

The Transformation of a Scottish Lioness

by Fishy

This is my interpretation of who Minerva McGonagall is and how her life's experiences shaped her; taking place between her last two years as a student of Hogwarts to the end of the second wizarding war.

Chapter one - Minerva McGonagall is in her sixth year and practices dueling with a fifth year Tom Riddle with unexpected results. She finds support from her Head of House, Albus Dumbledore.

Hazards of Dueling

Chapter 1 of 9

This is my interpretation of who Minerva McGonagall is and how her life's experiences shaped her; taking place between her last two years as a student of Hogwarts to the end of the second wizarding war.

Chapter one - Minerva McGonagall is in her sixth year and practices dueling with a fifth year Tom Riddle with unexpected results. She finds support from her Head of House, Albus Dumbledore.

*These characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I appreciate the opportunity to borrow them from time to time. My deepest thanks to the very generous **Squibstress** for her inspiration, advice and time.*

February 1943 - Hogwarts Castle

A seventeen-year-old Minerva McGonagall sat in Headmaster Dippet's office, waiting for a disciplinary decision due to her attack on Tom Riddle. The office was dusty and smelled of old pipe smoke and ancient parchment, and she had trouble keeping herself from sneezing. She heard raised voices from the staff room next door as she held her head in her hands, feeling miserable.

"I think the evidence is clear, Horace, that Tom acted dishonorably by casting a Body Bind spell after he had already disarmed her," Professor Albus Dumbledore stated to the Head of Slytherin House, pointing to the names of the last four spells that Tom Riddle's wand had cast. The names were written in the air in yellow, fiery lettering above the hovering Yew-made instrument.

Horace Slughorn, Headmaster Dippet, Gamekeeper Ogg and Albus Dumbledore stood in a huddle around the wand that now floated mid-air. Another wand, a 16 ½ inch Oak piece, lay on a table next to them with the names of its last four spells floating above it.

"Minerva's last spell was Protego. I think we can rule out that she intentionally set him on fire-" he paused "-or threw him up in that tree." Professor Dumbledore added to his mounting argument. Only the Gamekeeper seemed to be agreeing with his logic and the Headmaster shook his head in aggravation.

"Then how do you explain Tom ending up there? Surely you don't think the girl could have physically done it? Throw a lad like Tom some 30 feet in the air?" This question

came from the Headmaster while he scratched at his bearded chin and paced the floor.

Professor Dumbledore shook his head.

"Of course not. However, *innate* magic, especially when the caster is fearful, can produce such effects." In reaction to the Transfiguration professor's explanation, both Professor Slughorn and the Headmaster scoffed. The Potions master was the first to retort.

"Innate magic of that magnitude, from a sixth year? Albus, that's preposterous!" Horace threw up his hands and walked over to the fireplace and Dumbledore had the oddest sense that the Potions instructor wasn't being entirely forthcoming.

"Is it really?" questioned Professor Dumbledore. "Perhaps we could use the perspective of a woman on this. Yes?" To this the Headmaster nodded, understanding that his Transfiguration instructor was considering a dangerous possibility, and summoned a house-elf.

A young female elf Apparated into the staff room with a loud pop and was instructed to collect Professor Merrythought immediately. While they waited for the female professor to arrive, Professor Slughorn began ranting.

"I don't see the issue here. My prize student, a decorated Hogwarts *hero*, is in the hospital wing with a broken leg and was nearly scorched while your Gryffindor is without a scratch." Horace's eyes were wide as he looked over at the other men. Albus narrowed his gaze on Horace, moving swiftly across the room toward him.

"Miss McGonagall, who I would like to remind you is also *your* student, had her blouse *torn* open and is, quite likely, emotionally scarred. Are you insinuating that she was not injured during the event? I hope you're not suggesting that physical wounds are more significant." Dumbledore's voice had lowered and became quite dangerous. Headmaster Dippet stepped between the two, placing a hand on Albus' shoulder just before the house-elf Apparated back into the room holding the arm of a very confused Professor Merrythought.

"Ah, thank you, Jubles. You may go now," Headmaster Dippet stated, and the house-elf Disapparated. "Professor Merrythought, I apologize for such theatrics, but we are in need of a woman's opinion on a sensitive matter-" the Headmaster stated and began to explain the situation. Professor Merrythought looked around the room quickly, catching the fleeting gaze of Slughorn, who turned abruptly to stare into the fire.

"We have a pair of students, a male and a female, who were practicing their dueling arts on the grounds. Both claim that it started out as a friendly practice; which isn't in dispute, however, we have some evidence that the boy cast a Body Bind spell on the girl after he had disarmed her..." He paused, noticing Professor Merrythought's expression grow dark. "After this happened, we know that the boy ended up stuck in a tree, and moments later, the tree was on fire. The boy was pinned up there, leg stuck around a branch, and apparently he dropped his wand in the process."

As the Headmaster explained the situation, the Potions instructor became more and more agitated, pacing the floor. The Gamekeeper clamped his fists and chewed on his bottom lip. The Transfiguration professor stood quietly, focused on Professor Merrythought's face while the Headmaster explained.

"Mervin..." the Headmaster addressed the Gamekeeper, "would you please relay what you witnessed again, for Professor Merrythought's benefit?" The Gamekeeper cleared his throat nervously and started sweating.

"Well, like I said, I was out patrolin' the grounds, 'cause it was gettin' late, and I see two kids down a ways from me hut, and they were hurlin' spells at each other. Flashes of light and whatnot. So I go down to tell 'em to get up to the Hall for dinner, see, but before I get there, I hear a boy cast Expelliarmus, then I hear him say and cast Petrificus Totalus, right?

"I don't hear any female voice at all, and then I hear this soft thump, so I'm thinking, the boy must'a done somethin', so I rush down, and by the time I'm ten paces away, the boy, who turned out to be Tom, is hurled up into a nearby tree and the whole thing goes up in a blaze.

"The girl, she was pullin' herself up off the ground. Poor thing is all wet, covered in mud from getting' knocked down, and she's cryin', and I notice her over robe is ripped completely off 'er and her blouse is..." here he pauses and looks at the floor... "well, it's all ripped open, and she grabs up her wand, which was off somewhere, and runs toward the castle.

"She didn't say anythin' to me, she's so upset I think. And I look up in the tree, an there's Tom, screamin' at me to get him out, apparently he's stuck and I done forgot me wand-" he admits a bit sheepishly, "but I sees his wand there and I pick it up an cast Aguamenti to put the fire out - the tree was all ablaze yeh see, an then try to Levitate Tom out.

"Well, I ain't the best with spells, obvious, but I manage to jerk and wiggle him lose...I think his leg was stuck around a branch, maybe even tied, I ain't sure really, but he screamed bloody murder the whole time I was tryin' to get 'im out. Once I did get 'im outta tha tree, well, I carried 'im up to the hospital wing and found Madam Alumno and let her take over." The Gamekeeper paused to look over his audience. Slughorn had his back turned toward Mervin, the Headmaster was watching Merrythought closely, Professor Dumbledore was glancing between Merrythought and the Headmaster, and Professor Merrythought was fixed on Mervin's face.

"From what I saw, the lad got grabby with Miss McGonagall and got his arse beat by some sort of magic he didn't expect." And the Gamekeeper might have gone on explaining his ideas and opinions, but Headmaster Dippet waved him down, telling him that was quite enough. Mervin shrugged. "That's all I seen. Is the girl a'right?" he asked worriedly.

Professor Dumbledore was the first to speak up.

"I imagine she's upset right now, but we-" and Dumbledore made a point to look around the room at each of the professors, as if insisting they do as he advised "-will be doing all we can for her. I do not feel she has any blame in this whatsoever." He turned his attention to Merrythought.

"Professor Merrythought, we were hoping to get a woman's perspective on innate magic in relation to fear. If Miss McGonagall was expecting to be sexually attacked..." to this, both Slughorn and Dippet gasped and started "hey nowing" and protested "lets not go that far" to which Dumbledore just waved his hand at them and continued, "would that sort of magical reaction be normal, or likely?" Albus was solely focusing on Merrythought, and the room was as silent as a tomb.

With very careful dictation, Professor Merrythought explained how innate magic was uncommonly evident during the most intense of emotions; fear being one of the strongest causes of freak magical accidents. She then explained that she had learned of cases where unintentional magical outbursts, which could be quite violent, were often aimed at the fear source. She also added that she had known personally, two witches who had been sexually attacked that had similar reactions as to what occurred between Miss McGonagall and Mr. Riddle.

Professor Slughorn sighed heavily and spoke with noticeable dread.

"This is Tom we're talking about, the lad who flushed out the criminal who opened the Chamber of Secrets. A very talented boy!"

Albus Dumbledore spoke up before Headmaster Dippet had the chance.

"A student who is *credited* with solving the mystery, however, as we've spoken at length on this subject, we both know that Acromantuli are not capable of Petrifying their prey," Dumbledore reminded the group, and the Headmaster began rubbing his forehead in dismay and insisted they not stray off topic. Dumbledore pressed his advantage before anyone could stop him.

"And let us not forget Miss McGonagall, an Outstanding student in *ten* subjects, Gryffindor Quiddich Captain and Prefect who also happens to be the youngest Transfiguration Champion of continental Europe, is a *very* talented girl," he countered Horace's defense of Tom. The Headmaster waved his arms in the air and demanded an end to the argument, anxious to hasten a resolution.

At last, after a heated discussion among the strained group, a decision was made, much to Albus Dumbledore's disapproval.

Headmaster Dippet and Professor Dumbledore reentered the Headmaster's office, seeing Minerva sitting crumpled in one of the large chairs, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She was shivering. She looked up at the pair as the Headmaster walked toward her; his thick, tan robes sweeping across the floor.

"Miss McGonagall," the Headmaster began, "we've discussed the situation and feel you broke no rules and your actions against Tom were unintentional. You're free to return to your house-" he stated very matter-of-factly. Minerva was looking up into his face as he stood over her and he turned to avoid eye contact, walking toward his desk. "If you should feel the need to talk to the mediwitch or would like to contact your family, you may do so." He then walked around the Headmaster's desk and sat down, thankful to be off his feet.

Minerva sat there, extremely uncomfortable with the situation. She felt violated and undefended, by the very people who, by all rights, were meant to protect her. She wasn't sure what she expected from the Headmaster, but his casual and displaced reaction was more than disappointing. She glanced at her Head of House as he stood, quietly, by the heavy wooden office door. He looked extremely worried.

Minerva cleared her throat.

"Will Tom be expelled?" She asked timidly.

Professor Dumbledore sighed heavily as if he had been holding his breath and the Headmaster shifted uncomfortably in his large oak chair.

"I think that's a rather harsh punishment for a misunderstanding. No, he will not, and I do not wish to discuss this further-" was all Headmaster Dippet said before returning his attention to some paperwork in front of him.

Minerva stood up, clutching the blanket around her shoulders and rushed toward the door, nearly running into her Head of House. Dumbledore opened the door for her and followed her out to the hallway. She felt the threat of tears and wanted desperately to run away to hide somewhere, but her Transfiguration professor was too quick. Before she could race off, she felt his hand on her shoulder and stopped. The door to the Headmaster's office shut with a loud thump.

"I think you deserve an explanation, at the very least, of what the Headmaster decided." He paused, hoping she'd turn around. "And I want you to know, I do not agree with it."

She felt her breath catch and turned to look up at him, seeing the look of regret in his eyes. She understood, for the first time that evening since the whole scenario began, that someone was, indeed, in her corner. And that made all the difference.

Nodding up at him, she felt a tear slide down her cheek and straightened up, wiping her face quickly.

"Alright," she replied and followed him to his office.

Sanctuary

Chapter 2 of 9

Head of House Albus Dumbledore discusses the decision of the Headmaster with a sixth-year Minerva McGonagall.
Minerva finds unexpected comfort and is introduced to Fawkes.

Note: These characters belong to J.K. Rowling; I just borrow them. My deepest appreciation to the very talented **Squibstress** and **MMADfan** for all their inspiration, advice and patience. In this AU story, Professor Merrythought is, at the time being, the Charms instructor. The name of the song in this chapter is "An Páistín Fionn" and can be heard here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWeH6p7ldFc>

Chapter Two: Sanctuary

As Minerva and Professor Dumbledore made their way back to Gryffindor Tower, several students attempted to stop the pair to ask about the dueling incident and Minerva's well-being. Noticing his esteemed student's discomfort at the sudden attention, Professor Dumbledore gracefully dismissed all questions and steered Minerva toward his office.

Once inside, Minerva sighed with relief, feeling sheltered from unwanted attention. Still clad in her muddy robes and wearing a damp blanket, she was hesitant to sit down, wanting to avoid dirtying up her teacher's furniture. Professor Dumbledore withdrew an oak wand from his cloak pocket and handed it to her.

"I believe this is yours." He smiled kindly as she took it and thanked him.

The office was dark and cold, and Professor Dumbledore waved a hand toward the large fireplace, igniting a roaring fire instantly. He then waved at several candelabra around the room, lighting each candle and illuminating the room in a warm glow.

