's raised eyebrow, he said, "Muggle expression."

Albus tore open the gilt paper that covered the box, which, denuded of its wrapping, appeared to be a small jewellery case. He opened the top. When no disaster befell the Headmaster, Filius and Julian hurried over to peer into the case with him.

Inside lay a delicate silver chain bearing a pendant in the shape of a dragon. The dragon's tail coiled around its body to its mouth, which appeared to have swallowed the end of it. It was a necklace, pretty and well-made, but not expensive or unusual. It was the kind of thing one might pick up in any number of shops in Diagon Alley for a few Galleons.

Why would Riddle want to give Minerva this ... trinket?

Albus felt the other two staring at him, so he said, "Well, this doesn't look much like a Dark object, does it?"

"No," agreed Filius. "But one never knows."

"Indeed," said Albus. "So I'd like you both to test it for curses. Thoroughly."

"Of course," said Julian. "It may take several days to run a full series of tests; a few of the spells take time to reveal results."

"Fine. Run them, if you will, Julian, then give it to Filius for his evaluation."

"Certainly, Albus." Julian took the box from Albus and put it in his pocket.

Albus said, "And Julian, please lock it up safely. I don't want anyone else to handle it by mistake. All right?"

"Of course."

As he walked them to the door of his office, Albus said, "Thank you both for your help. Julian, I'm sorry to have kept you so late."

"It's all right, Albus. I had to wait for the storm to die down, anyway. I think it's clear enough for me to Apparate now."

"I should think so," Albus said.

He bid them goodnight and went to his desk to attack his paperwork, his mind somewhat eased by the uneventful unwrapping of the necklace.

Two days later, Julian Meadows was blind.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Chapter 52 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"I used every precaution with that blasted necklace."

As Albus stepped out onto the fourth floor of St Mungo's, he bumped into a petite, dark-haired witch who was hurrying to the lift, head down. When she looked up, he recognised her as Natasha Meadows and put a steadying hand on her shoulder.

"Professor Dumbledore!" she exclaimed.

"Please excuse me, Mrs Meadows," Albus said. When the lift doors closed behind him, he added, "And now I've caused you to miss your lift. I am sorry. How is Julian?"

"He is well, other than his eyes," Natasha replied in her lightly accented English.

"Have they discovered the cause of his affliction yet?"

"No, Professor. The Healers are with him now, making some more tests. I'm afraid you will have to wait if you want to see him."

"Ah. Well, then, perhaps you would permit me to escort you home, if that is your destination."

"Home, yes," she said. "Anton is waiting for news. But you mustn't disturb yourself, Professor. I will be taking the Knight Bus back to Aberdeen, so it may take some time."

Albus recalled that Julian had told him that his wife had had little magical schooling, thanks to the upheavals in Russia during her youth. It was unlikely she could Apparate.

He said, "I would be honoured if you would permit me to provide you with a Side-Along Apparition, Mrs Meadows. I believe I remember your home well enough to get us there safely."

"That would be very kind, Professor, thank you."

Once Natasha was safely back home, Albus returned to St Mungo's. It was another twenty minutes before a grim-faced Healer emerged from Julian's room, followed by a very young man wearing the pale-yellow robes of a Healer-in-training. The Healer gave Albus a terse nod as she swept by, but the trainee stopped, recognising his former Transfiguration teacher. After a moment's thought, Albus recognised him as well. No wonder he looked so young; the fellow had been in Albus's N.E.W.T. class only two or three years before. He groped for the boy's name for a moment. Finding it, he said, "Good afternoon, Mr Smethwyk. Can you tell me, how is Professor Meadows?"

The young man looked pleased to be addressed on a professional matter by his former teacher. "He's stable, I think, Professor Dumbledore. He..."

The Healer interrupted, her voice sharp and impatient. "Get moving, Smethwyk. We've four more patients to see, and then I'll want your presentation on that missed Animagus transformation."

"Right away, Healer Zabini," Smethwyk said with an apologetic smile at Albus, who returned it with a respectful incline of his head at the Healer-to-be.

Albus pushed open the heavy door to the ward, which contained six beds, only four of which were occupied. Two of the ward's other occupants appeared to be sleeping, while another, who was covered with brown feathers and had a flesh-coloured beak where his nose and mouth should have been, was lying against the pillow, clucking softly. Albus gave him a polite nod as he passed, but the man didn't acknowledge it.

Julian was in the bed farthest from the door, sitting up. He looked perfectly normal, except for the white bandage covering his eyes.

Albus spoke as he approached, so as not to startle him.

"Julian, it's Albus."

"Albus, thank you for coming."

"I would have been here sooner, but I was away from the castle when the owl came." He pulled the worn chair that sat at the foot of the bed towards him and said, "I'll just give us a bit of privacy, if you don't mind." He pulled the curtain around the bed and sat.

He leant close to Julian and asked, "Can you tell me what happened?"

Julian said, "I don't know, and that's the hell of it. I went to bed yesterday, normal as any night, and when I opened my eyes this morning, I couldn't see anything, not even a glimmer of light." There was anguish in his voice when he said, "Albus. I swear to you, I used every precaution with that blasted necklace. There was no curse on it that I could detect, not even the hint of a charm."

"I'm sure you were very thorough," Albus said. "Can you tell me which spells you used on it?"

"All the usual suspects, and a few unusual ones. *Revelio Umbram Cruoris, Deschideți-vă Secretele Întunecate* ... some Creole spells. There's a list with the results in the top drawer of my desk. Albus, there was nothing, I swear..."

"I know, Julian. This wasn't your fault. Where is the necklace now?"

"Also locked in my desk in the Defence classroom. Bottom left drawer. Warded, too."

"Good man."

There was a short, awkward silence, then Albus asked, "Have the Healers been able to give you a prognosis?"

Julian sat back against the pillows. "No." He gave a mirthless laugh. "They're as in the dark as I am."

Albus couldn't smile at the jest. "Rest assured, Julian, that you will have the best care, the best Healers, no matter what it takes."

"Thank you, Albus."

"If there's anything you need in the meantime, don't hesitate to contact me."

"If you would ..."

"Yes?"

"Check in on Natasha and Anton from time to time. While I'm here? She's a bit ... well, she's a bit lost in our world. She does fine, usually, but with me in here she might be a little at sea. Maybe you could see that my remaining pay packet is exchanged and deposited in our Muggle bank. The Clydesdale Bank, the one in Union Street."

"Of course. But what do you mean, 'remaining pay packet'?"

"Well, clearly I won't be able to teach, at least for some time."

"Yes, but even if ... forgive me, but even if you do not regain your sight, you will be paid through the end of your contract. Which doesn't end until June of 1959, I believe. And in that case, you will also receive your casualty payment."

"That's very generous."

"It's in your contract, Julian. People get hurt in our line of work. It's unavoidable. It only makes sense to take care of them when it happens."

"Yes, but you said it wasn't exactly school business..."

"Nevertheless, it was something I asked you to do. As Headmaster. Although it might be best not to mention what I told you about the necklace's provenance, except to your Healers, of course."

Albus didn't want the Board of Governors discovering that the accident had been a result of a personal favour he'd asked of Julian. He hoped they wouldn't attempt to deny Julian the payment of his salary and insurance benefit in any case, but Albus didn't want to risk it. He also didn't want anyone to discover that the necklace had been meant for Minerva. That would open up all sorts of questions he would prefer to keep private.

He left Julian with a promise to be back within the week to visit, either at Mungo's or at Julian's house, should he be released in the next few days. He also left with a thousand questions.

What to tell Minerva?

That quandary plagued him almost as much as the question of exactly what had happened to Julian.

He hadn't told her about his duel with Tom Riddle. He didn't want to frighten her needlessly, but Julian's accident would be the talk of the school in the coming weeks. He had no doubt that whatever he told the rest of the staff, she would press for more information. And she had a right to know that the necklace that had probably blinded Julian had been meant for her, didn't she?

If he hadn't intercepted it, would it be Minerva sitting in that hospital bed?

I will kill Riddle.

The thought came to him, simple and surprisingly comforting. Tom Riddle intended to harm Minerva. Tom Riddle would die.

What Albus had told Riddle during the duel...that he'd end up in Azkaban if the necklace turned out to be cursed...was far from certain.

If Julian had been unable to find a curse on the necklace, the odds were good that none of MLE's investigators would either. If so, Riddle would walk free, and while Albus could use his connections to keep an eye on him, it wouldn't be enough to let Albus sleep soundly at night.

Do it now, before he grows any stronger.

It would be easy to kill him. Albus would only need to think about what might happen the next time Riddle tried to get at Minerva, and his *Avada Kedavra* would tear through any defence Riddle could mount. Whatever the young man had been doing in the years since leaving school, he was still no match for Albus Dumbledore, of that Albus was certain. And Riddle knew it too.

The thought drew Albus up short for a moment.

Why would Riddle have risked it? He obviously knew what Minerva meant to Albus; he had to know that Albus would come after him with all the wrath of hell behind him if he managed to hurt her. And if he hadn't known before, Albus had told him as much during the duel.

What Riddle had said was true: if Albus killed him without authorisation from the Wizengamot, it would mean life in prison, no matter what services Albus had performed in the past. Hadn't Albus himself often insisted on an absolutely fair application of justice? And if his opinion on the matter hadn't always been heeded in the past, he was quite certain his opponents in the Wizengamot would be eager to follow it when the great Albus Dumbledore was the one chained in the Chair of the Accused.

Just like his father, he would die in Azkaban.

And he would never see Minerva again, unless they married before he was sentenced. In which case she would be permitted a monthly visit, during which they would talk in a cold, damp visitation room, unable to touch, guarded by Dementors.

Albus's mother had gone to visit her husband for the first few months after he'd been sentenced, but then she stopped, and she'd never taken her children to see their father. As a boy, Albus had resented that; he'd never got the chance to say a proper goodbye. Later, when he'd been to investigate the prison for himself as a member of the Wizengamot, he'd understood. Any place in which Dementors dwelt was no place for a child, even for an hour.

No. In the event that he went to Azkaban, Minerva would not step foot on that godforsaken rock. There would be no Ministry-holding-cell wedding. She'd stay free of him.

When he got back to Hogwarts, he immediately dispatched an owl to Minerva telling her he would be unavailable for their Saturday-night chess game. He would see her tomorrow at the cottage, he wrote, unless circumstances precluded it. She would understand as soon as she read the second note, the one he would send to all the staff requesting they attend an emergency meeting the following morning.