He turned toward his slightly shivering student. "Miss McGonagall, I imagine you'd like to clean up?" he asked while walking toward her. Tapping her blanket with his wand, Albus emitted a silent Warming Charm. She nodded, clutching the blanket around her shoulders, finding it warmer.

"I would; however, I'm not too anxious to run into my classmates." She paused. "I know I'll have to talk to them eventually, but I'd prefer to avoid it tonight." As she spoke, Dumbledore looked up at an antique cuckoo clock on the wall, then back to her.

"Evening feast has been over for half an hour." He raised a finger into the air, signaling an idea. "You should find more privacy if you use the Prefects' bathroom, and I could make an announcement in the Gryffindor common room that you are well and request privacy." He looked to her questioningly, and she nodded her head in agreement. "You are more than welcome to return to Gryffindor Tower if you like, or you could take some time to yourself in my office. I was going to have dinner here since we missed our meal, and you are welcome to join me. I wanted to explain the Headmaster's decision anyway, but I don't wish to take you away from"

She cut him off before he could finish, nearly jumping toward him in her nervous state.

"No, Professor, I would much prefer to stay here." She clarified, "I'd rather not return to the common room, actually." She looked across the room at him, suddenly feeling as if she might be intruding. "However, I don't want to intrude on your evening." To this he raised a dismissive hand.

"You aren't intruding. Not at all. I'd planned an exciting evening of marking second-year essays. I daresay your company would make the experience more tolerable," he stated with mild sarcasm, grinning at her.

Thinking aloud, she continued. "I could work on my Charms and Potions projects, if that's all right with you." The relief she felt was almost tangible, and she was so thankful that he had offered her the chance to avoid the mob she knew she'd have to confront in the hallways and common room. She realized she would have to face the questions eventually, explain the event with Riddle, but she wasn't ready. Dumbledore nodded to her request.

"Of course, you can study, read or whatever you like." He paused, thinking. "What would you like for dinner? Anything in particular?" he asked before summoning a Hogwarts house-elf who appeared in the room instantly with an audible crack. Minerva shook her head.

"I'm not really hungry, Professor." She had some difficulty looking him in the eye. Her professor snorted softly and insisted she needed to eat something.

"You don't have any favorite foods? I'm sure the elves can whip up something quickly that would suit" But she cut him off.

"Really, Professor, I've lost my appetite." She was still shivering and looking a bit on edge, but she could not help but admire the large bookshelf behind his desk. She imagined it held a variety of tomes she had never seen before, sparking a sudden curiosity. Dumbledore shook his head.

"You need to eat something. Perhaps ... I'll just request a few things ... will tea suffice, or would you prefer something else?" he asked as he started to write out a list for the house-elf who was waiting patiently.

"Tea is fine, sir. With milk and sugar, please," she answered.

Professor Dumbledore finished up his list, folded it and handed it to the elf, asking him to return as soon as he had their dinner organized. The house-elf Disapparated with a loud pop, and Dumbledore walked closer to Minerva, who remained standing, uncomfortably wet and muddy, by the door.

"I can cast an Invisibility Charm on you if you think that would enable you to avoid attention." To this, she nodded adamantly, and he added, "If I do this, I must have your word you'll return here immediately after you've finished bathing and gathering your books." He caught her gaze in his, a determined look on his face. "This isn't exactly permitted, therefore, I must have your word that you won't mispend this favor." He lowered his head so he could look at her over the tops of his half-moon spectacles, fixing her in a pointed stare.

She nodded obediently.

"No, sir, I won't abuse this opportunity. Thank you so much, Professor." She stammered a bit, extremely thankful that he'd offer her such a privilege and determined to make him understand just how much she valued it.

"I'll head to my room for clean clothes and my books, then go straight to the Prefects' bath and return straight to your office, if that is permissible?" She looked up at him, hopeful and warming due to the charm Dumbledore placed on her blanket.

He seemed satisfied enough and pulled his wand out of the loose sleeve of his gray robes and tapped her shoulder with it gently. She was soon completely invisible to herself, though Dumbledore seemed to be able to keep his gaze upon her eyes.

"Try and be quick. I'd rather the other professors not find out I enabled this. Remember, your books will need to be covered by your blanket or clothing to be concealed," he stated, opening the door for her, following her out, and heading to the Fat Lady's portrait.

The pair entered the Gryffindor common room, though Minerva was invisible, and several students stood up to greet their Head of House. Professor Dumbledore explained briefly that Minerva needed some privacy but was unharmed. Once several female students had run down the dormitory staircase, Minerva made her way up to her dorm room, quietly removed a set of clean clothing and her night slippers, and then shrank them to fit in the palm of her hand. She also shrank a book sack, which held most of her assignments and books, and put her shrunken clothing in it. She Scourgified her dirty blanket and clothes, picked up the tiny sack, wrapped herself in the huge blanket, and made her way out of the Gryffindor common room to the Prefects' bathroom.

Several students were whispering to each other about what they had heard of the duel. Dumbledore remained in the common room, requesting the students not take up the art of gossip and that they give their classmate the opportunity to explain when she was ready. He saw Minerva return down the staircase, and he kept the students focused on himself so that she could proceed undetected out through the portrait hole. As Professor Dumbledore turned to leave the active room, he was caught by a strapping sixth-year prefect.

"Professor? Can I talk to you ... ah ... outside?" Alastor Moody requested, and Dumbledore nodded to him, ushering him out the portrait hole. Minerva was already off down the hall before the Transfiguration professor and young man made their way into the hallway.

"I heard something ..." Alastor paused, remembering being reprimanded by Dumbledore more than a few times on his choice of words, "Well, I heard that Minerva was accosted by that Slytherin, Riddle," he stated, though it was more of a question. Alastor Moody stood a few inches shorter than his professor and had a slightly heavier build, well suited for his role as the Gryffindor Quidditch Keeper.

Professor Dumbledore inhaled deeply, choosing his words carefully so as to not set the young man off bolting to the hospital wing to pummel Tom Riddle.

"Miss McGonagall is upset because of events that occurred during a practice duel this evening. She is, as far as I know, uninjured. Mr. Riddle, whom she was dueling, is in the hospital wing with a broken leg, and there really isn't more I can say on this." Dumbledore noticed the younger man stiffen up, and anger flashed across his features. Before Moody could ask more questions, Albus added, "I am quite positive, once she is feeling more herself, she will explain the situation to her friends, and I want to make sure the option is *hers* to take." With this, Dumbledore raised a finger and pointed it in Alastor's face. "She needs some time, Mr. Moody. I ask that you give her that."

Young Moody didn't seem satisfied with this answer; however, he knew better than to push this professor with more questions and simply nodded in compliance. Albus thanked him for understanding, and Alastor took his leave. Dumbledore got the distinct impression that a fight was likely to break out soon, and that Riddle might suffer an additional beating, magical or not, though he chose not to press the Gryffindor Keeper on the matter.

Minerva made her way down the hallway to the Prefects' bathroom and came across Professor Slughorn speaking with Professor Merrythought, both of whom most likely thought they were speaking privately.

"Horace, if your student is responsible for a sexual assault, you must take that seriously," admonished the Charms instructor. Horace Slughorn looked extremely agitated and tried to make his way back to his office, but Merrythought persisted.

"Model student or not, that's not something that happens accidentally. I hope you realize the implications this could have for the rest of the students as well as for your House," she warned. Slughorn responded with several nods and "of courses" and picked up his pace down the corridor, most likely toward the Slytherin common room, Minerva guessed, leaving a fuming Professor Merrythought in his wake.

At last Minerva made it to the large, gold-inlaid door to the Prefects' bathroom and was extremely thankful to find she was completely alone. After turning on all the taps to the huge pool-sized tub, she let her blanket fall on the floor and stripped off her clothes, tossing them toward the laundry hamper. She carefully removed a brass locket, which was in the shape of an hourglass, from around her neck and pushed it into the shrunken sack, placing everything atop the blanket so she could easily find her belongings when she was finished. Knowing the bathroom door was securely locked behind her and that she would not be disturbed, she relaxed and dove into the bubbly, warm water.

The taps turned off on their own, and Minerva took her time swimming for a good ten minutes.

She was alarmed to notice Nearly Headless Nick swing in from the far wall and nod to her as he passed over the pool. Self-consciously she sank into the water, allowing the bubbles to cover her breasts, and wondered how a ghost could see her if she was, truly, invisible. But he was gone almost as fast as he appeared, and she put it out of her mind.

She knew that nothing would actually make her *feel* clean after Tom had touched, leered at and threatened her, but she understood it was a matter of taking it day by day and regaining confidence in herself. Finding a sanctuary was a primary step, and that was already provided to her by Professor Dumbledore, who probably had no idea just how much she appreciated his kindness. Then again, maybe this sort of thing had happened before, and Dumbledore had already dealt with similar situations. The idea made her feel sick, so she decided to silently recount Potions ingredients for various palliatives to take her mind off the trauma she had recently suffered.

The array of soaps in the Prefects' bath was astounding. She chose one in the shape of Celtic knot that smelled of lavender, spruce and cedar and began scrubbing every inch of her body with soap and a flannel. Afterward, she used a bottle of herbal hair soap that sat by the tub, one she had never noticed before. It added an incredible silkiness to her long, thick hair and smelled, oddly enough, like tea tree oil and lavender. She wondered if these toiletries were made specifically for Hogwarts as the containers were plain, offering no labeling, but just simple painted words detailing the contents.

She rose out of the luxurious bath, towed off, un-shrank her clothing and dressed in woolen, full body undergarments and Transfigured her invisible blanket into a green tartan dressing gown that was so large it ended up dragging the ground behind her. She saw a thick comb by the bottle of hair soap, and since she had forgotten to bring her own, she used this and found her hair to be smoother than she ever remembered it. She decided she was going to keep this hair soap, since it must be Hogwarts made, and added the bottle to a pocket in her now-Transfigured gown. Taking the brass locket out of the small sack, she replaced this around her neck, tucking it under her woolen undershirt. Leaving her books shrunken and in the small sack, she tucked her wand into another pocket in her invisible night robe and passed by the mirrors, which offered no reflection. She had no choice but to assume her hair would at least be presentable, even if wet, and left the bathroom to head back to her Head of House's office.

She passed a few students and one professor in the hall, but no one noticed her. Upon reaching Dumbledore's office, she knocked softly on the heavy, wooden door. It opened instantly, and she saw Professor Dumbledore sitting behind his desk. His spectacled eyes were focused exactly on hers as he motioned her inside.

She entered quietly and shut the door. Albus stood and wandlessly uttered the incantation to make her visible again and then Transfigured a small chair in the middle of the room into a table. He then Levitated two small office chairs toward it. A tray on his desk held two plates piled with food, and he Levitated it to the table as well, along with a pot of tea and two mugs.

"I ordered us some shepherd's pie, glazed carrots, pumpernickel bread and cherry cobbler. I hope that suits?" he questioned, looking over at her, and she nodded. He laid his spectacles on his desk, picked up a few napkins, and took a seat at the table. She hesitated a moment, as this was completely new to her, dining with a professor alone in his office, but eventually sat down despite feeling self-conscious. Albus began cutting the bread into slices and made sure the butter dish was close to his student, in case she wanted any. He then poured the tea and gestured her to add milk and sugar to her taste while he added several spoons of sugar to his.

"Do you usually say grace, sir?" she asked quietly. "I'm sorry ... my father is a minister. I feel rather guilty if I don't offer thanks," she explained, surprising her professor, who had previously thought her father to be a mediwizard. He laid his spoon down and placed his hands in his lap.

"No, however, you are most welcome to do so, if you like. It's a practice I've regretfully fallen out of." And he bowed his head respectfully. She mimicked him and began.

"Heavenly Father, we thank You for this abundance before us. I am most thankful to Professor Dumbledore for this kindness he has paid me, likely more than he realizes. Amen." She kept her prayer short, not wanting to make her professor uncomfortable, as she did not know his religious views. As Minerva said grace, Albus was surprised by her words and felt uncommonly warm and slightly embarrassed by her honesty. He smiled softly to himself before opening his eyes.

She took her napkin, placing it in her lap, and looked at the huge meal on her plate, feeling a sudden obligation to eat something despite her lack of appetite. She began by sipping her tea.

"Chamomile?" she inquired, adding a bit more milk. Albus nodded, scooping up a spoonful of meat, peas and mashed potatoes.

"I thought, with the evening's distressful events, we could both use something a bit more relaxing than standard tea. If you prefer, I can Summon something more traditional." He looked across the table at her, and she shook her head.

"No, sir, this is perfect, actually. My gran often gave me a cup of this during thunderstorms," she blushed, "when I was scared. It's quite comforting."

This answer caused Albus to smile, and she reached across for a slice of bread and began buttering it. He took a deep draw from his tea mug and then set it back on the table, crossing his arms, and looked at her. Minerva had the impression he was about to deliver bad news.