After the messages were sent, Albus made a brief stop in his quarters, then went to the third floor and used the Headmaster's password to open the door to the Defence classroom. There was a notebook with a black cover in the top drawer, and Albus leafed through it until he found the list of spells Julian had used. There were twelve pages of notes in the Defence master's small, neat hand, outlining the results of many spells Albus recognised and quite a few that he didn't. Julian was a master of the arcana of Dark Magic, and he had been very thorough indeed.

Albus used his wand to remove the pages from the book, Shrinking them and putting them in his robe pocket. He carefully dismantled the wards Julian had told him about from the bottom left drawer of the desk and opened it. The jewellery case was inside, sitting, seemingly benign, on top of several notebooks identical to the one on the desk. Albus withdrew from his pocket the charmed dragon-hide gloves he had retrieved from his quarters and put them on. Taking the jewellery case and holding it away from his body, he Disillusioned himself. He moved swiftly down the corridor and across to the west wing, then through a door to enter a dark, musty hallway that hadn't been used since before Albus had come to teach at Hogwarts. The room at the end of the hallway was small and empty, with only a single, small window to provide illumination.

Albus Vanished the mouldy hangings that still clung to the walls. He conjured a small ball of light to see by, then a sheet of steel, which he Stuck to the wall, covering over the window. He did the same for the door behind him.

He withdrew the jewellery box and placed it on the floor against the far wall. Withdrawing his wand, he backed up to the covered-over door and began.

"Exoritor Ignis Animante!"

A great ball of orange-and-yellow flame erupted from the end of Albus's wand. He could feel the heat of it, smell his beard beginning to singe, and he had to squint as the sudden brightness stung his eyes. The flame took on the shape of a lion's head and began to snap at Albus, but he held his ground, focussing all his power on controlling it.

"Obtemperate Mihi!" he boomed, and the fire-lion drew back.

Albus reached deep within his magic. The feeling of power siphoning up through his wand was nearly physical; it was pleasurable, almost like the building of an orgasm, and he had to keep himself from allowing it to simply pull him along with it and losing control. He pointed the wand at the fire-lion and thrust it towards where he knew the jewellery box was sitting, although he could no longer see it through the smoke and flame. The floor was burning wherever the lion had touched it, but Albus ignored it to concentrate on his task.

The lion flew at the jewellery box, which disappeared into its fiery maw, then it moved around the walls, searching for something flammable to devour, finding only stone and steel. Albus took a few steps towards where the jewellery box had been; nothing remained. He felt a searing heat at his back, and he realised that even that few seconds' distraction might now cost him his life.

He whipped around and brandished his wand at the lion, whose infernal claws had caught the tail of Albus's robes, and once again, he drew on the great store of magic that coursed through him.

"Ad Infernum! Ad Umbras!"

The lion roared, then seemed to draw back upon itself, opening its great mouth. It swallowed itself and was gone. Albus slipped off his outer robe, which was burning in little eddies of flame where the fire-lion had touched it. He felt his magic release, and for a moment he let himself sag with exhaustion and the pain of the burns on his legs.

But only for a moment. There was a path of hot flame where the lion had set the wooden floorboards alight, and they formed a ring around Albus. He garnered his strength again, drew his wand, cast a Bubble-Head Charm, and with a flick of his wand, swept the burning robe to join the other flames.

Water would not douse Fiendfyre, so he used the same spell he had used to Vanish Tom's fire-dragon, using his wand to pull all the oxygen from the atmosphere. The fire on the floor went out after a few moments, and Albus quickly Vanished the steel plank from the window, blasting it open with a switch of his wand. A cold wind flooded into the room, and Albus allowed the air to refill with oxygen, then ended his Bubble-Head Charm. He went over to where the jewellery box had been and knelt down, ignoring the searing pain in his legs. There was nothing left of it but a residue of ash and a tiny lump of tarry-looking substance that had undoubtedly been the necklace. Albus Vanished it, then did the same for the plate over the door. He conjured a plain teaching robe to cover his singed under-robe and went back to his office to heal his burns and consider how he might rid the world of Tom Riddle.

~oOo~

"How long is he going to be?" Macnair groused. "We've been waiting nigh on two hours already, and I'm hungry."

"Shut it," said Rufinus Lestrangle. "You'll wait as long as it takes and longer. The Dark Lord will come in his own time." He added, "Or you could just skip the meeting and go fill your belly. Maybe get a taste of what Carrow over there got when he fucked up and almost got himself arrested last week." He crooked his thumb at a short, pasty-faced wizard with thinning blonde hair who startled at the sound of his name.

Macnair glared at Lestrangle but said nothing more.

The small group sat around the table without speaking for the next few minutes, and the only sound punctuating the silence was the intermittent growling of Macnair's empty stomach. Every time it made a noise, he looked around guiltily, as if afraid someone might decide it was another complaint about the Dark Lord's tardiness.

The silence broke when Megaera Nott burst into the room, waving a piece of parchment in front of her.

"He's gone!" she cried.

"What do you mean, 'gone'?" asked her husband, standing.

"An owl just delivered this," Megaera said, holding the parchment out to him. "The Dark Lord says..."

Rufinus stood, holding out his hand for the scroll, saying, "I'll take that, Mrs Nott."

She hesitated only a moment, then handed it to Lestrangle rather than to her husband, who sat back down without another word.

Lestrangle opened the scroll and scanned it. He looked up and around at his comrades. "It seems the Dark Lord has decided to disappear for a time," he said, rolling up the parchment.

There were nervous glances around the table, but no one spoke.

"He has decided to continue his studies abroad, the better to prepare for what is to come, he writes. We are not to look for him; he will contact us according to his need. He instructs us to continue with our plans to infiltrate the Ministry and to stay true to his cause, but we are to make no definitive moves until his return." Rufinus looked around at the other Death Eaters. "The penalty for disobedience will be severe."

Megaera glanced at her brother, Orcus. He was still weak and shaky from the hours he'd spent under the Dark Lord's wand after having been questioned by MLE in connection with a spate of Muggle-baiting. He'd thought the Dark Lord would be pleased...what was all this for if not to set wizards in their rightful place over Muggles?...but Voldemort had been furious.

Poor, stupid Orcus, Megaera thought. All he'd done was to draw attention to himself and, by extension, his associates. And the Dark Lord's subsequent wrath had been far worse than anything the Aurors could dish out. She still heard her brother's screams in her sleep a week later.

If the Dark Lord was gone, so much the better, she thought. He'd been their "guest" for nearly a year, and they'd gained nothing by it. Rufinus LeStrange was still his favourite, despite everything Sebastian had done for him. The Dark Bloody Lord couldn't get far enough away for her taste. She hoped he'd never return. The baby inside her kicked, and she placed a protective hand on her belly.

LeStrange said, "The Dark Lord instructs me to take charge of our little organisation in his absence."

"Why you?" said Avery. "I've been with him just as long."

"Perhaps because I don't meet the Dark Lord's orders with foolish questions," retorted LeStrange.

Mulciber was the only one to voice the question they all had. "So, what do we do now?"

"Exactly as the Dark Lord says," replied Rufinus. "We plan. We watch. We wait."

"For how long?" asked Romulus LeStrange. When his brother turned a sharp gaze on him, he amended his question. "I mean, how long does the Dark Lord say he'll be away?"

"He doesn't," said Rufinus. "And it doesn't matter. We keep faith as long as it takes to see the Dark Lord triumphant. Does anyone disagree?"

Nobody spoke.

~oOo~

Voldemort stepped out into the noisy streets of Muggle Cairo, his heart lighter than it had been since the duel with Dumbledore.

The prospect of discovery always excited him, and he'd never been to Egypt before. There were secrets here, he thought. Ancient secrets of life and death, and he intended to unlock them.

The memory of the duel still pricked at him, though.

The necklace had been a mistake. Voldemort didn't make mistakes, but Tom Riddle was still capable of error. It was time to bury Tom Riddle once and for all, the man along with his father's miserable name. He'd assumed a new name, and now it was time to complete his transformation.

Angering Dumbledore before he'd finished, that was Riddle's gravest error. The misstep of a man still tethered by the past. When he'd discovered the location of Minerva's house...Rosier was friendly with the Deputy Head of Wizengamot Services, who kept the tax records...he'd been unable to resist the idea of leaving her a little wedding present.

And somehow, Dumbledore had known and had shown up in time to intercept him. It seemed the old man had more spies than Tom had thought. He'd have to remind LeStrange to be alert for them.

The joke of it was that there had been no curse on the necklace. Tom hadn't wanted to hurt Minerva...not physically...but he'd wanted to scare her a little, remind her that he was still there, still watching and waiting.

But Dumbledore wouldn't believe that. Not now, certainly. That curse, Tom's...Voldemort's...brilliant idea for keeping Dumbledore's students from learning too much defence had struck at precisely the wrong time. Voldemort had known the moment he'd read the story in the *Daily Prophet* about Professor Meadowes's "accident" that Dumbledore would blame Tom and the necklace.

Tom had no doubt that Dumbledore would come after him now. Dumbledore was a liar and a lecher, and he would do whatever it took to keep Minerva McGonagall...and his dirty little secret...safe. Did that include killing?

Dumbledore couldn't kill him, Tom reassured himself. Not with the Horcruxes in place.

The old man's words during their duel suddenly came back to him.

"I don't need to kill you, Tom."

What did he mean?

There were curses, Tom knew. Curses that condemned a man to torment while he lived...which, in Voldemort's case, would be forever. Voldemort didn't know them, not yet, but did Dumbledore? And if he did, would he use them?

No. It was a bluff.

Wasn't it?

No matter, Tom told himself. Dumbledore was merely a distraction now. Tom would complete his transformation far from the old man's reach. He could hide himself so completely that even Dumbledore would find no trace of him. A few months more of study, a few years, even, and the secrets of life and death and everything in between would be his...Voldemort's...and he need never fear anyone again. Not even Albus Dumbledore.

Tom pulled the hood of his djellaba over his head and moved quietly down the bustling street, just another shrouded figure, seeking his fortune in the dust of an ancient city.

Chapter Fifty-Three

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"I like to think we're friends, Albus, but if you looked at me the way you look at her, I'm afraid I'd have to hex you."

"Voldemort's gone."

Alastor took a swig of his Butterbeer and set it back on the table with a crack. "Thanks for the drink, Dumbledore. Hits the spot."