"I requested that Riddle be expelled," he stated plainly. Minerva was somewhat shocked. She had assumed Professor Dumbledore was likely the only advocate requesting punishment for the Slytherin, but she didn't think he'd push that far. Albus continued, "But because Tom is ...," he paused, considering his words, "regarded so highly by many of his instructors and has charmed quite a few members of the board of governors, few faculty are willing to accept that he'd done something so heinous" Albus wasn't finished with his explanation, but he saw a look of despair on his pupil's face and understood what she was thinking.

"Understand, Minerva, no one disbelieves *you*. Not one professor nor the Headmaster suspected you were lying" Minerva cut him off before he could finish.

"If I'm not lying, then what the ... what in hell do they think happened? I tripped? A bear happened along and ripped off my clothes?" Her voice was growing louder as the anger rose in her chest. She quickly realized what she had said and felt ashamed, looking at the napkin in her lap. "I'm sorry ... I didn't mean" But it was Albus' turn to cut her off. He reached across the table, placing his hand atop one of hers.

"I know this doesn't make sense to you, with you being such a perfectly logical person. But please, let me explain?" He waited until she looked up at him and nodded. He slipped his hand under hers and held it, hoping to offer some small measure of comfort. "Talented students such as yourself, and yes, Tom, come along rarely in a teacher's lifetime. We don't like to believe the harsh realities of any of them. I'm sure you're familiar with the psychological state of denial?"

To his question, she reluctantly nodded and sighed heavily, feeling the weight of understanding upon her shoulders. She would have to continue to take meals in the Great Hall with Riddle, tolerate him at prefect meetings, participate in extracurricular events, pass in the hallways alongside the boy who assaulted her. The very idea made her sick to her stomach. Professor Dumbledore continued in his naturally gentle voice.

"As loath as I am to admit it, my bias toward *you* would be difficult to sway if someone came to me, accusing you of such actions." Though his words were meant to soothe, she couldn't meet his eyes and kept her gaze upon her plate. There was nothing gained by wishful thinking in this case. Professor Dumbledore had, in fact, defended her and believed her. There was some comfort in that. Regarding Riddle, she knew justice was lost and her energy would be better spent elsewhere. Feeling the anger slowly leaking out of her like sand, she reached for her mug and drank deeply, finding the tea relaxing. Albus rubbed his thumb pad across the knuckles of her left hand until she finally looked up at him. She braved another question.

"Has he received *any* sort of punishment?" Her question was feeble, and she knew it. Nothing, save for, perhaps, expulsion, would satisfy her, and she felt weak after asking. Her professor stiffened a bit and released her hand, looking somewhat defeated as he responded.

"I requested a limited curfew be placed upon Riddle, removal from the prefects, removal from the dueling club, extended detention, as well as a loss of two hundred points from Slytherin. The Headmaster, however, felt that was far too harsh and agreed to a moderate number of detentions and one hundred points taken from Slytherin. Riddle has retained all rights to his extracurricular activities, I'm sorry to say." Though he felt she deserved the truth, the words tasted metallic in his mouth, and he regretted having to say them.

"Detention with Slughorn, I imagine," she stated, remembering how her Potions professor had seemed so unconcerned when she had passed him and her Charms professor arguing in the hallway. Professor Dumbledore shook his head and gently pushed her heaping plate toward her.

"Professor Merrythought, actually, who, if this is any consolation, is quite concerned about you." He watched her cautiously for a moment and added, "I've also made it a priority to keep an eye on Riddle, as well as yourself." She looked up a bit defensively as he said this, feeling a flare of anger that her professor would consider her unable to defend herself, but then dismissed it. He was, after all, only being protective, and she could not deny that she wasn't entirely able to handle the event that had caused the conversation to take place in the first place. "I hope you don't take offense. I am, as Head of your House, responsible for your well-being."

She sighed and nodded, pushing her carrots around her plate with her fork. "Thank you, Professor." While her response would have sounded insincere to most ears, Dumbledore heard her true appreciation and smiled softly. He saw the shift in his student, saw the internal struggle begin draining out of her face, and he relaxed considerably, thankful that they had gotten through the discussion without incident. He hoped they might find something pleasant in the evening, and he was curious about her family.

"A *minister* ... obviously not Catholic," he stated, sampling the carrots. Minerva was actually thankful that he changed the subject, and she found the shepherd's pie looked appetizing after all. She wondered for a moment how he knew it was one of her favorite dishes.

"Presbyterian, Professor," she answered and filled her fork with a sampling of the main entrée. Dumbledore looked at her with great interest and she felt she could hear the question that must be circling in his head. "You needn't fear asking, Professor. Yes, my father is a Muggle. It's my mother's side, the MacGruders, who are magical," she explained matter-of-factly. "The McGonagalls are sheep farmers, mostly."

Dumbledore was intrigued.

"That's quite the paradox," he stated, thinking a moment. "Rarely do I hear of those in the church who openly accept our Wizarding world ... non-magical people I mean." Minerva grinned to herself as he stated this, and she further explained, between bites of creamy potatoes, peas, corn and ground lamb.

"I asked my father about that once. How, when nearly all of the Christian faith looked upon the realm of magic as devil's work, did he manage to fall in love with, let alone marry, Mum," she continued and saw that her professor was hanging on each of her words with extreme concentration. "He explained that it was difficult for him to accept in the beginning; however, he spent a great deal of time in prayer about it and decided, ultimately, that something as beautiful as Mum's talent couldn't possibly be anything but a gift from the Divine."

Until she had explained her father's ideas, Minerva couldn't remember her Transfiguration professor ever looking dumbfounded. But he certainly did at that moment. After several long nervous seconds, at least for her, he spoke.

"That's quite remarkable. And *rare*. Your father's wisdom is, indeed, enlightening." Taking another long draw from his mug, he returned to his meal.

His proclamation filled Minerva with a sense of pride, and she had to stare into her plate to hide her embarrassment. Though her professor was always gracious and polite when addressing his students, compliments of *this* nature from Albus Dumbledore were quite uncommon. Only then did she realize he had actually paid her two very large praises: the wisdom of her father and explaining that *her* talent was highly valued by instructors such as himself. She chose to take a large bite of pie so as to avoid the possibility of making a fool of herself by speaking, as she really had no idea what to say.

"It's quite curious that your father came to a similar conclusion as my Grandfather Dumbledore," he continued, and Minerva's head shot up.

"The Dumbledores were originally ..." But she couldn't finish her question as she considered how judgmental it would sound.

"Muggles ... yes. My father's parents were devout Catholics, and my Grandfather Dumbledore was actually non-magical. It was my father's mother, my Grandmother Dumbledore, who had magical blood," he added helpfully. "I had asked my grandfather a similar question, as did you to your father, how he overcame the prejudice of the church against witchcraft," he explained, taking a bite of carrots. Minerva was leaning forward, eager for him to continue.

"What did he say?" she asked quickly, focusing intently on her professor's mouth. Oddly, she found the mixed auburn and few silver-colored hairs of his mustache to be terribly fascinating.

"Very much the same as your father said to you: something as wonderful as the gift of magic simply couldn't be malicious. Oh sure, he believed it could be used for dark purposes, but no more so than could the average person use their talents malevolently." He cleared his throat. "An ideal I've grown to understand more and more as the years pass."

Minerva thought for a moment and blurted out without thinking, "Catholic ... I thought you sounded a bit Irish, but your biography explains you grew up in Godric's Hollow?" After, quite literally, thinking out loud, she felt she had been rude, prying into his personal life. Her professor chuckled lightly, wiping his beard with his napkin.

"You know, there *are* Catholics in other parts of the world besides Ireland," he teased. "But you are correct. You've a sharp ear." He winked at her, causing her to blush. "True, we were raised in England, mostly; however, I spent a great deal of time with my paternal grandparents in Kells, Ireland." He noticed Minerva reddening and couldn't help but further his teasing. "And now, you know my deepest, darkest secret ... I am a closet Irishman." He grinned widely.

They both burst out laughing, and Minerva had the distinct impression that Albus was enjoying this bit of teasing at her expense. She was thankful when he broke the tension, explaining further his Irish nature.

"Don't tell the Headmaster. We have a friendly pool at my brother's pub every year, betting on national Quidditch matches, and Armando *to this day*, thinks I support him and his fanatical passion for the Falcons. When, in secret, I always put my Galleons on the Kestrels." He chuckled, describing his preference for the Irish team, the Kenmare Kestrels, over the English team, the Falmouth Falcons. Minerva grinned to herself and decided to tip the scales a tad back in her favor.

"Really, Professor?" She feigned surprise. "And here I thought all along that you favored noble Scotland's Pride of Portree! What with your obvious favor for the color *purple*." She grinned at him over her tea mug and saw, for the very first time, Albus Dumbledore gasp and blush, at a loss for words. He nearly choked on his peas and held up a hand in mock surrender.

"Touché, my dear," he laughed merrily at his defeat, "well played."

Minerva took on a very serious expression and raised herself as high as she could in her seat, holding her tea mug with both hands. She just couldn't resist, not when he set himself up so perfectly.

"Not to worry, Professor, your *secrets* are safe with me. I shall not repeat that you are, indeed, an Irishman who desperately wishes he were born a wee bit further north, in the royal Highlands." Albus shook his head and laughed, knowing he'd been bested.

"Small mercy for the rest of your classmates at Hogwarts that we have only a dueling club and not a debate club." He chuckled, freely complimenting his exceptionally witty student, knowing full well he'd get the satisfaction of yet *another* blush out of it.

Minerva wasn't expecting a retort in this fashion, and she colored significantly, pleasing her Transfiguration professor all the more. She covered her face with her hand to hide her wide grin and complete embarrassment, and Albus laughed openly, waving his hands back and forth as if calling for a time-out.

"All right ... all right, I'll stop," he sputtered, still laughing. "Twenty points to Gryffindor for Miss McGonagall besting her cheeky professor." He fished in a breast pocket of his robes and drew out a deep purple handkerchief to wipe tears from his eyes, which caused Minerva to point and exclaim.

"What did I say? Pride of Portree, right there!" She grinned, feeling extremely pleased with herself with this most unusual victory. They both laughed for several more

moments before recovering themselves and focusing on the remainder of their dinners.

She found it quite strange that, only hours earlier, she thought she might have been on the verge of a mental breakdown. And now, for reasons she couldn't explain, but having completely to do with her Head of House, she was having one of the most enjoyable evenings she could remember in quite a while. The dichotomy was bizarre. Minerva sniffed at her tea suspiciously, wondering if some kind of potion was at work, when there was a sudden loud bang and a brilliant orange flash over Dumbledore's desk. Minerva inadvertently jumped backwards in her chair, spilling her tea in her lap as Fawkes appeared in a flash of fire and sat on the perch to the right of the large desk.

Albus remained completely unsurprised at this sudden interruption and, grinning, handed Minerva another napkin.

"No need for alarm. Fawkes has simply decided to return." He chuckled as Minerva dabbed at her robes with the napkin. "He can be rather dramatic at times. I can cast a Drying Charm ... or" He stopped as Minerva took the initiative at his suggestion and uttered the incantation, drying her robes and muttering out of embarrassment. Albus reached to refill her mug, noticing the teapot was quite light. "I don't know about you, but I'm wanting for more," he stated and summoned the same house-elf from earlier, requesting another pot of tea.

Minerva looked past her professor at the large red and orange phoenix perched beside his desk, preening a wing.

"I don't know why I forgot about your phoenix, Professor, but I had no idea they moved about so freely." She added milk and a spoon of sugar to her mug, stirring gently. Albus nodded after refilling and preparing his own tea, taking a long drink.

"Well, to be honest, your first mistake is assuming that Fawkes is *my* phoenix," he stated while glancing at her, his bright eyes full of mirth. "Phoenixes belong to no one but themselves and come and go as they please. He's been gone for a fortnight, in fact, this time." He turned around, offering a respectful nod to Fawkes, who paused from preening as Albus wandlessly Summoned some type of bird cakes from his numerous shelves and waved them into a dish affixed to the perch.

"But, Professor, isn't Fawkes your familiar?" She was confused and sat studying the pair, the wizard and the bird, while sipping her tea, having already cleaned her plate of every morsel of the meal. Albus raised a hand as he turned back around.

'Ah ... a familiar. In the sense that a magic user purchases a wand, toad or an owl? No, a phoenix is not." He cleared his throat before continuing, draining the last of the tea from his mug as the house-elf Apparated back into the office with a loud crack and a fresh pot of chamomile tea. Albus thanked the elf, returning his attention to Minerva. To the surprise of both the humans in the room, Fawkes tilted his head up and opened his beak, letting forth a lingering trill, seemingly inspired by Albus' explanation of the glory of phoenixes.

Minerva blinked a few times. She had never heard a phoenix song and could only remember ever seeing Fawkes once, from a great distance as the bird returned, on wing, to the castle during her third year.