"What do you mean, he's gone?" Albus asked.

"Gone. Vanished. Bugged off ... gone. Riddle hasn't been seen in more than a week, and I found out this morning that Voldemort told his followers he was planning to go away for a while. Amelia Bones heard something...one of her recruits pulled that Carrow git back in yesterday on that Muggle-baiting case, and Bonesy decided to demonstrate some advanced interrogation techniques. He rolled over, I guess, admitted to torturing that kid and let slip something about 'when the Dark Lord comes back.' *Meh*," Alastor sneered, "'Dark Lord', my hairy Irish arse."

"Did Carrow say where he'd gone?"

"Nah. That's all she got out of him. Guess he's more scared of Voldemort than of Amelia Bones, hard as that is to believe. So I did a little more investigating. One of my contacts said his followers are pretty brassed off. Apparently, he went off without any notice and left that bastard Rufinus LeStrange in charge."

"Did your contact have any information about how long he'd be gone?"

"No. But my guess is that he's going to stay gone for a while. My contact said Nott's been selling off some of his stuff. I guess the 'Dark Lord' had some pretty fancy tastes. But Nott told him that he wasn't going to be selling again, and that can only be because he knows he's not going to have to support his lord and master. My contact said Nott seems pretty relieved to have him gone." Alastor snorted again. "I'll just bet he is. Too fecking late for his wife, though."

"What do you mean?"

"She died yesterday. In childbed. Baby died too."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"Don't waste your pity on Sebastian Nott. Bloody eejit."

"I'm sorry for Mrs Nott and their baby, who was innocent of any wickedness its parents might have done."

"Yeah, that part's a shame," Alastor allowed, looking into his Butterbeer. "Kid deserved better parents. Anyway, you want me to get Bonesy to lean on Carrow some more? Find out what he knows about Voldemort's disappearance?"

Albus considered for a few moments. "Is he likely to be released soon?"

"Depends on what the Wizengamot does with his confession. Of course, you could have some influence over that."

"I won't use my vote to hold the man longer than the case warrants. But based on what Amelia told you, do you think he's likely to be sent up?"

"Well, he's dead-to-rights on the torture," said Alastor. "'Course, he confessed, and it's not 1945 anymore."

Sentences for anti-Muggle activities had been particularly harsh in the aftermath of the Grindelwald war, but the Wizengamot traditionally treated crimes against Muggles with a light hand, particularly when nobody had been killed or permanently harmed and the victim or victims could be Obliviated.

"No," said Albus, "it's not 1945. I think if Amelia could find a way to press Carrow for more information without getting the rest of MLE too interested, that would be to the good."

"Right. I'll talk to her tonight."

"Thank you. And thank Amelia for me."

"I will."

"Will you have another?" Albus asked, indicating the empty Butterbeer mug.

"No," said Alastor, standing. "I'd better get back."

As he was putting on his cloak, Alastor said, "If I don't see you before Christmas, congratulations."

"For what?"

"You and Minerva." Alastor was pretending to be searching for something in the pockets of his voluminous cloak.

Albus was startled. "How did you know?"

"Minerva told me. We did some sparring on Sunday morning." Alastor found what he had apparently been looking for and shook a cigarette from a crumpled pack. Keeping his eyes off Dumbledore's face, he pulled his wand and lit the cigarette with the tip of it. "So, like I said, best of luck to you. She's a grand girl."

"Yes, she is."

"Yeah, well," Alastor said, scratching his nose. "Anyway, she asked me to the wedding, but can you let her know thanks, but I'm busy Christmas Eve? Family ... you know

how it is."

"Of course."

It might not be a lie, Albus thought. Alastor's parents were dead, and he had no siblings, but Albus thought he remembered a cousin who'd been at Hogwarts a year or two after Alastor.

He said, "Thank you for your good wishes."

Moody gave a terse nod and stepped out the door.

Albus sat gazing into his teacup and thinking.

A few minutes later, as he walked the path from the gates back to the castle, Albus felt lighter than he had since the duel with Riddle.

He didn't delude himself that Tom was gone for good; Riddle wasn't the kind of man to let things lie. But the fact that he'd apparently slunk off with his tail between his legs gave Albus some breathing room. He didn't have to move against him right away; he could wait and watch. See what Riddle's followers would do in his absence and keep his ear to the ground for news of the self-styled "Lord Voldemort". He could plan for Riddle's return.

And he could marry Minerva.

An hour later, as he sat at his desk reviewing the agenda Filius had made for the upcoming general staff meeting, a thought occurred to him, seemingly out of the blue.

A magical bonding.

He hadn't considered it before. His great-grandparents were, as far as he knew, the last of the Dumbledores to wed in that way, but it was still occasionally done in other of the older pure-blood families.

The more contemporary outlook was that it was Dark Magic. Well, any spell that involved blood magic was generally frowned upon as Dark these days. But Albus was of the opinion that the Darkness came from the intention of the practitioners. True, the spell had most often been used to ensure fidelity and "pure" bloodlines, and, more distressingly, to shore up the magical power of a weaker wizard by harnessing it to the magic of a stronger witch...with tragic results in cases in which families had tried to use it to "force" magic into a Squib. But surely it could be used for good.

It could be used to help protect the weaker member of the union.

Minerva was not weak. She was as magically powerful as any mage he'd met, but she was not Albus's equal. Some bizarre accident of nature had bestowed on him what some...including Nicolas Flamel, who knew first-hand...considered the greatest magical gifts since Johann Faust. (Maybe since Merlin, some said, although Albus thought that terrible hyperbole.) True, Albus had worked harder than most mages to hone and refine his gifts and to broaden his knowledge, but the fact remained that his blood...or something in it...carried the raw seeds of his power, and without it, he wouldn't have been able to achieve what he had. Nor would he have survived the duel with Gellert.

If he could share that with Minerva through the ritual and mutual intention of a magical bonding, it would make her that much safer once Riddle did return. If she worked at keeping her already-formidable duelling skills sharp and her mind as quick as it had always been, the addition of some of his magical power and protection might tip the scales in her favour, should it ever come to a direct confrontation between Minerva and Riddle. And if she were to fall victim to a curse...even a powerful one...the magical protection a blood-bonding could confer could save her from the most grievous effects.

As to the drawbacks ... the fidelity charm in the ritual could be left out, he thought. Not that he believed for a minute that it would be an issue between Minerva and himself, but he did not want to bind her in that way. She was a great deal younger than he, and there could come a time...far in the future, he hoped...when he would no longer be capable of making love to her. In that case, he thought (though it pained him), she should be free to seek that kind of relationship with someone else.

The magical drain...that was more troubling. It was possible...even expected...that the bond would be uneven. That one partner would draw strength from the other. If that was the case, he could accept that he might lose some strength in order to fortify her magic. But if it went the other way? It was unlikely, but it had been known to happen. But surely there was a way to ensure that her magic would remain inviolate. Might he be able to direct the intent so that each partner would be strengthened by the other without any detrimental effects on either?

Albus rose from his desk and ascended the spiral staircase to the Headmaster's library. He Levitated himself, holding on to the edges of the shelves to keep himself steady, so that he could skim the upper shelves where the more troublesome texts were kept. He found one book on blood magic and two on ancient rituals that he thought might contain additional information on the bonding ritual and its variations.

He stayed up far too late reading through the texts, but none held exactly the information he was seeking.

The following day, he passed the wards to Filius and went to Aberdeen to see Julian Meadowes.

After Natasha had delivered the tea, the three drank it and exchanged chit-chat and news of Julian's progress. Julian told Albus that he would be seeing an American mediwizard who specialised in helping the blind learn to use charms to help them adapt to their disability.

"I'm quite sure the fellow would never have agreed to take me on without Filius's friend's help," said Julian. "Do thank him for me."

"I will," said Albus. "Filius was delighted to be able to help."

"Are you still taking my classes?"

"Yes."

"You should probably advertise for a replacement. I don't think I'll be coming back."

Natasha seized her husband's hand and brought it to her lips. "Don't say that,*solnyshko moyo*."

"Well, not for a while," Julian added, kissing his wife's hand in return.

"I plan to hire a temporary teacher for your classes. Until you are ready to return. On that note, I wonder if there is somewhere we might speak quietly so we will not have to bore your lovely wife with school-related matters," Albus said with a smile at Natasha.

Taking the hint, Julian asked Natasha to excuse them, and he led Albus haltingly into a tiny study off the parlour. Albus helped Julian to find a chair and pulled up another beside it.

"I was wondering, Julian, how much you know about magical bonding rituals."

"Bonding rituals?" Julian made an obvious attempt to stifle his surprised chuckle. "I won't ask you why you're interested, but yes, I know a little something about them. Was there something in particular you'd like to know?"

"Is there a way to ensure that the bonding doesn't result in a magical drain for either partner?"

"Good question. Most scholars believe the traditional European rituals were intended to weaken one partner magically...generally the witch, of course. And empirical observation...what little there's been...suggests that, even when the intent isn't there, a drain occurs, usually from stronger to weaker, but not always. It depends upon how the ritual is performed, I think. There's are a few paragraphs about it in *Secrets of the Darkest Art*. The book has lots of information on blood magic. I haven't got a copy of it here...it's quite rare...but you'll find it in the Restricted Section.

"Funny you should be asking about the bonding ritual. One of my mentors, Desmond Pritchard, recently wrote a paper for *Theurgic Hypotheses* on potential biological and genetic changes caused by it. His idea was that it's the reason we don't have as many witches of great power as in the past. I mean, where are your Circes, your Hecates, your Medeas? He thinks the systematic power drain, if you will, has actually affected the genetic makeup of European witches...pure-bloods, at any rate...over several centuries. It has to do with gene expression, he says...wait, let me see if I have a copy..."

In his excitement, Julian stood and banged into the edge of the desk, emitting a yelp of pain. Albus winced in sympathy.

"Bloody hell, that bloody hurts," Julian huffed, rubbing his bruised thigh. "The journal should be on that shelf just behind the desk. Have a look. You might find it interesting."

As Albus scanned the shelf, Julian asked, "Did you find it?"

"Yes."

"Take it with you. I think Minerva would be interested. The biology bits are right up her alley."

Albus Shrank the journal and put it in his robe pocket. "Thank you."

"Has she consented to a magical bonding?" Julian asked.

"Who?"

"Minerva."

"I'm not sure I follow you," Albus said a touch too quickly.

"Maybe I've misread, but I've had the impression that you two were close."

"Yes, we're friends, if that's what you mean."

"I like to think we're friends, Albus, but if you looked at me the way you look at her, I'm afraid I'd have to hex you."

Albus was ashamedly thankful at the moment that Julian couldn't see the smile that played involuntarily across his lips.

"And how do I look at her?"

"The same way I look at Natasha. Or used to."

"I am sorry."

"I know." After a moment, Julian added, "It's not your fault, you know, Albus. You advised caution, and you didn't order me to examine that necklace. I was intrigued, so I wanted to do it. And frankly, I'm not convinced it *was* the necklace. I ran every possible check on the thing, and there was nothing. Magic leaves traces, and magic strong enough to do this ... I really don't think I could have missed it, even if I couldn't figure out exactly what the curse was."

Albus said, "You may be right."

But he didn't think so. Julian was as knowledgeable about Dark Magic as any wizard alive, but Albus was beginning to believe that Riddle had been all too honest when he'd said that he'd "pushed the boundaries of magic" beyond what most thought to be its limits.

As Albus was leaving, Julian said with a grin, "Good luck with Minerva. And don't worry; I won't say a word to anyone. I'll even take a Fidelius Oath."

"No need for that. But I do appreciate your discretion."

When he returned to Hogwarts, Albus went immediately to the library's Restricted Section. He found *Secrets of the Darkest Art* in the section on Dark Magic, as expected, and took it to his office.

There were several chapters on blood magic, and one of them contained a two-page section on bonding rituals. It detailed the way the ritual had been altered over the centuries to allow one partner to call upon the magical strength of the other.

He was surprised to find that the oldest known version of the ritual called for a complicated charm that required the partners not only to exchange blood vows, but to make a blood sacrifice of animals thought to be the *anima* and *animus* of the bride and groom, each drinking the blood of the other's animal spirit.

Minerva would never agree to *that*, he thought with a shudder.

The practice had died out by the early 15th century, according to the book, and began to be replaced with a ritual designed to ensure that one partner reaped the most benefit from the bonding. Albus guessed that the Black Plague, which had killed Muggle and wizard in equally appalling numbers, had also been the death-knell for the older ritual. If he remembered correctly, Bathilda had told him that by the end of the 14th century, the plague had apparently mutated to become proportionately more lethal to young men. It was no wonder that around that time, the most powerful wizarding families were looking for ways to shore up the well-being of their male progeny.

Albus didn't need any shoring-up, and while he didn't have any intention of suggesting the animal sacrifice to Minerva, he thought it likely they could use the other parts of the old-form ritual to perform a magical bonding that was relatively equal.

If she'd agree to it, that was.

He leafed through the book and found nothing further on bonding rituals, but he was surprised when he came to a section on Horcruxes. That the book mentioned them at all was unusual, but not unheard of. But it actually gave the incantation and information on forming the intent.

Albus was not normally in favour of removing books from the library. There was little he felt was too dangerous for students to read, and the school's policy on restricted books helped ensure that the students who accessed them were mature and responsible enough to use them appropriately.

But something about this spell in this book pricked at him.

He'd see Madam Pince the next day, he decided, and let her know that he intended to remove it from circulation. Just for the moment, until he could put his finger on what was unsettling him about it.

~oOo~

"Absolutely not."

"I understand your concern, Minerva, but I think if you just..."

"No, Albus, it's absurd. I won't have it."

She was shocked beyond words that he would even consider asking her to form a magical bond. Hadn't that kind of thing gone out with moon rites and ritual cleansings for menstruating witches? Minerva was damned if she'd join the likes of the Blacks and the Rosiers in undergoing some archaic, misogynistic marriage rite just because Albus had some ridiculous notion that it would protect her.

He said, "I'm not suggesting a conventional bonding. We would alter it so that the fidelity charm isn't invoked."

"And you think *that's* what I'm concerned about?"

"No, but it's one of the changes I would make. The others would be to ensure it was equally binding. That neither of us would be harmed by it."

"It doesn't matter, Albus. I just can't believe you'd ask me to consider it."

"I thought it might help keep you...keep us both...safer."

"From what?"

"I have enemies, Minerva."

"Gods, Albus, you're starting to sound like Alastor."

He was silent, and she was afraid she'd hurt him with the remark. But when he spoke again, her anger flared anew.

"If I can eliminate the risks and drawbacks...ensure that you won't suffer any magical drain, and that you would be free to ... to be with someone else, if that's what you wanted...why would you not want to reap the benefits?" he asked.

"Even if you could guarantee all that, I still want no part of it. It's just ... it's just offensive, the idea that we should *belong* to one another physically."

"It isn't physical, it's magical."

"It comes down to the same thing, though, doesn't it?"

"Be rational," he said. "Just because it's been used to the detriment of witches in the..."

"That's not the point. This is not some irrational, some *feminine* fit of vapours."

"I didn't say that. You're letting your emotions get in the way of your thinking. You..."

"Don't you dare, Albus Dumbledore!"

She had shouted at him, and he was shocked.

"I'm sorry, Minerva," he said. "Let's both take a few breaths and forget about this for the moment. Maybe we should..."

But she was so upset, she refused to hear him out, and the chess board sat untouched as she stormed out of his quarters, changing into her feline form and racing towards the gates as fast as her four limbs could carry her. As the gates opened, she dashed out and found herself entangled in a pair of legs. She popped back into her human form, dismayed, as she realised she had tripped up Filius Flitwick, who had gone sprawling in the mud.

She apologised and helped him up, using her wand to clean the mud from his cloak.

"No harm done. And I daresay I'm as much to blame as you," Filius said. "To tell the truth, I think I've imbibed a bit too much of Macdougall's fine cloudberry wine. There's a new girl he's got in, and all the local lads were rather trying to impress her. Including me, I'm ashamed to say. Rose something or other. Pretty girl ... I predict a definite upswing in the Broomsticks's business." He smiled wistfully for a moment, then shook his head. "I'd offer to see you home, Minerva, but frankly, I'm in no shape to Apparate. Or walk, for that matter ..."

He tipped his hat and began to weave his way down the path to the castle.

If Minerva hadn't been so distressed, she would have reminded him to take a dose of hangover preventative before bed.

She didn't sleep much that night.

Why was Albus so obsessed with her safety? She understood that his proposal of marriage had been...at least in part...made out of a desire to keep her close, to keep her safe, and she couldn't really object to that. She felt the same about him.

But it had been months since Tom Riddle had shown his ugly face, and Minerva reckoned he'd got what he wanted from her, at least for the moment. She'd been frightened of his threats, and he'd known it. Perhaps it hadn't been such a mistake to tell him about her engagement to Albus, after all. It apparently hadn't provoked him into going to the newspapers or the governors, and maybe it had frightened him a little. Separately, both Albus and Minerva were powerful, but together...

Is that what this is about? A magical bonding to frighten Tom?

But surely Albus wouldn't expect her to submit to a bonding just to frighten one would-be Dark wizard? Tom Riddle was powerful, but he was no Gellert Grindelwald.

~oOo~

Albus appeared at her kitchen door the next afternoon, carrying a small potted plant that bore a spray of tiny yellow flowers. Glynnie looked him up and down, saying nothing as she admitted him. Once the door was shut, she simply popped away without a word.

"What is that?" came Minerva's voice as she entered the kitchen.

Albus set the pot on the table. "It's rue. Herbert had some in one of the greenhouses. I thought it appropriate."

They stood looking at one another across the table for a few moments, then he said, "Will you forgive me?"

"Of course."

"I never meant to..."

"Let's not say any more about it. You asked, I responded. That's all."

He went around the table to her and took her hands in his. "All right. The subject is closed."

"Thank you," she said. "Have you eaten?"

"No. I was plundering Herbert's greenhouse during the lunch hour."

She smiled at that, and he relaxed a little.

Crossing to the cold cupboard, she said, "There's some soup...cullen skink...it's good." She rummaged around and withdrew a small earthen pot. "There's bread there too," she said, pointing to the counter. "Glynnie made it fresh this morning."

"That sounds fine, thank you."

He sliced the bread as Minerva decanted the soup into a bowl and heated it with her wand.

As they sat at the table, he said, "Aren't you eating?"

"No. I had some tea at ten, and Glynnie practically forced me to eat a scone."

"She takes good care of you." Albus tucked into the soup. Between bites, he said, "She's sent me to Coventry, I think."

"I was a bit upset last night. And this morning I told her I wasn't certain if you would be coming today. She obviously drew some conclusions."

"Perhaps I ought to have got a plant for her."

He finished his lunch, and they spent the afternoon together, Minerva completing lesson plans and Albus catching up on some reading. When Minerva had finished her work, they played the game of chess they'd skipped the previous night, and Minerva won in record time.

Over a dinner of roast chicken, potatoes, and green beans, Albus said, "How would you feel about a few days away after the wedding?"

"A honeymoon?"

"Yes. Assuming you still want to marry me."

"As long as you promise never to let me win at chess again."

"I never!"

"Yes, you did, and you know it, Albus Dumbledore."

"I was somewhat distracted," he said. "Your victory was completely earned. So, what about Italy?"

"Italy sounds heavenly, but how will we ever manage it?"

"I haven't taken anywhere near the holidays specified in my contract in I don't know how long," he said. "And Filius informs me that there are only a few students down to stay over Christmas, so my absence shouldn't prevent any of the Heads from having a proper holiday. Two at any given time should be perfectly sufficient to manage eight homesick teenagers."

A smile blossomed on Minerva's face. "What did you have in mind?"

"I thought a few days in Florence or Siena ... maybe Venice. I was there ages ago, it seems, and I remember thinking what a romantic place it would have been had I only had someone to share it with."

"It is terribly romantic," she said. "The last time I was there, I was with a very handsome wizard."

"Oh, really?" Albus asked, wondering if she was about to tell him about a romantic holiday with McLaggen...or, Merlin forbid, Alastor Moody...as a sort of revenge for his having angered her so deeply the previous evening.

When she added, "My father," he relaxed, chastising himself silently for believing she would be so petty.

"Would you rather go somewhere else?" he asked.

"No, Italy is perfect."

"We'll need to stay in Muggle areas. I'm afraid I'm rather well known, even there."

"Of course. I don't mind travelling à la Muggle."

"Italy, then."

After dinner, as Minerva stood at the sink rinsing the dinner dishes before Scourgifying them, she felt Albus's hands come around her waist and his lips at the back of her neck.