"Consider Fawkes my friend. I'm sure you've never thought that you *owned* your friends, have you?" From another's mouth, these words would have seemed like sarcasm, but from Professor Dumbledore, it was a simple explanation. Feeling quite relaxed, Minerva let her thoughts out in words

"That song ... was ... hauntingly beautiful." Her candor would have embarrassed her if Albus hadn't reacted as he did, simply nodding and pouring and preparing another mug of tea.

"This may sound strange, but ... Fawkes seems to understand you were distressed earlier this evening. Apparently, that is why he has returned." Albus looked up from his mug of tea, completely unaware that such a declaration would sound remarkable. "He returned because of you, I think." When Albus caught sight of Minerva's expression, he realized he had spoken too freely and tried to explain away the confusion or worry he thought he saw in his student's face.

"Phoenixes are intuitive, sensitive and incredibly empathetic creatures. Much like Thestrals and unicorns, who can sense emotions in other species. However, unlike the Thestral or unicorn, which do not actively try to aid others with feelings of despair or sorrow, but do so simply with their presence; phoenixes actually seek out others and attempt to brighten their moods. He does not *speak* to me, like you and I speak, but I can feel his emotions and he mine, a gift he has granted me that I have never felt I deserved ... but I am meandering a bit ... Fawkes sensed your despair from earlier this evening and simply wished to offer you a bit of encouragement," Albus continued, banishing their empty plates to the kitchens without much thought, and reached over to add more tea to Minerva's mug, which she was holding between her hands on the table. She sat transfixed, staring at her professor as if he had sprouted another head.

"Professor ... your ... I mean, Fawkes ... he's never even *met* me," she stammered, quite shocked at this strange and very complimentary declaration of a magical creature she'd always considered more a myth than reality. Dumbledore smiled softly, looking down in his mug and deciding his tea needed more sugar. She continued and asked, "How could he have known *I* was upset?"

"He knew of your despair through me. It mattered to me that you were upset, therefore, it mattered to him." He glanced at her and returned to focus on his tea. "It's a bit difficult to explain, if you've never had an empathetic link to a magical beast. I'm sure I must sound like I'm speaking Greek, but that's the best explanation I can offer." As Albus finished his discussion, Fawkes let out another soft trill, followed by a gentle warble, and Minerva felt a wave of kindness sweep over her, assuming this was the effect of Fawkes' song. The emotion was so intense, she actually worried she might burst into tears and blinked rapidly, willing herself to maintain composure. Albus smiled across the table at Minerva, watching the phoenix's magical effect on her, satisfied that his friend, his *companion*, could offer comfort where he felt he could not.

"Remarkable, isn't he?" he questioned gently, completely understanding how Fawkes' song had affected her. Minerva simply nodded, feeling relief and contentment. The fire was warm and glowing, spreading security throughout the room. The candelabra seemed to cloak the air with silky light. The room suddenly felt warmer, calmer and *safer*. Feeling strangely at ease, she leaned back and relaxed, closing her eyes, and concentrated on the bird's melody. Albus said nothing and they sat quietly, listening to Fawkes trill and coo.

Once Fawkes seemed content and quieted, Professor Dumbledore stood, replaced his chair against the wall and turned to the stacks of unmarked essays on his desk. He turned to look at Minerva out of the corner of his eye.

"If you'd like, I can Transfigure your chair into a plush couch. Far more comfortable I think, for prolonged studying?"

At his question, Minerva glanced at the wall that previously housed the chair and decided that a couch would, indeed, be far more suitable. She rose and took a step back, removing her wand from her dressing gown pocket.

"May I have a go, or would you prefer to Transfigure your own office furniture?" After all those compliments, she felt a bit like showing off and even briefly considered turning the chair into a gaudy, purple couch, but decided against it. Dumbledore raised his eyebrows in surprise, turning toward her.

"By all means!" He grinned, interested to see what she would do.

Minerva raised her wand and flicked the end toward the chair, elongating it first, next lining the wood with cloth, then added plush cushions, clawed feet, a well-padded, raised back and finally changed the colors to Gryffindor red and gold in a tartan pattern. Satisfied she could accomplish all this nonverbally, she then Levitated the couch back toward the wall, found it was a few inches too long to fit properly and shortened it slightly, so that it fit perfectly beside the end table.

Albus was quiet while she worked the Transfiguration, having difficulty refraining from offering unsolicited advice. He was quite pleased with her work and smiled with pride as she added the cushions and then laughed openly when she changed the colors to Gryffindor plaid.

"Your nonverbal skills are quite impressive. And the colors are superior! I almost expected you to goad me with more purple!" He laughed, walking toward the couch and taking a seat, testing the solidity of the Transfiguration.

"Not in Gryffindor Tower ... though, I admit, it was tempting." She smirked and held her wand at her side.

"In fact, I like this so much I'm going to make it permanent." He looked up at her and winked. "But a few pillows would help, I think."

He extended his wand, taking a few loose buttons out of his inside breast pocket and, pointing his wand to each, turned them into pillows of solid colors, matching the couch. He then uttered an incantation to force the pillows and the couch to assimilate their new forms permanently. "Much better than what I had before." He stood, walking back to his desk. "No idea why I didn't think to do that before now ..." He shrugged to himself and opened a music box that sat on the bookshelf behind the desk. "Will music disrupt your studies? Nothing loud, of course."

Minerva had already taken a seat on the couch, donned her reading glasses, let her slippers fall to the floor and tucked her feet under her seat. She adjusted the closest candelabra with her wand to offer a bit more light and had opened her Potions book.

"No, sir, not at all," she answered and dipped her quill in a small ink vial on the end table, quietly jotting down several potions recipes.

A soft Irish melody floated out over the room as Professor Dumbledore sat down in the large desk chair, donning his spectacles. He took a sheet of parchment off a large stack and began to read, but then looked up as if suddenly remembering something.

"I nearly forgot I wanted to offer you the chance to Floo-call your parents, if you wished to speak to them about today's incident. I can leave" He said when she cut him off.

"No, sir!" she exclaimed, far too loudly and too quickly, startling him and causing him to stare. "I mean, no, thank you. I really prefer not to discuss it with them." She half rose off the couch before she realized she had and sat back down. Her professor looked at her with confusion.

"I can leave the room" But again, he was cut off by her adamantly shaking her head. "You don't wish to inform them of what happened? Not at all?" He cocked his head, completely at a loss.

"Please, sir, I really don't wish to speak of this to them." Then her eyes grew wide, worry crossing her face. "Is the Headmaster going to tell them?" Albus could easily see her fear at the prospect, though he couldn't understand her reasoning.

"Headmaster Dippet left it up to me to inform your parents. I was going to write them a letter, at the very least," he explained. Minerva stood and approached the desk, her glasses slipping down the bridge of her nose. A gust of wind blew up, rattling the window on the far wall of the office while rain began beating against it in sheets.

"Please, Professor ... don't," she begged, shaking her head.

Albus laid the sheet of parchment down and removed his glasses, studying her face.

"Miss McGonagall, you have nothing to be ashamed of" He began but was again cut off with her hasty interruption.

"Professor?" she asked gently, hoping he wouldn't press her.

"Yes?"

"I don't expect you to understand this, but it is my wish that they not learn anything about this ... incident. If I have any say in this matter at all, I'd really prefer that no one discussed this with my family. May I request that one, small dignity?"

Albus could see that she had no intention of explaining her reasoning, but he simply couldn't deny her petition, not after the ordeal she'd been through. He knew this would nag his conscience; however, no more than the Headmaster allowing Riddle to remain at the school with far too many freedoms. Never knowing Minerva McGonagall to succumb to fear, avoid confrontation or suffer an injustice quietly, her request simply didn't make any sense to him. He sighed and lightly twirled his spectacles in his hand, pondering his words.

"Miss McGonagall, I am going to trust you have good reason for this request, as I have never known you to do anything foolhardy or unworthy, which is probably why I don't understand your desire in the first place. I do hope, *dearly hope*, that you aren't feeling guilty or ashamed about what happened, because you are *not* at fault." He leaned forward slightly. "You do know that, don't you? This is *not* your fault."

"Professor ... I understand that this may not make sense ... and I can honestly say, I do not feel guilty or at fault about what happened." She wished she could say she didn't feel ashamed, but that would be a lie, and she wouldn't lie to him. "I only ask that my family not learn of this, and I hope you can trust me with my reasons." She stood and tried to look confident, though she didn't feel it.

Albus sighed deeply, sinking back in his chair.

"I will respect your wishes. I will say nothing of this to your family and will ask the Headmaster to do the same." Though he could see that Minerva was extremely relieved with his response, he still felt wrong about it. Everything about it felt wrong, especially and perhaps mostly, because he could see that she felt shame and he hated that Riddle had put shame in her heart.

"Thank you. Thank you ... very much." Her relief was obvious, and she felt a pang of guilt for not explaining her reasons, but pushed the emotion out of her mind. Feeling more relaxed than she had earlier, perhaps due to Fawkes' song, or just the knowledge that she didn't have to return to her dorm just yet and face questions, she moved back to the Transfigured couch and resumed reading over her Potions project.

The small music box that sat along the bookshelf behind Professor Dumbledore began playing an old lullaby Minerva remembered from her childhood. A guitar and violin started out and were joined by a woman's alto voice; a gentle, swaying rhythm that soon filled the room. Minerva watched her Transfiguration professor as he softly sang along with the song, tapping his foot on the floor with the slow, graceful beat. He was reading some parchment intermittently, stopping on occasion to make a note in the margins. As his voice was baritone, his accompaniment blended in beautifully with the high notes of the strings and the mid-notes of the woman's voice.

Minerva lay back on the couch, drawing her legs up and stretching out, feeling the music wash over her like a warm blanket while outside, rain and wind beat against the tower. She allowed herself to relax and completely surrender to the melody, and saw Celtic knot work emerge spontaneously as ribbons in the air, twining and twisting around the room like some kind of graceful ballet. The ribbons were colored, silver, burgundy, gold and dark green, and wound around the room, bouncing off the walls on occasion and returning toward Dumbledore's desk to circle him or wrap around the furniture. One particular ribbon of gold knots twined into his hair and through his beard and seemed to melt into his robes.

At that moment, Minerva didn't ponder the strange effect of the music, or how she could visibly see the notes travel around the room, or even the events that transpired which caused her to be in her professor's office in the first place. She was utterly at peace and decided not to question it.

The lyrics were both familiar and comforting.

It tusa mo run, mo run, mo run

Is tusa mo run is mo ghra geal

You are my delight and my comfort all night,

And I'll wrap you up tight in my arms.

An Paistin Fionn is my heart's delight.
Her heart shines out through her two eyes so bright,
And the bloom of the apple in her cheeks so bright,
And her neck like the swan, on a March morn's light.
It tusa mo run, mo run, mo run
Is tusa mo run is mo ghra geal
You are my delight and my comfort all night,
And I'll wrap you up tight in my arms.
Oh, love of my heart, my fair Paistin,
Your lips are as red as the roses' sheen.
But mine have touched none other, I ween,
Than the glass that I drank to the help of my queen.
It tusa mo run, mo run, mo run
Is tusa mo run is mo ghra geal
You are my delight and my comfort all night,
And I'll wrap you up tight in my arms.
We'll riot the town, where spokes prevail
Between two barrels of sweet ground mill,
And my fontage theme upon my knee
Tis' I who will sing to her pleasantly.
It tusa mo run, mo run, mo run
Is tusa mo run is mo ghra geal
You are my delight and my comfort all night,
And I'll wrap you up tight in my arms.
Nine nights I have lain, in sorrow and pain
Beneath your window, love, under the rain,
Thinking of you, my love, once again,
That some whisper, or thought, might awaken you.
It tusa mo run, mo run, mo run
Is tusa mo run is mo ghra geal
You are my delight and my comfort all night,
And I'll wrap you up tight in my arms.
Kind friends and neighbors, they say I'd go
From all the prettiest girls that I know,
But from you, my dear, I'll never, oh no,
Till I lie in the coffin stretched cold and blue.
It tusa mo run, mo run, mo run
Is tusa mo run is mo ghra geal
You are my delight and my comfort all night,
And I'd wrap you up tight in my arms.
It tusa mo run, mo run, mo run
Is tusa mo run is mo ghra geal
You are my delight and my comfort all night,
And I'd wrap you up tight in my arms.

By the time Professor Dumbledore had finished his large stack of second-year essays, he had nearly forgotten Minerva was in the room, she had been so quiet. As he looked out over his desk, he saw why. Her head was turned inward toward the back of the couch as it rested heavy on a large gold pillow. She was sound asleep. Though he had added a single dose of anti-anxiety potion to the teapot, feeling they both could use the calming effects due to the stress of the evening, he never imagined the effect would be this strong. Not when he had drank at least half of it himself.

He quietly admonished himself for not considering the potion's combined effects along with the chamomile tea, or the possibility of Fawkes' serenade. Still, the effects were

not harmful in any way, and she did seem to feel at peace, which was his whole objective: to provide her a peaceful evening away from the stress of the dueling incident.