"I *am* sorry about yesterday," he murmured in her ear. "I didn't think."

She put down the dish she held and turned in his arms.

"It's all right," she said and kissed him briefly.

"Do you think the washing up can wait?" he said, moving his lips over her neck.

"Yes."

She normally didn't care much for making love during her monthlies, but she was afraid if she demurred, he'd believe she was still angry with him, so she let him lead her upstairs to the bedroom and excused herself to the loo to undress and cast a quick cleansing charm. They were tentative and careful with one another, and while it wasn't the most satisfying sex she'd ever had, it was sweet, and she felt more settled, happy to be at peace with her beloved. They slept together for a time, and he didn't leave until after midnight, kissing her gently and saying, "Sleep well, my love. I'll see you tomorrow."

When he was gone, she got up and had a quick bath, then cast a cleansing charm on the sheets. As she lay back and tried to go to sleep, she wondered if she had been too hard on him. He had only wanted to protect her with the bonding; he clearly hadn't understood how repugnant the idea was to her. And rather than trying to help him to understand, she had gone to pieces.

Still, she was glad he had dropped the idea. They were bound...emotionally, spiritually...by the love they had for one another. What need was there for a ritual that would intertwine their magic in unpredictable ways?

Later, Minerva would look back at her attitude with a mixture of bitterness and amusement, but that was forty years in the future, after she had been bound to Albus Dumbledore in ways that were beyond anything she could have conceived in the waning days of 1957.

Chapter Fifty-Four

Chapter 54 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

"You take my breath away. You always have."

Thorfinn was in the wine cellar when he heard the door open behind him.

"I thought I'd find you hiding down here," Einar said, hands on his hips.

"I'm just double-checking the wine list," Thorfinn said. "Cadfyn's only got six bottles of the Karthausenhoff 'twenty-one chilling, so I thought I'd bring up a few more."

Brushing his hand across one of the dusty racks, he added, "There are only two more bottles here; we may have to substitute the 'thirty-seven."

"Da, there are only, what, thirteen guests, including us? And you're going to be giving them claret and champagne in addition to the Riesling. Your guests are going to be too squiffy to walk, much less hold on to their Portkeys home."

"Thirteen, aye. Ye don't suppose Reverend Dunbar will refuse to sit down with us?"

"No, why on earth should he?"

"I thought thirteen at table was meant to be ill luck for his people."

Einar laughed. "That's an old superstition. And if he does think it bad luck, we'll just bring down one of the babies from the nursery to join us."

He clapped a hand on his father's shoulder. "Come now, Da. No reason to be nervous. Your daughter is just marrying the most famous wizard in Britain in an hour. That's all." Seeing the look on Thorfinn's face, he added, "Don't worry. This wedding is much smaller than mine. You managed to entertain more than a hundred guests then, and I don't remember anyone complaining that there wasn't enough wine."

Thorfinn closed the cellar book and placed it back in its spot on the tasting table with the quill. *Øch*, you're right. I am nervous. A man can't help it when his only daughter's about to be married."

As they stepped out of the cellar and began to ascend the stone staircase, Einar said, "You weren't this nervous at my getting married."

"Aye, but it's different when it's a daughter. It shouldn't be, I know, but there it is."

"Are you worried about the two of them together? That they won't be happy?"

"No. They're well matched, I think."

They climbed in silence for a few seconds, then Einar said, "It's funny, though."

"What is?"

"To think of Minerva marrying him."

"How so?"

"Well, for one thing, he was our teacher. And he's so much older than she is."

"I imagine she took that into account when she accepted him."

"He was my hero. Hell, he was a hero to all of us, going out to fight Grindelwald, on top of everything else. It's almost as if a character from an epic novel had stepped off the page and said, 'Hello, there, I'm here to marry your sister.' Sometimes I wonder ... ah, never mind."

"What do ye wonder?"

"Just if she knows what she's getting into."

"Do any of us?"

"No, I suppose not," said Einar, laughing. His face darkened. "He's got enemies, though."

"All great men do."

"Yes, but ..."

Thorfinn put a hand on his arm. "What is it you're trying to say?"

Einar sighed and turned to face his father. "I hear things around the office, Da. And what I hear is troubling. We've been busy lately. Too busy. Things are heating up again. I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but five of our calls in the past six months haven't exactly been accidents."

"Muggle-baiting?" said Thorfinn, his brows knitting.

"Looks like it. And worse. The last one...just a few weeks ago...it went way beyond a prank. A couple of Muggles were seriously injured. I had to visit their families and charm all the Muggle paperwork for the cover story because one of them is still in hospital and will likely never fully recover. I have to tell you, I considered having his wife and children Obliviates so they'd forget they ever had a father."

When he saw the look on Thorfinn's face, he quickly added, "Don't worry, I didn't do it in the end. Among other things, there were too many other people that we'd have had to do too. But I'm still not sure it wouldn't have been the kindest thing."

"That's tragic, of course," said Thorfinn, "but I'm not sure what it has to do with Minerva's marriage."

"Nothing. Not precisely. But there's Darkness gathering out there. I don't think it entirely went away after Grindelwald fell...it just went dormant. Something's stirring it up."

"And you think Dumbledore will need to get involved again."

"I don't know. But I do know that there are still powerful people out there who hate him for bringing Grindelwald down. They're mostly quiet about it, but it doesn't take a Seer to predict that they'll come out of the woodwork if another leader comes along. And they'll be looking for ways to get at Dumbledore."

"Aye," said Thorfinn. "It's something he and Minerva will have to live with. So will we."

He was quiet and pensive for a few seconds before adding, "Love is the riskiest thing we do in this life." He looked at his son. "Ye have a child now. Tell me ye don't worry about her every moment of every day, that something will happen to her, that *you'll* do something that hurts her without meaning to. But ye wouldn't not have her, worry and all, would ye?"

Einar shook his head.

Thorfinn continued, "And I wouldn't give up any of the pain I felt at your mother's death if it meant I had to give up a second of the time I had with her. So I can't ask my daughter to throw away a chance at happiness because of fear." He put a hand on Einar's shoulder. "I know you're worried. I am too, especially after what you've told me. But Dumbledore's no fool, and neither is your sister. They know the risks, and they'll do what they can to manage them."

"By not registering their marriage with the Ministry."

"Among other things."

"I don't understand why he didn't want to have the guests take Fidelius Oaths, though," said Einar.

"Minerva said she didn't like the idea of telling her friends and family that she didn't trust them to keep a secret."

"She has more faith in people than I do, I guess."

"She's always been leery of those kinds of charms. You know that."

"Yes, I remember." His natural good humour reasserting itself, he added, "Anyway, I suppose she can always have me Oblivate anyone who hears of it by accident."

"Cheeky bugger," retorted Thorfinn. "Now let me alone, I've got to see to the glassware. And you," he said, eyeing Einar up and down, "need to have a wash and get dressed. The Portkeys will start arriving in less than an hour."

"Yes, Da."

~oOo~

When Albus arrived at Castle Isleif, the head elf...Cadfyn, Albus reminded himself...took his cloak and offered him a glass of champagne.

"No, thank you. I think I'd best keep my wits about me. I'm getting married today, you know," Albus said, winking at the elf.

"I knows that, sir," said Cadfyn. "And on behalf of all the McGonagall and MacLaughlin elves, I wishes you and Mistress Minerva every happiness." Cadfyn snapped his fingers, and a second elf appeared.

"Take Albus Dumbledore's things to the Green Bedroom," Cadfyn instructed the younger elf, who bobbed his head, took Albus's bag, then Disappeared.

Cadfyn told Albus, "Mistress Morna said you is to use the Green Bedroom, sir, to get ready. I will ensure your things are sent to Mistress Minerva's room after the wedding."

"Thank you. And would you be good enough to tell me where the Green Bedroom is?"

A voice from the main staircase said, "Third floor, second room to the left of the staircase." Thorfinn trotted down the steps and went up to Albus, holding out his hand. "Albus, ye look splendid!"

Albus shook Thorfinn's hand. "Thank you, Thorfinn. You look most dashing yourself. Minerva didn't mention that you'd be wearing Highland dress. I didn't think to ask if I should..."

"No, no. It'll only be me and Einar in the Kenmore and kilt. Everyone else will likely be in dress robes. Besides, you're the groom...ye should wear what pleases ye. The robe is beautiful...such a wonderful colour!"

"Thank you. I had it made for the occasion. I took the liberty of having Monsieur Malkin charm the fabric to match the colour of the crimson stripe in your family tartan. I thought it might please Minerva."

"And she'll be delighted. The sash will look well with it." Thorfinn clapped Albus on the shoulder. "Well, I expect you'll want to freshen up before everyone starts arriving. Quistrick will show ye up to the Green Bedroom. Minerva's still dressing. Quistrick!"

The elf who had taken Albus's bags appeared a second later, and Thorfinn said: "Quistrick, please show Professor Dumbledore to the Green Bedroom." To Albus he said, "We'll be serving drinks in the Music Room until it's time to start the ceremony. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got a few last-minute things to attend to."

"Thank you."

When Albus was alone in the bedroom, he opened his bag and withdrew a small parcel that was wrapped in green felt. He opened it and looked carefully over the contents. It wasn't much of a gift, he thought, but selecting presents for Minerva was always difficult...her taste ran to the simple, if not to say spartan. A good thing, he supposed. They wouldn't be wealthy...although Minerva likely would be herself, once her father passed on...and most of their time would, of necessity, be spent in and around Hogsmeade.

He hoped the surprises he'd planned for their short honeymoon would make up for anything lacking in his wedding gift to her. He was eager to show her some of the delights that he'd discovered in Italy during his travels.

In less than two hours' time, she'll be my wife.

He still had trouble believing it. He'd lain awake the previous night, certain that something would arise to prevent it, that he'd get up in the morning to find a McGonagall-family owl bearing a message telling him that she'd changed her mind.

When he had stopped by his office, Fawkes trilled at him insistently, and Albus saw that he had a parchment in his talons. His mouth had gone dry when he took it, recognising the seal as Minerva's.

Thinking of it now, he took the parchment from his bag, and, spreading it out across the emerald-coloured coverlet of bed, he reread it, his heart pounding as it had that morning, but for a different reason.

Albus's fingers played gently over the parchment, tracing the words written in Minerva's familiar, spiky, hand:

I imagine you're having all sorts of doubts this morning.

Every little whisper that suggests that I cannot not love you, should not love you, that you do not deserve happiness, that you will harm me...get them all out of the way right now, this minute.

...

There. Have you done it?

I hope so, my darling, because I may be many things, but one thing I am not is a liar. I will not swear to love and keep you...not to Dunbar's God, not to the gods of my fathers, not to my family, not to my friends, and most of all, not to you...if I do not mean it with every fibre of my being.

And rest assured that I intend to marry you at half past five o'clock today. Do not doubt that by six, you'll be mine, body, soul, and spirit, and I yours. But it has always been so, hasn't it? We don't need a few words from a Muggle book nor a few drops of blood in a wizarding ritual to tell us that. The world, however, likes it to be spelt out, very tidy, in everlasting ink, and so we shall, before God, as the Reverend Dunbar would have it. I shall declare it to gods and men alike, and to any other creature who cares to know: I love you. I am yours, my beloved.

Always,

Minerva

Albus conjured a handkerchief and dabbed at the tears that had once again formed in his eyes.

Yes, he thought, it had always been so. Since the first day he'd really met her, all elbows and big eyes, her hair in two long plaits, her pointed chin set in determination as she'd taken the matchstick from his hand, aimed her wand at it, and Transfigured it into a needle as easily as if she'd been doing it all her life. He'd smiled approvingly down at her, and she'd attempted to hand the needle back to him, pricking his thumb in the process. She'd ignored the snickering of the other students and apologised with a dignity that most eleven-year-olds didn't possess, taking his thumb between her fingers and dabbing at the bead of blood with her tartan handkerchief. He thought he remembered seeing her eyes widen slightly when he'd put the thumb to his mouth and sucked away at the tiny wound...but he had to admit that it was possible his memory was playing tricks on him.

Either way, he had been hers. He'd loved the child she had been, loved her inquisitiveness, her unwillingness to cede any ground when she thought she was in the right...which she had been more often than any young girl had a right to be...and her desire to know everything, immediately and without abridgement. She had disquieted him, too, more than once in her early years. She'd seemed far too comfortable with him...always polite and respectful, but warm and animated in a way that she clearly wasn't with others. And he with her. It hadn't been until she'd become a woman, and he'd fallen in love, adult love, with her that he'd realised that he was more at ease with her than he was with anyone else he knew, and had been almost since the slightly strange beginning of their acquaintance.

He didn't believe in fate, not precisely, but there had to be a reason, he thought, that they'd been thrown together...two of the most powerful mages in the world. He had thought that about Gellert, but he'd never felt comfortable or right with him. Their connection had been born of something outside themselves...the thirst for power, in Gellert's case, and the desire to avenge the wrongs done to his family in Albus's...and their passion buoyed along by anger at the world. But with Minerva ... it had always felt intimate, as if they existed primarily for one another. He'd allowed the outside world to intervene...he'd had no choice, really...and while it hadn't destroyed either of them, his existence afterwards had been as if in shadow, a half-life. She'd felt it too, he thought; it was why she had returned to Hogwarts and to him.

He rolled up the parchment and put it back in his bag. Removing a comb, he attended to his beard and hair, adding a charm to keep them tidy during the proceedings.

He summoned the young elf who'd seen to his bag.

The elf popped in, saying, "How can Quistric be of assistance to Albus Dumbledore?"

Albus handed him the felt-wrapped parcel.

"Will you deliver this to Mistress Minerva for me?"

"Right away, sir," Quistric replied, taking the parcel and popping away before Albus could thank him.

After checking his appearance in the mirror one last time, Albus left the bedroom and headed down the stairs to marry the woman he loved.

~oOo~

Morna was just pinning the tartan rosette to Minerva's dress when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," called Minerva, and her grandmother hurriedly added, "Unless it's Albus!"

The door opened, and Thorfinn peeked around it. "All right to..." He stopped when Minerva turned to face him. "My gods," he breathed.

"What's the matter?" Minerva asked, turning quickly back to the mirror. "Is there something wrong?"

"No, lass," her father answered, stepping fully into the room and closing the door behind him. He approached her and put his hands on her shoulders, regarding her over

them in the mirror. "Ye look just as your mother did the day I married her. Which is to say, beautiful."

"Thank you, Da. We made a few small alterations to Mother's dress...shortened it a bit and took some of the extra lace off the sleeves...I hope you don't mind."

"Mind? Why should I? It's your wedding dress now. And I know your mother would have approved. She'd have loved to be here," he said, removing a handkerchief from his pocket and wiping his eyes.

Morna said quietly, "She is here."

"Of course she is," said Minerva.

"Yes," said Thorfinn. He withdrew a small box from his pocket and held it out to Minerva. "I wanted to give you these," he said. "They were your mother's. I gave them to her on our wedding day, and I've always meant for ye to have them. They were your grandmother's originally."

The box contained a pair of earrings: round-cut emeralds, about the size of the nail on Minerva's little finger, beneath which dangled a pair of teardrop-shaped pearls. The design was simple, but very beautiful, in Minerva's estimation.

She asked, "They're the ones in Grandmother's portrait, aren't they? The one in the library?"

"Yes," Thorfinn said.

"They are exquisite," Minerva said as she held them up to the light from the candelabra that hung from the ceiling. Thank you so much, Da," she said, hugging her father tightly. She turned back to the mirror and put them on.

"Lovely," said Morna.

"So, do you think you're ready to see your handsome lad?" Thorfinn asked.

Minerva laughed. "Well, I agree that he's handsome, but 'lad' is pushing it a bit, don't you think?"

"Nonsense. He's two years younger than I am, and I'm like a spring lamb myself," Thorfinn said patting his hands over a midsection that somewhat belied his words.

"You are very, very handsome," Minerva said. She hooked her arm in his and said, "Let's go."

They had only taken a step towards the door when a knock stopped them.

"It is Quistric, Mistress Minerva," a voice called from the hall. "I has a package for you from Albus Dumbledore."

"You may bring it in, Quistric," Minerva said.

The elf entered and held out the parcel to Minerva.

"Thank you."

The elf bobbed his head and said, "If I may say so, Mistress Minerva, you is looking very pretty. Very happy."

"Thank you, Quistric. I am."

Quistric nodded again and Disappeared.

Minerva unwrapped the felt and withdrew a spoon of intricately carved wood, its handle in the shape of a pair of griffins, back to back, hind-claws joined, wings meeting at the top to form a sort of heart shape. When she turned it over, she saw that there were runes carved all along the back.

"What is it?" Thorfinn asked.

"It seems to be a spoon," Minerva said. "I'm not quite sure..."

"I know what it is," said Morna, joining the other two, looking at the mysterious object. "It's a Welsh love spoon. I think that's what they're called."

At Minerva's questioning look, she continued: "Elisabeth told me about them when I was helping her pack up the Lancashire house. She had a collection of them from her father's family."

"The Cadwalladers," said Thorfinn.

"Yes," said Morna. "Edgar or Amelia would have them now. They're an old Welsh tradition. A young man would present his intended with a carved spoon when he made his offer of marriage."

"Yes, that's what Albus's note says," said Minerva, squinting to read the parchment. "He writes that Muggles picked up the tradition sometime in the seventeenth century, but it goes back much further among the wizarding Welsh." She read a bit more and gave a laugh. "Oh, dear!"

"What," asked Thorfinn.

"He says that the spoon is charmed to detect common poisons. Here ..." she handed him the note.

Thorfinn took a pair of round-framed spectacles from his Quintaped-fur sporran and read aloud:

"During the eleventh century, the Dinefwr family attempted to wrest control of Gwynedd from the Aberffraws, from whom the Dumbledores are descended (although not directly) by poisoning young women pregnant with Aberffraw heirs. The wizarding branch of the Aberffraws attempted to protect their family's progeny by charming the spoons used by the wives of the princes. The bowl of the spoon would reportedly disintegrate if it touched food containing any of the known poisons."

"Dashed clever of them, I say," said Thorfinn. Looking at the parchment once again, he continued:

"This spoon was passed down from my father's family and held a place of honour in our home in Mould-on-the-Wold. I don't know precisely how old it is; I have only been able to trace its provenance back to my great-great grandmother Dumbledore. The original charms have, of course, worn off with time, but I have added some of my own devising. Do not worry: I do not expect you to use the spoon; the charms are more symbolic than practical, but I hope you take this in the spirit in which it is intended, my love, because..."

"Well, I think I'll let you finish it yourself," Thorfinn said, handing the note back to Minerva and removing his spectacles.

She read the rest of it, a small smile playing at the corners of her lips.

Folding the note and putting it in the top drawer of her dressing table along with the spoon, she turned and said, "I'm ready."

~oOo~

Albus was introducing the Flamels, whose Portkey had been the first to arrive, to Einar and Katherine McGonagall when Nicolas broke into a large grin at something behind him. Albus turned and saw Minerva, flanked by her father and grandmother, standing just inside the doorway to the Music Room.

He hoped his face had not given away his shock. She looked about sixteen, in an ivory gown with tiny white flowers woven through her hair. But no, when he looked more closely, it was clear that she was no child. The ecru of the under-dress that peeked out from under the lighter-coloured lace at the rounded neckline emphasised her bosom, while the tartan sash and rosette around her waist made it look impossibly tiny. The lace over-dress flared slightly at her hips to create a distinctly female...distinctly *adult* female...shape.

He went to her and leant down to kiss her cheek. As she kissed his, he whispered in her ear, "You take my breath away. You always have."

"Thank you. And thank you for the spoon. It was a lovely surprise."

"It isn't much of a wedding gift."

"It was very thoughtful. A nice way to include your family in the day, I think."

"I'm glad you think so."

Nicolas and Perenelle came over to greet the bride.

"Madam McGonagall, how lovely you look," said Nicolas, taking her hands and standing on tiptoe to kiss each of her cheeks, right and left, then right and left again.

"Thank you, but please do call me 'Minerva'."

Perenelle said, "Such a beautiful gown! I wondered what a modern bride would wear, and now I know."

"We have not been to a wedding since ... when was it *ma chère*?" Nicolas asked his wife. "Ah, yes! The Strindbergs." In a loud whisper, he added, "Of course, Siri was *un petit peu* ..." He made a gesture in front of his belly to indicate the bride's advanced state of pregnancy. "So sad what happened..."

Perenelle interrupted, "Albus, my boy, you also look marvellous!"

"Yes, you do, Albus," said Minerva, taking the lapel of his over-robe between her thumb and forefinger. This colour suits you so well."