Rising and stretching, he moved over to the couch to wake her, glancing at the clock on the wall *A quarter past one in the morning!* He would have guessed it was only eleven o'clock at the latest.

Minerva's glasses rested on the tip of her nose, her hair was splayed out over the pillow, and her Potions book lay open across her lap, quill and parchment atop it. Her hand had fallen down off the couch and lay on the floor. Albus sighed and decided that she looked far too peaceful to wake and bent to move the parchment, quill and book, folding the sheets and placing them inside the book, then lay all of it next to her book sack on the floor. He carefully pulled her glasses off her face, then folded them and placed them on top of her books. Flicking his wand lightly, he conjured a thick, wool blanket, then changed the color to match the Gryffindor tartan colors of the couch and draped it over her. He tucked the blanket snug around her feet and placed her loose hand on her lap before draping the blanket over her. He allowed himself to watch her for a moment longer before turning, waving his hand, and quieting the fire to only a few glowing embers.

The storm continued to rage outside, and the window rattled periodically as Albus considered placing a Warming Charm on the room since the fire was nearly extinguished. He decided it would be far too cool, even with the wool blanket, for her to remain here overnight without a charm, and muttered the incantation while waving his wand.

Returning to his desk, he took a clean sheet of parchment and jotted down a quick note, folded and laid it under Minerva's folded spectacles. Albus whispered the name of the house-elf who had served them their dinner, summoning him, and requested that he wake Miss McGonagall no later than six in the morning and that he assist her in anything she might need. After the house-elf Disapparated, Albus waved his hand to dim the lights as low as he could, then took one last look at his sleeping sixth-year student. He muttered the password to the secret door that connected his office to his private rooms and stepped through, hoping Minerva would be comfortable enough remaining in the quiet office.

Ghosts and Folded Parchment

Chapter 3 of 9

Minerva contemplates a difficult decision regarding the Gryffindor Quidditch team. She discusses a few ideas with her Head of House.

*These characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I appreciate the opportunity to borrow them from time to time. My deepest thanks to the very generous and gracious **MMADfan** and **Squibstress** for their inspiration, advice, patience and time.*

In this semi-AU, Professor Merrythought is, at this time, the Charms instructor.

Chapter 3: Ghosts and Folded Parchment

February 1943, Hogwarts Castle

Minerva blinked her eyes several times and sat up, forgetting where she was until she recognized the ticking of the antique clock that hung on the wall across from the Transfigured couch. She groaned, feeling foolish for falling asleep in her professor's office. *Why hadn't he woken me? And what time is it?* Glancing at the window and then up at the clock, in the dim light of the candelabra, she could see that it was early, still dark outside, only half past five.

She swung her feet over the side of the couch and her bladder screamed. Muttering to herself about falling asleep in the first place, Minerva was thankful that there was a small office loo and hurried inside. After relieving herself, she stood by the sink and grasped the bar of soap. Much like the soap in the Prefects' bath, this bar was also in the shape of a Celtic knot. It smelled quite strong once she worked up a thick lather: cinnamon, clove, and bay rum, which she thought was oddly familiar.

After returning to the office, she began gathering up her belongings and noticed the note atop her Potions book. Donning her reading spectacles, she unfolded the note and read:

Miss McGonagall,

I hope you do not mind that I did not wake you, but you looked far too peaceful in your slumber, and I was loath to disturb you. I have notified Gibber, the house-elf that served us dinner, to aid you should you need anything simply call him.

I do wish to speak to you in regard to your request last week about the Animagus apprenticeship, though that is not an urgent matter.

I hope your day goes well. I will be in my office this evening after dinner, and you are welcome to stop by should you need anything, though I am sure I will see you in morning class.

Sincerely,

Professor Albus Dumbledore

Although she still felt foolish, even childish, for falling asleep on her professor's couch, he didn't seem bothered by it. She guessed there were far worse things other students had done in the past, and she decided not to give much energy to her embarrassment. Tucking the note into her Potions book, she stuffed everything back into her normal-sized book bag and laid it on the couch, looking around the room. She had wanted to browse her professor's small library the night before and wondered if he would mind much if she glanced over some of his books. She decided it wouldn't hurt to look and walked around his desk.

She gasped a few times, recognizing some of the tomes as those she had never been able to find in the libraries at school or in Hogsmeade, or even at Flourish and Blotts. Many of Professor Dumbledore's books were out of print and quite a few were old, centuries old. One in particular captured her interest: *The History of Animagi of the Past Millennium* by Cedric McGregor. Tentatively, she laid her index finger along the top of the spine, contemplating drawing it out. Curiosity got the better of her, and she withdrew the book carefully and, cradling it gently, opened it to the title page. *Printed in 1806!* Her stomach fluttered with excitement as she turned the pages with great care, looking over the table of contents.

Every chapter title was the name of a person; each one was, no doubt, an Animagus registered over the past thousand years. She saw listed forty-six chapters and wondered momentarily if this was a list of British Animagi or if the book included other nationalities. Forty-six registered Animagi for the entire world for a full thousand years sure seemed like a small number. Perhaps the art was as difficult as Professor Dumbledore had warned her. Minerva decided it didn't matter how difficult the study

was. She knew she'd regret it if she never tried, and decided that, no matter how grueling the practice became, she'd make a determined effort to succeed.

Feeling somewhat guilty for snooping when she had not been given permission, she replaced the book and looked over the desk for some blank parchment. Upon finding a sheet, she used her professor's large pheasant quill and wrote out a short note. After signing her name, she had an idea and grinned; folding the parchment in a peculiar shape, she tapped it with her wand, muttered an incantation, and laid it in the center of his desk.

Returning to the couch for her possessions, she noticed the blanket had been Transfigured to match the couch, and she smiled before folding it up neatly and draping it over the back. After picking up her book sack and making sure she had everything she came with, she slipped out of the office and quietly padded to the Fat Lady's portrait.

The Gryffindor common room was silent and dark, and she made her way up the stairs to her dorm room as quietly as possible. As early as it was, she doubted any of her Housemates would be up, as she was generally the earliest riser. She quickly dressed in a sweater and heavy wool skirt in response to the chilly February weather, then donned her common school robes. In the girls' lavatory, she continued getting ready for her day before heading back down to the common room to study a bit before her patrol rounds.

At six a.m., Minerva headed out the portrait hole for morning rounds as she did every morning. Preferring to get her obligatory prefect duties accomplished at the beginning of the day, she had signed up for first rounds at the start of the year. Though spare time wasn't something she had in excess, she preferred to relax in the evenings when she could. This evening, being a Friday, would likely find Minerva busy, as Gryffindor had Quidditch practice in the afternoon and a game against Ravenclaw on Saturday. As Gryffindor Quidditch captain, it was her responsibility to make sure they were ready, so she resigned herself to the idea of having little time of her own until Sunday.

Their Seeker, a seventh-year named Claymont Williams, had recently broken up with his girlfriend, Minerva's cousin, Sara MacGruder, and had been despondent. He had been so surly and preoccupied at their last practice on Wednesday that Minerva had asked him if he would like to take some time off, allowing their third-year reserve Seeker to take over. Williams hadn't given her a real answer, but if his attitude and performance didn't improve by this afternoon, she'd have to replace him with Darwin Clandallin, a short but stout young man with ginger hair. She had little patience for what she perceived as melodramatic teenage angst, and the team shouldn't have to suffer because Williams had lost interest. Sara, while also on the team, seemed quite relieved to be rid of Williams, at least romantically, and had not lost any of her Quidditch gusto. Minerva decided not to dwell on it any longer. If Williams was going to wallow in his grief, he could do it in the stands.

Minerva had broken off her relationship with Alastor Moody only a month prior, and she could not have cared less if he remained on the team or not. She had no qualms about continuing to work with him. Well, that wasn't entirely true; he was an excellent Keeper. She did suppose if he had quit Quidditch over their break up, she'd consider that extremely unfortunate. Gryffindor had an excellent team this year and a real shot at the Quidditch Cup, and as it was her first year as captain, she wanted even more desperately to pound all competition into the dirt.

How foolish of Williams to allow his personal feelings to get in the way of Gryffindor's success!

Even so, Alastor didn't take the breakup as anything earth-shattering, nor did she. She shrugged and decided she wasn't likely to understand Williams' emotional state, but regardless, as captain, she would have to make the final decision about the Seeker, and she would choose what was best for the team.

Minerva's rounds were uneventful, and she found only a sparse few students up and moving already. She was walking down the last two flights of stairs to the Great Hall for breakfast when a bright voice spoke to her from the outside edge of the banister.

"Good morning, Miss McGonagall!" exclaimed Sir Nicholas in a cheerful voice as he floated forward, mid-air, alongside her. Minerva was somewhat surprised and paused in her steps before finding her brisk stride again.

"Good morning, Sir Nicholas. You're up and about early," she commented. *Not that ghosts slept, did they?*

The ghost smiled pleasantly and continued to float at her side. "Ah, this is true. I have found in the last few decades I've been missing far too many dawns. Shame really, to have the extended earthly pleasures that I have such as viewing the weather patterns and not take them, don't you think?"

Minerva didn't know what to think of his response, never having been that social with the castle ghosts in the first place. She wondered to herself if ghosts actually did still enjoy any earthly pleasures; it seemed doubtful, but then, why would they have remained as ghosts? There must be some benefit. She decided she'd ask one day, but she was certain it wouldn't be a welcome subject, even for Sir Nicholas, who was usually quite friendly.

"Oh I quite agree. The Scottish sunrise isn't one to miss!" Minerva responded but didn't add that during the winter months, as Scotland was so far north and got so few hours of daylight, that dawn wasn't coming for another hour and forty minutes. "Nor are the sunsets." She grinned at the ghost, glancing at him as he floated through the air, wondering just what this old Gryffindor was up to.

"Indeed! Sunsets are even more beautiful, especially over the Quidditch pitch! Perhaps I should take one in with you, our team *captain*, this afternoon!" He beamed at her as they made their way down to the first floor and onward to the Great Hall. If Minerva didn't know better, she'd have thought he was flirting with her. *Do ghosts flirt with the living? This is most unusual.*

"As much as I'd enjoy that, I'm afraid that sunset will come long before my last class of the day and that our practice will have to be held under the lights, after nightfall, as is usual at half past four in the afternoon in February." Minerva shivered a bit in the frigid hallway before opening the heavy doors to the Great Hall and being hit with a pleasant blast of warm air. Sir Nicholas followed her, but instead of moving through the open doorway, he *glided through* the door and popped out on the other side.

"Oh my, I had completely forgotten about the early onset of nightfall during winter. Mayhap I will take in the sunset and remain in the stands for team practice," he continued as he followed her to the Gryffindor table. "We do have an excellent shot at the Quidditch Cup this year! The Bloody Baron had become quite overbearing last year, and I daresay, he's been far more pleasant than usual. Word is, you're to thank, *Captain*." He saluted her and continued to grin as he floated by. He stopped and hung in the center of the table, standing up to his midsection in a large tray of sliced fruit.

Minerva poured a cup of tea and scooped up a serving of haggis, took some toast and selected some sliced oranges from the tray under Sir Nicholas.

"You could remain in the stands and lead the cheering section!" She wasn't sure how well her teammates would take it, having a ghost cheering them on, but perhaps he could be inspirational? Still, this was most curious. She'd seen and talked to Sir Nicholas more in the last twenty-four hours than she had in all her years at Hogwarts. The only ghost that seemed to pay her more attention was Peeves, unfortunately.

Sir Nicholas smiled and saluted, still standing in the middle of the fruit tray. "Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington at your service, Captain McGonagall! I will serve the House of Godric Gryffindor with pride and honor! Of this, you have my word!" He made a flamboyant bow as he finished his statement, sweeping his arm out and through Minerva's plate and tea cup as he bent low. She couldn't help but giggle at his gesture and watched as he glided up to the High Table toward Professor Merrythought and the Headmaster. Minerva was surprised that no other professors were yet present.

A few more students entered the hall; however, Minerva was the first seated for breakfast, as usual. She opened her Charms book and began reviewing a chapter that she'd already read but had not yet been assigned, feeling fairly confident on the material, and ate her breakfast.

Alastor Moody, his hair still wet and slicked back from his morning shower, spotted Minerva sitting alone at the Gryffindor table and walked toward her, taking a seat to her right. She was focused intently on a book in front of her. Before saying anything, he heaped several fried eggs, strips of bacon, bangers, and slices of toast onto his plate.

Minerva didn't have to look up to know who had sat down beside her. The familiar smell of generic soap and the abrupt movements, in addition to his selection of all the

greasiest breakfast foods, told her it was Alastor Moody. He had been repeating this habit of perching next to her during breakfast for the past two years.

"Where were you last night? Waited up, in the common room, until one in the morning." Alastor mumbled around a mouthful of sausage. Minerva turned to look at him and poured herself another cup of tea.

"Fell asleep in Professor Dumbledore's office," she answered quietly, still quite embarrassed about it.

"You slept with Dumbledore?" Alastor retorted far louder than Minerva would have hoped or approved. Reflexively, she elbowed him hard in the chest and spilled her tea, only then seeing a familiar figure walking toward them. She felt the color rise from her chest to her face instantly and couldn't even bring herself to immediately reply to her companion's ridiculous question. Tucking her chin into her chest, she tried to hide her face as Professor Dumbledore's shadow fell on Alastor. Minerva cocked her head sideways and could have sworn she heard the sound of a fiddle playing some jovial Irish jig. She tried to focus on the music but lost the melody in a crackling buzz that she quickly tuned out.

"Mr. Moody, Miss McGonagall. I trust everything is well?" Professor Dumbledore grasped Alastor's shoulder, giving him a not-so-gentle squeeze. Alastor had the sudden horrible realization that they had been overheard by their professor, and he stiffened, turning reluctantly to look up into the older man's bearded face. Albus shot him a warning glance as he looked down before releasing Alastor's shoulder. The young Keeper gulped abruptly, swallowing his half-chewed mouthful of sausage, and coughed, trying to recover from the shock.

"Fine ... Professor," he responded, though his words betrayed him, his discomfort obvious.

Minerva closed her eyes and desperately wished she could be anywhere but there at that moment. Summoning courage from where she had no idea she looked up briefly, past Alastor, into her professor's concerned eyes.

"I'm quite well, Professor, despite my house-mate's obnoxious comments." Minerva caught a glimpse of Professor Dumbledore's reaction to her words before returning to stare at her teacup. Dumbledore hadn't expected Minerva to be so brazen in her scolding of the young man, and he couldn't help but chuckle inwardly. Moody paled considerably at her words.

Professor Dumbledore, satisfied with Miss McGonagall's admonishment, and making the young man aware that he, himself, had overheard the comment, walked past the pair and sat down next to Minerva, his elbow leaning casually against the table. Alastor dug into his food with gusto, averting his eyes from the man to his far left while Minerva, between the two, turned on the bench seat to face her professor.

"I got your note this morning, Miss McGonagall, and there's no reason to be concerned. You did have a particularly difficult evening, after all." Dumbledore paused, glancing past Minerva to the young man at her right, considering how much he should say in his presence. Alastor Moody seemed completely focused on his heaping breakfast plate, not daring to look up.

Albus grinned while remembering something, his eyes sparkling, and he turned back to Minerva. "What was the charm you used on the note, by the way? I don't think I've ever seen anything quite like that."

Minerva returned his grin, unable to hide her pride as she remembered the incantation she had cast on the note. Taking a sip of her tea, she noticed Alastor had stopped chewing, as if holding his breath and waiting for her to answer. She was quite pleased with her classmate's obvious discomfort, and while he pretended, though poorly, not to be paying attention, she knew he was.

"*Caulis pellis animatae phoenix* sir," she answered, watching her professor over the rim of her mug, curious if he recognized the decorative charm or her manipulation of it. Albus repeated her words quietly, mumbling to himself and thought back through some mental list of spells, possibly trying to remember where he had heard or read of the spell group before.

"You made that up," Dumbledore declared, looking at Minerva with joyous surprise, and as she nodded her head in answer, he laughed openly. "I've heard of *Caulis pellis animatae* before, but never in regard to a phoenix! And the musical accompaniment!" He was completely delighted and couldn't contain his enthusiasm. "You'll have to teach me that!"

Minerva laughed, quite proud she could impress her professor with something so trivial and silly. "Of course, sir, but it isn't difficult. Whenever you have some time, I'd be glad to show you." She smiled up at him.

A very confused Alastor Moody grumbled inwardly as Minerva and their Transfiguration professor sat enthusiastically discussing some obscure spell of which he had no knowledge and would not even venture to guess at. *What in hell are they talking about, anyway? And couldn't they discuss this marvelous idea somewhere else so I can eat in peace? Phoenixes ... really ...* The realization occurred to Alastor that he wouldn't feel nearly as foolish if his professor hadn't overheard his comment about Minerva sleeping with him, which, of course, made him feel even worse. His breakfast didn't seem nearly as appetizing anymore. Not wishing to be obviously rude nor to call attention to himself, he robotically continued to eat as more students filed into the hall.

Professor Dumbledore asked Minerva to find him in his office after Quidditch practice to discuss a few matters and excused himself to join his colleagues at the High Table. After taking his customary seat between the Headmaster and Professor Merrythought, and greeting those present, he selected his standard breakfast foods of eggs, toast, and berries. While sampling a large strawberry, an unusual treat for the end of winter, he took a few moments to remember a pleasant surprise earlier that morning.

Albus Dumbledore had opened the secret door that connected his private rooms with his office, his hair and beard still wet from his morning shower, and yawned. Something wasn't right. The candelabra nearest his desk had been burning. *I never leave candles burning overnight!* He had then caught sight of the newly Transfigured couch, and the previous evening's events came back to him. *Of course, Miss McGonagall fell asleep here, and I didn't wish her to wake in the dark not knowing where she was.* Obviously she was already up and gone.

He had waved his hand toward the sconces by his desk, sparking them all into a bright glow as he moved to sit down in his chair. He had been tired and hadn't been getting enough sleep in the past weeks, and Albus had hoped that the coming weekend would be uneventful. As he sat there contemplating his fatigue and the reasons behind it, he had noticed a folded slip of parchment in the shape of a bird sitting in the center of his desktop.

Cocking his head to the side, he then reached for it, and as his fingers closed on a wing, the bird had burst from his hand. Fluttering into the air and emitting red sparks, the parchment had unfolded itself mid-air, and a snippet of the Irish lullaby *An Paistin Fionn* lilted softly through the room. As the violin and guitar had finished the short stanza, the note had come to rest, unfolded, between his hands. Albus blinked a few times and had been completely astonished, then drew his half-moon spectacles out of the inner breast pocket of his robes, donned them and read.

Professor Dumbledore,

I cannot thank you enough for your kindness last night, nor can I express my embarrassment for falling asleep in your office! I must beg your pardon; I had no intention of taking such advantage of your hospitality. I am terribly sorry and hope I did not inconvenience you in any way.

As you likely know, Gryffindor has Quidditch practice this afternoon directly following afternoon classes, though I would like to take you up on your offer and stop by afterward, as I wish not only to discuss the Animagus apprenticeship, but also to request the opportunity to take a few early N.E.W.T.s this year, if that is at all possible.

Thank you again, Professor, for everything.

Minerva D. M. McGonagall

Professor Merrythought tapped Albus on the shoulder, breaking him out of reverie, and he turned to look at her.

"My apologies for woolgathering, Galatea, what did you say?" Albus pinched the bridge of his nose, pushing his spectacles up a bit, and tried to clear his thoughts. The plump witch tutted at him, giving him a gentle pat on the shoulder.

"Albus ... pardon me for being so forward, but you're looking quite worn ... and don't fuss ... but I'm worried!" she admonished. "Have you talked to the Headmaster about what we discussed?" The older woman poured herself and Professor Dumbledore cups of tea and looked up at him with concern.

Albus sighed reluctantly and added a few spoons of sugar and some milk to his tea, avoiding her gaze. "No ... I haven't."

The Charms instructor grumbled, "Albus, I don't mind picking up a few of your classes ... at the very least, until your business with this war is over."

Though Albus did not discuss his activities aiding the Allied forces with the advancement of the war waging across Europe, most of the staff at Hogwarts knew, minimally, that he had been enlisted by the British Ministry of Magic. Some even guessed correctly that he was also advising the Muggle British military. Dumbledore knew his colleague was understandably concerned, and he regretted being responsible for her worry. It was logical to assume he'd be away from the castle more often as the war progressed, and he should make arrangements to cover his classes beforehand.

Hoping to reassure her, Albus reached over and gently patted her arm. "Thank you, Galatea. If it gets to be too much, I'll let Armando know." He gave a sideward glance at the Headmaster to his left, who appeared to be in an animated discussion about wand movement with the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Reginald MacFarlane.

Professor Merrythought huffed gently and retorted. "Not before I do, Albus! I'm serious. If this gets any worse, I'll speak to the Headmaster myself." As she spoke, she looked out over the Gryffindor table, spotting Minerva. "I saw you speaking to Miss McGonagall earlier how is she?"

Albus followed his colleague's gaze toward Minerva, who was tucking a book into her book sack, preparing to leave. "She seems to be handling herself well." Not wishing to speak too freely with the Headmaster sitting next to him, he lowered his voice. "I fear her trust in Hogwarts has been shaken, unfortunately."

"Undoubtedly. I can't imagine it wouldn't be," Merrythought responded, mildly disgusted.

"I spoke to her last evening, explaining the Headmaster's decision, assuring her that we believed her." With that he gave a subtle nod to Professor Merrythought, indicating his lack of desire to speak further on the subject.

Galatea Merrythought lowered her voice and leaned toward the Deputy Headmaster. "Let her know she can come to me if she has any further problems, won't you? I'm not too pleased with the situation myself."

Dumbledore's eyes softened and he offered her a small smile. "Thank you, Galatea, I will."

.....

The Hardships of Leadership

Chapter 4 of 9

Minerva deals with a problem on the Gryffindor Quidditch team and discusses the dueling incident with a friend.

The Hardships of Leadership Chapter four

Minerva sat casually on her broom about forty feet up from the center of the Quidditch pitch with a moderate-sized, garnet-colored sack in her lap. Her broom had metallic stirrups that she took advantage of, sitting comfortably, drawing her knees up close to her body. She glanced to her right and watched the Gryffindor Chasers and Keeper practicing goal shots for a few moments before being joined in the air by her Seeker teammates. Her cousin Sara had just scored a shot on teammate Alastor and was goading the Keeper with flamboyant dives in and around the goalposts.

The senior Seeker, Williams, and the reserve, third-year Seeker, Clandallin, rose up to meet their captain mid-air. Minerva reached into the cloth sack and drew out two smaller bags, handing one to each of them. The dark-haired Williams groaned as he accepted his bag.

"Not Snitch practice again," he whined, tying the bag's drawstrings around his belt and clucking his tongue in contempt. "We do this every practice! I can catch a bloody Snitch!"

Minerva rolled her eyes. She was not in the mood.

"And what would you suggest a Seeker practice then: goal shots, Bludger toss?" Satisfied when Williams ceased complaining, she turned her attention back to the younger boy. Taking a white golf ball out of the large sack, she tossed it in the air and immediately caught it with the same hand.

"I'm going to make this simple. I've got forty golf balls here. I'm going to throw them, one by one, around the field. I won't throw another until the ball in the air is either caught or on the ground. Once I run through the entire sack, whoever has the most balls, without retrieving any from the ground, will play against Ravenclaw tomorrow." She dropped the ball she was holding back into her sack and withdrew her wand from a pocket inside her jacket. Like her male teammates, Minerva wore trousers, tunic, and a sweater for Quidditch practice. The cold February night would have been very uncomfortable had she not cast a Warming Charm on her sweater and trousers.

Williams retorted loudly, "You've got to be kidding me! I've been on this team for four years! You're actually going to start Clandallin? Over me?" The thin seventh-year shifted on his broom so that he could face Minerva, anger dominating his face.

Minerva proceeded to cast a Disillusionment Charm on her broom, then on herself. She was now mostly invisible, although, while she was stationary, her teammates could still see the odd shimmer of colors that kept the Disillusionment Spell from making her completely invisible. "You heard what I said, Clay. The last few practices, you've been slouching. You're off your game. We talked about this already, and I'm not going to go over it again." She paused, half expecting Williams to continue to protest. "Now, after we start moving around, you shouldn't be able to see me, so focus on the in-bounds area above the field. I've charmed the balls so they have much greater reach than usual, so don't be surprised if you have to chase one to the end of the field. I'll announce when I'm going to throw the first one, but after that, you're on your own. Remember, I won't throw another ball while one is in the air." Leaning back on her broom, Minerva pulled back, rose in the air a few feet, then shot forward and raced away from her teammates. She felt the sharp sting of sleet on her face. The normal drizzly Scotland rain was freezing.

The two Seekers separated, each moving toward opposite ends of the pitch. Minerva flew between her teammates and watched them. When she was satisfied that they

had completely lost her position, she stationed herself between them and announced she was about to throw the first ball.

Minerva took care to throw the balls randomly, making sure she didn't favor one Seeker over the other. She flew around the field, tossing balls in various directions, some above her teammates, some below, and she made sure she gave them time to recover after they had caught or lost a ball on the field. During the practice, she couldn't always see who caught what, but she was impressed by Clandallin's swift dives and sharp turns. The third-year was covering the field well. She would be very surprised if Williams had caught more than the younger player, and after her bag was empty, she withdrew her wand and canceled the Disillusionment Charm, revealing herself, and appeared over Williams' right shoulder.

"We're done, Darwin," she called out loudly in Clandallin's direction, as he was about twenty yards away. "Let's meet on the ground for a count, then I'm going to have you both work with the Beaters for a while." Minerva explained, descending to the field. Clandallin followed with enthusiasm, clearly excited at the possibility of playing in his first game. Williams followed Minerva, but instead of handing her his bag, he threw it at her as he dismounted his broom and walked off the field toward the locker room.