"Thank you, my dear, I'm glad you approve," Albus said, taking her hand and kissing it. Turning to Thorfinn, he said, "Thorfinn McGonagall, I don't believe you've met my friends, Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel."

"Tis a great pleasure," said Thorfinn. "I've read all your work, Mr Flamel. I can't claim to have understood it, though."

"That's quite all right, Mr McGonagall, neither does he," said Perenelle, and the group laughed.

As Thorfinn was introducing the Flamels to Morna, Cadfyn stepped in and announced the arrival of the Reverend Dunbar, who shook everyone's hands, proclaiming himself "gey chuffed tae be here."

Another elf entered the room bearing a tray with glasses of champagne and circulated among the guests, who continued to arrive approximately five minutes apart.

Everyone cooed over Edgar and Evelyn Bones's baby, also named Edgar, who had been born three weeks earlier. That done, Cadfyn made a show of taking the baby up to the nursery to be looked after, along with baby Morrigan, by Llyndie, Katherine and Einar's nursery elf.

Amelia Bones arrived, sans Marlene, and made her apologies.

"Marlene's absolutely bugged that she couldn't come," Amelia told Minerva. "She sends her love. But there was a werewolf incident in Kent, and she has to stay at Mungo's."

"How awful!" said Morna.

Albus took Amelia aside, and Minerva followed.

"How serious was it?" he asked Amelia

She replied hesitantly, "Well ... I saw the report at the office. There were a bunch of injuries, and apparently, a couple was killed. Only one survivor was bitten, though. A kid. They don't know if he'll live."

"Was the child one of our students?" asked Albus.

"I don't know," said Amelia. "The name is Greyback...ring any bells?"

"I believe I had a Hildolf Greyback several years ago. But no one now," Albus said.

"I hate to mention it on such a happy occasion," said Amelia.

"No, it's fine," said Minerva, glancing at Albus. "I'm sorry it happened, and I'm sorry Marlene can't be here, but we certainly understand."

"Anyway, she said to give you a kiss and pinch your bum for her," said Amelia, doing the former but skipping the latter, to Minerva's relief. "Minerva, you look good enough to eat," Amelia said. Then she slapped her hand over her mouth. "Gods! That was an awful thing to say right after ... I didn't mean ..."

"No, of course not," said Minerva. Leading Amelia over to where Filius was talking with Reverend Dunbar, she said, "Amelia, you may remember Filius Flitwick from the Hogwarts duelling championships. And this is the reverend David Dunbar."

At three minutes past five, Minerva was talking with Evelyn Bones when she heard Cadfyn announce, "Mr Aberforth Dumbledore ..."

Her eyes immediately went to Albus, who seemed frozen in place.

Aberforth stood in the doorway, a scowl fixed on his face. When Cadfyn attempted to relieve him of his hat, he pulled it away and stuffed it into his pocket.

Minerva went to him and said, "Aberforth. I'm so glad you came. Albus will be, too. He's over here."

She hesitated before taking Aberforth's elbow and leading him over to where Albus was standing with Einar and Katherine. Neither brother spoke.

"Albus," Minerva said, "here's Aberforth." She felt foolish, stating the obvious, but she didn't know what else to do.

Albus seemed to recover his wits. He held out his hand, saying only, "Abe."

Aberforth eyed his brother's hand, and Minerva was afraid he would refuse to take it. But after a moment, he grasped it, gave it one rough shake, and dropped it immediately.

"Minerva asked me," he said. "Can't stay long. Got a bar to look after."

"I know," said Albus. "Thank you for coming."

"Mother would have wanted it."

"Yes."

Albus didn't move, so Minerva introduced Aberforth to her family and the other guests. Shaking Aberforth's hand, her father said, "I'm so glad ye could make it, Mr Dumbledore." He added conspiratorially, "Among other things, I was afraid the reverend would refuse to sit down with thirteen of us at table. But now, ye make fourteen, so all's well!"

Aberforth gave a non-committal grunt.

When the elf offered him a glass of champagne, he asked her, "Got any beer?"

"No, sir."

"Thought elves made beer"

"Yes, sir. If sir likes, Eira could get you some Firewhisky. Or..."

"Nah," said Aberforth, taking the glass of champagne. "This'll go down right enough."

Minerva, who had witnessed the exchange, gave Eira an encouraging nod. She noticed that Aberforth didn't drink the wine; he just held the stem of the glass awkwardly between his thumb and three fingers.

A few minutes later, Reverend Dunbar approached Minerva and Albus, saying. "It's gane twenty past five. Shall we gae gi' started?"

Albus looked at Minerva and said, "Yes. Definitely."

With Thorfinn's help, Dunbar herded the guests into the salon...rarely used, but dusted and decorated in purple heather for the occasion...and after the guests were settled, he gestured Albus and Minerva to come forward.

"Are ye ready?" he asked quietly.

"Very," said Albus.

"Guid on ye," said Dunbar. And he began.

Minerva wondered later if anyone other than her family had understood much of the ceremony. Dunbar's accent was heavy, and Minerva could have sworn that he lapsed now and then into Scots.

She was a bit nervous when Dunbar gave Albus the words to the vow, but either he understood Dunbar's instructions, or he had learnt them himself beforehand...which would not have surprised her...because his voice was clear and confident as slipped his mother's ring onto her finger and repeated the words:

"With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee honour, and all my worldly goods with thee I share, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

She was glad she didn't have to make the same vow, as she wasn't at all certain her voice would work at that moment.

Then Dunbar pronounced them man and wife, and Albus was kissing her, and her father was pinning a McGonagall-tartan sash on Albus.

Later, Minerva would have to use Albus's Pensieve to remember the rest of the evening, which seemed to pass in a blur of kisses on the cheek, toasts, and songs, and the only thing she could recall clearly was the feeling of Albus's hand squeezing hers.

Epilogue

Chapter 55 of 55

It's 1943, and both the wizarding and Muggle worlds have exploded into war. Eighteen-year-old Minerva McGonagall is brilliant and talented, with dreams of becoming the first witch in the Auror corps. Albus Dumbledore is famous, powerful, and haunted by his dark past. Their attraction to one another is unthinkable, inevitable, and dangerous, especially with Tom Riddle watching from the shadows.

As their paths cross again and again, their lives change in ways neither anticipates, and they find they must confront the man who will become the greatest threat the wizarding world has ever known.

Warning: Teacher/student (of age)

Winner - 3rd Place, Best Romance (Minerva McGonagall) - Fall/Winter 2013 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

EPILOGUE

"He's gone."

Damn Albus! Where is he?

The Order was holding its own, but just barely. William Weasley and Remus were both agile, but neither was a particularly strong duellist, and Minerva and Nymphadora were spending more time protecting the children than they were incapacitating Death Eaters.

Minerva felt the *whoosh* of a curse fly past her face and turned to see Melchior Yaxley advancing on her. She had time only to cast a hurried *Protego*, and his powerful curse bounced off it, sending her staggering backwards.

She and Yaxley duelled for what seemed like an eternity...he was by far the most skilled of the opponents she had faced this night...when he suddenly abandoned the fight, casting one last protective spell, and took off running toward the staircase.

Draco. Where's Draco?

He'd been with the small phalanx of Death Eaters near the stairs leading up to the Astronomy Tower...not fighting, just standing there looking pale and terrified, and she'd almost pitied him.

She shouted to Ronald to tell him to find out where Draco had gone, but he didn't seem to hear her. He was standing over a body, she realised, and he was wild-eyed and firing hexes without aiming, nearly hitting Remus.

Roaring in frustration, Minerva turned her wand on a Death Eater she didn't recognise, felling him with a stroke of her wand, when she was jerked back by the neck of her robes, her wand flying from her hand. She smelt blood and foetid breath and recognised the voice of Fenrir Greyback snarling in her ear.

"Such a pretty white throat, Professor," he said. "It'd be a shame to let it go to waste."

She brought the heel of her boot down hard on his foot, and when his grip loosened, she tore herself away from him, ripping her robe down the back. There was no time to Summon her wand...she could hear him just behind her...so she dropped into the Third Defensive Position, giving silent thanks for the late Greg McKinnon's long-ago tutelage. At the last moment, she crouched low in a ball, protecting her head from the onslaught as Greyback launched himself at her. His legs slammed into her back, thrusting her forward, her palms and forehead connecting with the stone floor at the same moment, and she saw stars.

Her head was spinning, but she looked up to see Greyback getting to his feet. She Summoned her wand, and when it berthed itself firmly in her palm, she pointed it at him, hoping her shaking wouldn't affect her aim. But before she could fire a hex, he turned and ran, preternaturally fast, disappearing up the stairs to the Astronomy Tower.

She had little time to contemplate this mystery, though, because a pair of Death Eaters was advancing on her, and it took all her concentration to deflect their curses and put them down.

When she saw Severus arrive at last, she nearly shouted with relief. Finally, another competent duellist!

But he disappeared up the staircase without stopping, and she had only a moment to wonder about it before she had to rescue Ronald from Alexander Crabbe.

"Remus!" she shouted. "Take Ronald and try to get up to the tower...something's happening up there! Go help Severus! Nymphadora and I will cover things here!"

To her relief, Remus grabbed Weasley's arm and pulled him towards the stairs. Minerva, Nymphadora, and, surprisingly, Ginevra, managed to Stun or Petrify five more Death Eaters.

Just as the fifth one fell, Minerva felt an odd pulling sensation from deep within her...like a burst of cold air rushing through her magic. It was gone almost as quickly as it had come, and in any event, she had no time to think about it because at that moment, Severus came tearing down the stairs with Draco Malfoy in tow, followed by Amycus and Alecto Carrow, the latter stopping to fire a *Bombarda* at a row of statues that lined the north wall of the corridor, her doughy face contorted with laughter.

Strangely, this last act of wanton destruction infuriated Minerva more than anything else she'd seen that night. She pointed her wand at Alecto and barely stopped herself from using the *Cruciatus* for the first time in her life. But the powerful Stinging Hex seemed to have the desired effect, and as Carrow and her brother ran screeching from the scene, she shouted after them in momentary triumph.

A few seconds later, Harry Potter streaked past her after Snape and the fleeing Death Eaters, shouting words she couldn't make out.

Where had he come from?

When Ginevra took off after him, Minerva nearly screamed with frustration.