Minerva stood, holding the Snitch sack, and sighed, watching Williams stomp off.

That didn't go well.

Darwin dismounted next to his team captain and offered up his sack. Minerva didn't have to count the balls to know the younger player had more. The weight difference was significant. Just to make sure, she first counted Williams' collection. Four. She then counted Clandallin's. Thirteen. She looked down at the bushy-haired boy, whose eyes were locked on her hands as she counted, then gave him a wink, and he burst into a wide grin.

"Excellent work, Darwin. Your turning is much, much better, and you cover the field well. You'll be starting in the game tomorrow." She put the smaller sacks into the larger Snitch sack and uttered an wandless *Accio* for the remaining balls on the field. "Watch out, now," she advised as several golf balls came sailing toward her from various directions. Clandallin laid his broom down and swiftly gathered up golf balls, aiding Minerva with the task.

The younger boy looked up at Minerva apprehensively after handing her the last of the balls. "Um ... Captain?"

"Yes?"

"Well ... Clay seems upset about, well ... about me taking his spot." He shied away from eye contact and looked down at the old broom in his hand.

Minerva tossed the Snitch sack over her shoulder with her right hand while she leaned her broom against a bench. She wiped her face with the back of her arm as the shards of sleet melted and began dripping down her forehead.

"Listen, Darwin, because this is important." She paused and waited for him to look up at her. "This is a team. We play for our House, for Gryffindor. Nobody on this team has their *own* spot. Its a *privilege* to play for Gryffindor, not a *right*." She motioned to Rodriguez, one of the Beaters, as he flew by, and waved him toward her. "Sebastian, get Stewart and join Darwin and me here, would you?"

After the Beater flew off toward his partner, she turned her attention back to the ginger-haired Seeker.

"If someone isn't playing up to their ability, for whatever reason, and another teammate is playing better, would it not be logical to have the stronger player in game?" To this, Darwin nodded 'yes,' and she continued. "Don't consider the Seeker position as *belonging* to Williams. Just like it's not *yours*. Similarly, captain isn't *mine*. I may need to step down tomorrow, and I will if that is what's best."

Darwin thought about that for a moment and couldn't imagine any scenario, other than an injury, in which Gryffindor would benefit from Minerva McGonagall relinquishing her position as captain. Though he'd tried out for Seeker the previous year, he'd not been selected and had given up hope for try-outs this year. Had it not been for Minerva's encouragement, he wouldn't have tried out again, resigning any hope that he'd be good enough to secure a spot on the team. In his eyes, Captain McGonagall was a titan. The fastest nonprofessional Chaser he'd ever seen and completely comfortable in command of the field *and* her team. In his opinion, nothing could bring her down.

"We're a team, and the whole point of participating is to do our best for our House. Williams is off his game. Simple as that. If he gives you any grief, tell me. Understand? I'm not tolerating any harassment of my players," she explained, and the young Clandallin felt comforted in the idea that he was one of *her* players.

Darwin, wide-eyed, nodded up at her and thanked her. She felt oddly affectionate toward this youngster who seemed so appreciative of her confidence and approval. Uncharacteristically, she reached out and ruffled his hair, causing Darwin to break into a shy grin and stare at his feet.

"You'll do fine tomorrow. Just remember: trust the Beaters to keep you safe, and concentrate on finding the Snitch. Don't worry about anything other than that tiny, golden ball."

Darwin relaxed as Rodriguez and Stewart joined them down on the field, and Minerva assigned the Beaters to teach their new Seeker some Bludger defense maneuvers. She looked toward the locker room, contemplating going after Williams, and thought better of it. She had tried to talk to him on Wednesday, with little success, and he certainly didn't seem receptive to her advice now.

Mounting her broom, Minerva lifted off to join her teammates by the goalposts. The two other starting Chasers, Sara MacGruder and Roland McCreedy, took a Quaffle and flew across the field to work on passing techniques while Minerva and fifth-year back-up Chaser, Gloria Greenwood, shot goals against Alastor Moody. Minerva spent the next forty minutes racing in and around the goalposts, trying desperately to score against Alastor, but was only able to make one shot. She wasn't sure if she was more impressed with Alastor's tenacity at defense or disappointed in her own inability to score. One thing was for certain, however; Ravenclaw was going to have one hell of a time trying to gain points against the Gryffindor Keeper.

When Minerva finally dismounted her broom and walked toward the locker room, she was peeling off her sweater, she was so hot. Despite the near-freezing temperature of the early Scotland evening, she was sweltering. A cool shower would be glorious. She saw Sir Nicholas glide over the pitch and disappear into the darkness toward the castle. *So he meant it when he said he was going to watch Gryffindor practice! Strange.*

"Minerva! Hey, wait! Minerva!" It was Alastor, striding toward her, helmet still on and broom in hand. "Hey! You ever going to tell me what happened between you and Riddle?" This time, he lowered his voice as he neared. Apparently, even he had some understanding of the delicacy of the situation.

Minerva shook her hair out of the bun she had it in for practice and ran her hand through it. She was tired and simply wanted a shower, not to answer a barrage of questions. Shaking her head and letting her long hair bounce over her shoulders and down her back, she answered him.

"I'm taking a shower"

"Yeah? Can I watch?" He grinned at her and unbuckled his helmet.

She gave him a sharp glare and snorted before turning away, heading toward the locker room.

"Oi, I was just joking! Seriously, Minerva, you going to tell me what happened?" Alastor pleaded and trotted up beside her as she opened the door.

"If you want to walk back with me after I get cleaned up, I'll tell you, but I have an appointment with Professor Dumbledore before dinner, so I don't have much time." She entered the building and veered off to the left; to the girls' lavatory.

"All right." Alastor looked around. "I guess the rest of the team is cleaning up in Gryffindor tower. I'll shower too and meet you here. Walk you back?" he asked while flicking

his wand at his broom locker and opening it.

Minerva nodded in agreement and whispered the password to the girls' lavatory.

When Minerva emerged twenty minutes later in heavy, green tartan skirts and a thick, woolen sweater, her hair was wet and combed back, and she had a towel wrapped around her neck. Alastor was waiting for her on a bench beside the entrance door. When he saw her emerge from the door of the girls' lavatory, he smiled and stood, and then held the door open for her as she approached.

The drizzly rain that had begun during practice had dissipated, and the air temperature was dropping. Minerva shivered and cast a Warming Charm on her towel and wrapped it loosely around her head like a hood. Alastor began shivering almost as soon as they started across the pitch, and Minerva cast a Warming Charm on his jacket.

"Thanks. I need to learn how to do that."

"Alastor this morning at breakfast your comment about Professor Dumbledore" Minerva began, but her companion interrupted her.

"Oh come on! I was joking! Dammit, can't anyone take a joke?" He immediately went on the defense.

Minerva stopped, giving him a withering look, and Alastor shrugged his shoulders.

"What? I stuck my foot in it, all right? Why you still pissy about that?" He pleaded.

Minerva sighed with aggravation and shook her head. "Did you ever consider someone might overhear you?"

"The hell kind of question is that? Of course not! Obviously, since Dumbledore heard me himself! Come on, you're beating a dead horse!" he grumbled loudly, obviously embarrassed.

"Well then, if you never considered someone overhearing you, then you likely didn't consider the complications and possible detriment a rumor like that could cause Professor Dumbledore." Minerva could see the slow dawn of understanding on Alastor's face and she continued. "Imagine what would happen to *him* if somebody malicious, someone like *Riddle*, overheard that and decided to make trouble for our Head of House. A rumor like that could cause Dumbledore to lose his job!"

Alastor's shoulders drooped, and he hung his head. He had never considered anything of the sort, and the realization that he could, indeed, have cost their professor his job actually scared him.

"I didn't think" he started, but was cut off by Minerva's sharp brogue.

"Exactly! You don't think! You just mouth off!" She glared at him hard and poked him in the chest. "I don't particularly like the insinuations you make about me, and I can *almost* tolerate your childish teasing, but to direct that at a teacher ... whose reputation could be destroyed by one well-placed rumor? How would you like to be responsible for Professor Dumbledore losing his job and having his reputation questioned? Or how about me? I'm sure that would look great on my resume M. D. M. McGonagall slept with professor for good marks! Honestly Alastor! The damage you could do with so few words ..." She decided from his reaction that her admonishment had struck an understanding and she curbed her tongue.

Alastor was feeling absolutely deplorable now. His mind was creating various images: pictures of Minerva and their Transfiguration professor on the front page of the *Daily Prophet* with the words "Dumbledore Sacked for Shagging Underage Student" in giant letters beneath it and he felt queasy.

"I'm sorry, all right. I didn't think. I never never thought about it that way," he voiced softly and ashamedly. "I like Professor Dumbledore, you know."

Minerva turned and started making her way back across the Quidditch pitch toward the castle. "I don't need your apology, though I appreciate it/ understand you well enough to know it wasn't intentional. I do think you owe *Professor Dumbledore* an apology, however."

Alastor didn't respond to her suggestion and walked along with Minerva quietly for a few minutes. When she didn't broach the question that he had asked her before their showers, he spoke up.

"You going to tell me about Riddle?" he prodded.

Minerva sighed and tried to conceal her emotions. She knew if she told him the truth, the complete truth, he'd do something stupid. Maybe stupid enough to lose his prefect status, his dueling club membership, or even his position on the Quidditch team. She didn't think he'd do anything foolish enough to be expelled, but knowing Alastor, anything was possible. After four years of near constant companionship, she knew his temper. She would have to explain the event truthfully, but carefully.

"We were practicing our dueling" she began.

"You can practice with me! You don't have to work with that arsehole," Alastor interrupted forcefully.

Minerva continued, ignoring his remark. "Riddle disarmed me, and after he did so, he proceeded to Petrify me and Silence me."

"*After* he disarmed you? He did that?" Alastor had stopped and grabbed Minerva's arm, forcing her to break her stride as well. His voice was steady, but she could hear his anger building. Minerva nodded and gently tugged her arm back from his grasp.

"Mmmhrrm. That's when I managed to throw him into a tree and set him on fire." They had now reached the narrow stone path that wound down from the castle. "That's what all the fuss was about. The Headmaster was trying to decide if I had broken any rules, or some such, and if I should be punished. I think my expulsion was considered, actually." Alastor stopped but didn't reach for Minerva this time. He stood quietly a few moments, head bowed, thinking.

Minerva stopped and turned back toward him. His silence worried her.

"Obviously, I'm fine. Dumbledore made sure I came out clean as a whistle." She tried to placate him. "Come on, I've got to see him before dinner, and we're short on time."

Alastor rubbed his forehead. "Something ain't adding up here, Minerva. How did you toss him, break his leg, and set him on fire without a wand?"

"Fear." As if that explained everything. "A reaction. My magical reflexes. I wasn't aware I was doing it at the time," she answered and tilted her head toward the looming castle above them, urging him to resume his pace.

"Yeah, I understand innate magic. Still, that's pretty impressive stuff though we're talking about you so, I guess I shouldn't be surprised." He paused, thinking again, and didn't make any motion to continue toward the castle. Alastor looked up at her as she stood ahead on the path, and she had the impression that he suspected she wasn't being entirely truthful. "What I don't understand ... what doesn't mesh ... is *why* you were scared," he paused, "you're not scared of anything."

Minerva turned to avoid his gaze and resumed her pace. She heard Alastor's steps on the pathway behind her and she quickened her step.

"Minerva ... what aren't you telling me?" he persisted, catching up with her, and Minerva cursed inwardly. "What/else did he do?"

"Alastor leave it alone. Professor Dumbledore took care of it. The Headmaster made his decision. Riddle was punished." She quickened her pace and heard him do the same, now nearly on her heels.

"Minerva! What did he do?" he demanded, keeping pace beside her, studying her face as they walked.

Minerva stopped suddenly and glared down at him, thankful for the large stone step she was standing on that gave her a slight height advantage. She kept her voice low and steady, willing herself to remain calm.

"I'm only going to say this once, and you can take it or leave it, I don't care. Riddle cheated. He pinned me down unfairly. I had a magical reaction, unintentional though it was. I made it back to the castle, wand in hand. The gamekeeper was able to get Riddle out of the tree, so he wasn't permanently harmed. I'm *fine* and it's *over*. I will not be practicing with Riddle again, and I'll be happy to practice with you if you like, but I *am done* discussing this!" By the time she was halfway through her speech, her thick, Scottish brogue was at full tilt.

As they arrived back at the castle, Alastor was fuming angry, feeling that Minerva was lying to him, at least partially. Not only was he upset that she didn't trust him with the truth, he was upset because she seemed to be protecting Riddle. He got the notion that Dumbledore knew more about the event than Minerva disclosed. *How could she trust a professor more than a friend?*

True, she wasn't male, but Alastor had always considered McGonagall as his best mate ever since their third year when they had made the Quidditch team and joined the dueling club. Later she started helping him with Transfiguration studies, and he aided her with Defense skills. Their time spent together increased during their fifth year when they were announced as Gryffindor prefects. And of course, she was in all of his classes. He was her teammate, her Prefect double, her dueling buddy and study partner. She was probably the best friend he'd ever had and she didn't trust him, he thought miserably.