Her attention was drawn back to the fight at hand when she heard Nymphadora shout, "Minerva! Behind you!" She ducked and fired a Stunner as she spun. It hit its mark, and when Minerva looked up, there were no Death Eaters left standing.

The other Order members were crouching next to William. She went to them and was relieved to find that he was still alive. But there was nothing more she could do, so she went to see to Neville, whom she had seen fall to what she hoped was only a Rebounded Stunner. He was conscious but disoriented. After satisfying herself that he was in no immediate danger, she called for Nymphadora, who seemed to be the most intact of the group.

"You're bleeding," Nymphadora said, looking at Minerva's face.

Minerva put her fingers to her cheek, and they came away bloody. She'd dodged the Flaying Curse Yaxley had hurled at her, but just barely. She hadn't felt it graze her cheek.

She said, "We'll need to get all the injured up to the infirmary and ensure the Death Eaters are secured. Will you organise it and alert the Ministry? I need to find the other Heads and make sure the students are safe."

"You need the infirmary too, Minerva," Nymphadora said. "That cut's deep."

Minerva touched her wand to the laceration and murmured, "*Collocutis*," wincing at the sting as the edges of the wound came together. It was good enough for the time being.

She sent a Patronus to Filius...wondering for the first time why he had not joined the fight...and to Pomona, telling them to round up their Houses and meet her in her office in forty-five minutes. Severus was clearly busy trying to get Draco to safety, so she also sent a message to Horace, asking him to see to Slytherin House.

Heading down the corridor, she composed a carefully worded message in her head, then stopped long enough to send another Patronus to the Burrow.

She had almost reached the main staircase, intending to see that all the other Gryffindors were accounted for, when she heard the main doors rumble open. Hagrid came through them, and when he saw her, he went stock-still, a look she couldn't identify on his sooty face.

"Hagrid, are you injured?"

He said nothing, just shook his head, his eyes wide and staring at her. He'd never looked at her like this, and it unnerved her.

She asked, "Do you need the infir..."

"Perfesser," he said, taking a few steps toward her. Then, softly, "Minerva ..."

It was the first time she could ever remember him using her given name, and for some reason, it made the blood rush to her head.

"Yes, what is it?"

The enormous man swallowed, and a tear spilled from his left eye and down his cheek, leaving a pale wake through the grime.

"He's gone."

"Who's gone?"

"The Headmaster. He's dead."

Her response was automatic. "That's impossible."

"He ... he fell off the Astronomy Tower."

"No."

Why would he be saying this to her? Albus wasn't even here, he was out on one of his secret missions. With Harry."

Harry is here.

Hagrid said, "Harry saw Sn... he saw it happen. An' I've seen 'im. He's gone."

"No," she said again, but even as the word passed her lips, she knew it was true. She closed her eyes and focused on her magic.

The *thrum* was gone.

The barely perceptible hum of his presence that had inhabited her magic since she'd received his blood thirty years ago was simply ... absent.

The world swam, and she swayed on her feet. She felt large, gentle hands on her shoulders, supporting her, and her eyes gained focus again.

"Where ..." She had to stop and clear her throat. "Where is he?"

"Out there. Where 'e fell. I would've moved 'im, but I thought I should get the kids inside first."

"Thank you, Hagrid. You did the right thing."

She wanted desperately to go to Albus, to see him for herself, to touch him, but there were other more pressing matters. Although she couldn't think for the moment just what they might be.

"Are yeh all right, Perfesser?"

No.

"Yes."

She felt as if she were looking down on the scene from outside herself...just two people talking in a corridor, nothing extraordinary about it.

Stepping away from Hagrid to remove his hands from her shoulders, she said, "Will you please move him? You can bring him ... bring him to the Great Hall. And cover him. Then seal the doors...ask one of the other teachers to do it if you can't. No one must go in. Will you do that for me?"

"Of course, Perfesser."

"Then go collect the Gryffindors. See that they're all accounted for...except for Ronald, Ginevra, and Neville, who will be in the infirmary."

"Let me take yeh up to Madam Pomfrey first. Yeh shouldn't be alone." His voice broke on the last word.

"No, that isn't necessary. Please just do as I ask." Her voice was sharper than she intended, and she forced herself to soften it. "Thank you, but I'll be fine. I have to go to the infirmary anyway, so I shan't be alone."

He looked at her appraisingly, and she thought that for the first time ever, he was going to ignore a request she'd made. But after a moment, he nodded, saying, "All right, Perfesser. If that's what yeh want."

"Yes, thank you."

He lumbered out through the main doors, and Minerva forced herself to move despite the strange buzzing that seemed to fill her head.

As she walked, memory began to press in on her...Albus kissing her goodbye, quickly and rather absently, after telling her that he was taking Harry for "an outing" that evening, instructing her to have on-duty Order members patrol the castle during his absence.

His absence ...

Absence ...

Her heels echoed on the stones as she walked, and she focused on the sound ... one foot, the next, then the next, then the next ...

She passed an alcove in the west corridor and was assaulted by the memory of refusing to kiss Albus there under the mistletoe he had no doubt charmed for the purpose...only, what? three Christmases ago? Four?...afraid they might be seen.

Up the stairs, her breath beginning to hitch slightly with the effort on the second flight ...

Albus, laughing after she'd been marooned on a staircase that had decided to shift and simply hung there in mid-air. He'd refused to force it back into place until she smiled.

Up the third flight and across the landing ...

The vague awareness of Albus's arms around her as he carried her across the infirmary, his voice sounding strangely far away as he said, "St Mungo's."

Oh, gods, Albus ...

Her knees buckled, and she stumbled, jarring her knee painfully against the step. She felt the electric zing of her magic escaping her. It ricocheted across the walls in a flurry of red sparks, and the flat smell of ozone filled her nose. Several portraits burst into flame, sending their inhabitants screaming and fleeing for the safety of other pictures.

She tried and failed to corral her magic, and she was afraid she would destroy the castle as she had once almost destroyed the nursery as a toddler. In her desperation, she resorted to a trick her grandmother had taught her, almost before she could walk, reciting lines of poetry to calm the firestorm of magic within her.

"My love is now awake out of her dreames,

And her fayre eyes like stars that dimmed were

With darksome cloud, now shew theyr goodly beames

More bright then Hesperus his head doth rere."

She could almost feel his voice filling her mouth as she murmured Spenser's familiar lines, learnt long ago in some childhood lesson and spoken to her by her husband on their wedding night. It soothed her, and she concentrated on her magic. A sucking sensation, like a receding tide, filled her. It burnt as it flowed back, making her draw a hissing breath, but after a few moments, the feeling ebbed, and she was able to put out the small fires that still crackled in the portrait frames.

She forced herself to move down the corridor towards where everyone was gathered in the infirmary, expecting her to tell them what to do next. Poppy would be there, and Remus, and Molly and Arthur eventually...her friends, but there was no warmth in the idea. She stopped mid-step, suddenly unable to bear the thought of their eyes on her, pitying her, waiting for her to break so they could offer their cold comfort.

"Now lay those sorrowfull complaints aside,

And having all your heads with girland crownd,

Helpe me mine owne loves praises to resound,

Ne let the same of any be envied:

So Orpheus did for his owne bride,

So I unto my selfe alone will sing,

The woods shall to me answer and my Eccho ring"

Enough.

Squaring her shoulders, she kept moving forward.

It was late, and she had things to do.

~FIN~

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the assistance of the many individuals who helped in making this story, especially:

J. K. Rowling, for creating the world of Harry Potter and for allowing others to play in it;

The wonderful moderators at The Petulant Poetess archive, who helped me get my wild comma-fu under control;

Tetleythesecond, for her incisive comments on the Dresden scenes and for her help with the German;

Albalark, for her help in crafting a believable post-Hogwarts academic résumé for Minerva;

MMADfan, for her advice and commentary on the epilogue;

And finally, Fishy, for her editorial work on the later chapters and for her endless enthusiasm and cheerleading, which kept me going when my own enthusiasm and stamina were flagging.

Copyright

The author believes this work falls within the scope of the Fair Use Doctrine as a transformative work. For more information, see the Organization for Transformative Works.

All original characters, settings, and plot elements are copyright © Squibstress.

The works quoted in the novel are in the public domain, with the following exceptions:

"Of the Argonauts and an Epithalamium for Peleus and Thetis", translation copyright © 2001 A. S. Kline. Used with permission.

The "Babel fish" referred to in Chapter Twenty-Five are, of course, originally the invention of the brilliant Douglas Adams for his wonderful 1978 BBC series *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and the subsequent novel of the same title.

Chapter Forty-Three contains three lines of dialogue taken directly from *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, copyright © 2005 J. K. Rowling (Bloomsbury Publishing).

The image used on the book cover is Arno Brecker's "Orpheus und Eurydike", photo by Jos43 at nl.wikipedia, used under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.5 Generic license (CC-BY-SA 2.5).

This story is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

More in the Epithalamium Series

To those of you who have come with me this far, my thanks. If you got half the pleasure in reading this story that I did writing it, I'll consider it a job well done.

For anyone who is interested, there are links and information on the backstory for characters and events in the "Epithalamium universe" on my website (<http://squibstress.wordpress.com>).

If you'd like to know more about Minerva and Albus's adventures, you might enjoy the following stories, set in the same universe. All are available here under my username.

Bonnie Wee Thing | Epithalamium #0.5 ~ A short story that takes place on the day of Minerva McGonagall's birth.

Till A' the Seas Gang Dry| Epithalamium #2~ In this follow-up to *Epithalamium*, Minerva and Albus venture into the Muggle world to enjoy a winter honeymoon in Venice.

Come Autumn, Sae Pensive | Epithalamium #3~ A novel following Minerva McGonagall and Albus Dumbledore through an unexpected pregnancy and its aftermath.

Winterreise | Epithalamium #3.5~ A short story about marital tension between Minerva McGonagall and Albus Dumbledore.

Familiar Rituals | Epithalamium #3.6~ A short story about some end-of-term rituals and how Minerva McGonagall became Head of Gryffindor House.

Mammals of the Order Chiroptera | Epithalamium #3.7~ A short story in which Severus Snape observes members of the Order of the Phoenix at closer range than he would perhaps like.

Ca' the Yowes | Epithalamium #3.8~ A fluffy short story featuring Minerva McGonagall just after the Stunner attack in Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix.

Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart | Epithalamium #4 A novella about the lengths Minerva McGonagall and Severus Snape must go to in the prosecution of the war after Dumbledore's death.