When they stepped inside the castle, Minerva turned to head to Gryffindor tower, but turned back to tell Alastor she'd meet him at Gryffindor's table for dinner later. She was surprised when he ignored her and quickened his pace into the Great Hall.

McGonagalls and Quidditch

Chapter 5 of 9

Chapter five - Professors Dumbledore and Merrythought meet up with some of Minerva's relatives at a Quidditch match. Albus is troubled by rumors of war erupting in Muggle Europe.

*These characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I appreciate the opportunity to borrow them from time to time. My deepest thanks to the very generous and gracious **MMADfan** and **Squibstress** for their inspiration, advice, patience and time. In this semi-AU, Professor Merrythought is, at this time, the Charms instructor.*

Chapter 5: McGonagalls and Quidditch

Marcus McGonagall stepped out of the Three Broomsticks holding the hand of a young girl and led her carefully through a busy street and toward the steep hill leading up to Hogwarts castle. He glanced down at his strawberry-blond companion and grinned.

"Are yeh excited?" He asked. She responded with a bright-eyed, enthusiastic nod of her head and shivered. The wind was brisk, and the temperature was only a degree or two above freezing. The streets were just starting to form ice patches as the ground was quite wet from a recent rain. Marcus maneuvered around a chatting couple who were also making their way up the hill and pulled his wand out of a pocket inside his overcoat. Muttering an incantation, he cast a warming charm on the girl's heavy, brick-red, woolen coat, which looked to be a size too big for her.

"Thank you," she commented and fished a yellow knit cap out of a pocket, pulling it down over her pink ears.

"We'd best get a move on, lass ... the hot seats will soon be taken!" he said, quickly taking up her hand again and, without properly looking, stepped back into the lane of foot traffic and ran smack into a tall man wearing a dark purple overcoat. Marcus blinked once in recognition and smiled.

"Professor Dumbledore! Fancy meetin' yeh here! How has the world been treatin' yeh?" he asked, thrusting his free hand out and surprising Albus. While studying the young man's face, Albus searched his memory. The fellow looked terribly familiar: thick, black hair, vivid green eyes, an aristocratic nose, and he sported a very rich Scottish brogue. After staring for a moment, Albus broke into an apologetic smile and took the extended hand, shaking it firmly.

"Dear me ... forgive an old man for his failing memory. You look familiar, but I can't seem to place you." With that comment, Albus glanced down at the small girl holding the man's hand, catching her gaze, and winked at her.

Marcus let out a sharp guffaw.

"Old man my arse! Ye'll be kickin' the heather up when I'm long in the tooth," he replied, jovial and loud. "It's Marcus, sir ... Marcus McGonagall ... graduated three years back? I was in yer House. Couldn't get away with even a nip to the kitchens after curfew yeh slept like a cat!"

The dawn of recognition washed over Albus. Of course he knew this boisterous young man, his former student, and now understood the recognition. Marcus could pass as a male version of Albus' protégée...Minerva McGonagall...they looked so alike. He was slightly ashamed that he had forgotten a recent resident Gryffindor, and Minerva's brother to boot. Without breaking composure, Albus turned his attention to the child by Marcus' side.

"This must be Amelia." Albus bent down and reached for her tiny, mittened hand, giving it a gentle kiss. "I've heard a great deal about you, little one. Your aunt told me that you're quite serious about your music. The violin, is it?" Albus paused as a shy smile crept over Amelia's face and she nodded. "I, in fact, supplied the wrapping paper for the Christmas gift she bought you." He paused, smiling. "Imagine my surprise when I looked in the box and saw, not a kaleidoscope or box of sweets, or even a magical toothbrush, but an enchanted bow! Did you like the wrappings? I'm afraid I didn't have much to choose from, and your aunt settled on something rather drab: owls carrying yule wreaths. You must accept my apology that I didn't have something more suitable for a lady of your age."

Amelia nodded again to his question but said nothing. The wizard towering above her reminded her of a young version of Father Christmas. Though his beard had only a few strands of silver, and he was far too thin for a true St. Nick, the twinkle of his eyes and the grin on his mouth were benevolently magical. She imagined him with a huge sack over his shoulder and bending down to give her the largest candy cane she'd ever seen. Amelia looked up at the professor and giggled softly.

"Yes sir, since my daddy said I couldn't have my own owl. Your wrappings were lovely, and Gran said I could keep it! She had Daddy cut out a section for my room!" she explained, and Albus straightened up and chuckled.

"No owl for Christmas? Well, my dear, I am quite pleased that the wrappings suited you so well." He paused, stroking his chin, then remembered the true reason they were

all standing in the middle of the busy street. "I take it you two are heading to the stadium to watch Gryffindor play against Ravenclaw?" Albus asked, turning back toward the rise of the hill and reaching down to take Amelia's free hand.

"Oh, aye, we are at that. This'll be Amelia's first game. She's got two aunts playin' fer Gryffindor, so she's a wee bit excited." Marcus replied and winked at his niece, following Dumbledore's action and resuming their stride up the hill on either side of the tiny child. They walked slowly, giving Amelia's short legs plenty of time to keep up.

"I'm hoping to see most of the game; however, I'm expecting an owl any time about a Ministry meeting perhaps I'll be fortunate, and the game will be short," Albus said and paused, glancing at Marcus. "Your sister tells me you're working at St. Mungo's?" he inquired.

"Aye, that I am. A Mediwizard at the moment, but working on my apprenticeship fer Healer I'm expectin' that to take another four years or so. No rush, o'course."

"Ah, I must have gotten you confused with your brother. I thought he was the one with the ambition to become a Healer and that you worked with your mother at the apothecary." Albus silently scolded himself for his rudeness in forgetting so much of what he had learned recently of the McGonagall family. This was not normal. His memory was usually incredibly accurate.

Perhaps Galatea was right. I might be working too much.

"Nay, Professor, yer gettin' Mathew and myself confused though yeh got some bits right. We both work with Mum she assists with the apothecary but its me Grandfather MacGruder who runs the business. Mathew is the primary Potioneer and also manages the family greenhouses, where we grow many of our medicinal plants." As Marcus explained, Albus nodded and listened, carefully directing the young McGonagalls through the throngs of people ascending to the Quidditch pitch.

"Mum's got her fingers in nearly all the family ventures, though she don't do much with the sheep." Marcus gave a light chuckle. "She says she has enough o' cleaning up after the infirm, she don't want to clean up after cattle. Not tha' I can blame 'er." He paused and winked. "So the sheep are Da's domain, though Mathew helps some...as well as me uncles, Da's brothers. The McGonagall family has been farmin' sheep for near a century, yeh see."

Edging around a tree, Albus led them out of Hogsmeade proper and onto Hogwarts grounds, by-passing more than half the crowd that was previously in front of them by using a well-placed Teleportation spell. The magic was so smooth and seamless that Marcus was completely unaware of the significant distance they had just crossed. Amelia blinked a few times, looking around suspiciously at the trees as her uncle continued describing his apprenticeship, oblivious to the sudden change.

"Mum's me mentor at St. Mungo's. Yeh likely know she's one o' the three senior Healers in hospital. Specializes in reproductive health and pediatrics. But the hospital dun get all of her time o'course, she's got her private practice few days a week mostly pregnancies and tha' sorta thing, though folk come from all round to our wee Lairg to see Mum both Muggle an Magical." Marcus paused while they navigated through a few trees as Albus led them off the beaten path on what may have been a shortcut. "I'm hopin', within the next few years, I'll be studyin' under Healer Sinclair, who leads research at St. Mungo's. His specialties be in microbiology and magical ailments, specifically curses, as well as envenomation by both magical and non-magical beasts."

Albus grinned, looking over at him as they wound their way through the last of the trees. "I see. Seems your need for excitement has extended into your professional career. I had hoped you'd have left that here, at Hogwarts." Albus gave him a knowing smile, eyes twinkling.

Marcus coughed, perhaps to end the subject of conversation, or just to keep Amelia from hearing more, and glanced at the professor. Quickly tilting his head down toward his niece, Albus understood immediately, that Marcus didn't wish to discuss any of his former *exciting* ideas, endeavors or consequences in the company of such young ears. Albus chuckled softly and gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder, nodding.

Dumbledore paused as they emerged adjacent to the northern bleachers, letting a large group of bustling students go ahead of them, and gently pulled Amelia out of the way of traffic.

"I was under the impression that your father was a minister. Has he retired to sheep farming?"

"Oh nay, he's still runs the kirk." Marcus chuckled. "Da won't leave the ministry until death takes him, and maybe not even then!" Another brash guffaw, and Marcus continued. "But the McGonagalls always had sheep in Lairg. We're actually one of the oldest families in Sutherland. I'm sure yeh know that Lairg be the location of the largest annual sheep auction in Britain," Marcus responded as they began to ascend the stairs into the Gryffindor section of bleachers.

"Ah, no, actually, I didn't," remarked Albus, feeling a bit bewildered at his lack of Scottish farming knowledge.

Amelia remained quiet as her uncle and the professor discussed Marcus' medical interests and the history of her family. In truth, little of the topic interested her, and most of it flat out confused her. Instead, her attention was focused on where they had been walking not even a minute before, quite a ways down the hill, in Hogsmeade. She couldn't quite decide how they had crossed such a distance in just a few strides, and her six-year-old mind pondered the possibilities of magic.

Marcus rattled on about McGonagall sheep husbandry, while Albus, listening attentively, led them to a section of empty seats next to some of Hogwarts' faculty. Marcus raised Amelia up and seated her on his lap, giving her an excellent view of the Quidditch pitch.

"Unless you'd prefer to sit with the students, you're welcome to sit in the faculty section as my guests," Albus explained, nodding to an approaching plump woman who wore a thick, yellow, woolen cap and cloak. Albus scooted closer to Marcus and Amelia to make more room on the bench seat.

"Galatea, join us! We just got here as well," Albus exclaimed, obviously expecting his colleague's arrival.

"Oh? Did you warm my seat?" she laughed, then looked over at Marcus and Amelia and smiled. "I see you've brought us company, Albus! Grand!"

"Professor Merrythought, allow me to introduce Marcus and Amelia McGonagall, special guests of mine, to my delighted surprise." As the yellow-clad woman sat down on the right side of Dumbledore, she leaned around and smiled toward the McGonagall pair.

"Well, of course I recognize my former student, Albus. I'm not *that* old ... yet." She gave a wide smile to Amelia. "Though I've not yet had the pleasure of meeting your daughter, Marcus." She extended her hand, and Marcus took it, giving it a friendly shake.

"My *niece*, Professor, my *niece*," he laughed. "I ain't been *that* busy! And good seein' you likewise. Aye, Amelia is my elder brother's wee-un; I just cart her around some." With that, Marcus poked Amelia in the ribs, eliciting a peal of giggles from the little girl. Both professors laughed at the pair's antics. Once the giggles died down, Marcus motioned toward the professor to his right.

"Amelia, this is Professor Merrythought. She'll be teachin' yeh how to protect yerself from curses in a few years. For my O.W.L. examination, this woman put all of us 5th years on this very pitch and forced us to fight off dragons and vampires while gargling butterbeer." Amelia gasped in shock at her uncle's words. "And we were only allowed to wield pumpkins and cabbages in our defense!" Amelia's blue eyes went as wide as saucers, staring over at Professor Merrythought.

"Oh for ..." Galatea snorted. "*Marcus McGonagall*, you should be ashamed of yourself! Filling that sweet child's head with such nonsense!" Turning her attention to the impressionable youngster, Professor Merrythought continued. "Miss McGonagall, don't you listen to your uncle. I did no such thing! Trust me, your O.W.L.s will take place inside a classroom, with only your quill, inkwell and parchment to contend with. No dragons. No undead." Glaring at Marcus, Merrythought didn't catch the amused expression on her Gryffindor colleague's face. "Besides, I'm teaching Charms these days, not Defense."

Laughing to himself, Marcus nodded as Amelia turned around to look at her uncle, unconsciously questioning him on these two very different histories of his earlier schooling. He only then realized he had never properly introduced Professor Dumbledore to his niece.

Ever the curious one, Amelia piped up as if hearing her uncle's thoughts.

"And what does he teach?" she asked, reaching over and tugging on Albus' sleeve.

"Professor Dumbledore teaches Transfiguration. Yeh probably don't remember him, but he was at your aunt's competition last year. Her mentor, in fact."

"Aunt Minerva's ... what?" She squinted up at the bearded man, trying to remember.

"A mentor ... that's a person who takes special interest and time in someone's learnin'. Much like yer gran mentors me at hospital. Professor Dumbledore teaches folk to change things into different things, like when Aunt Minerva transformed yer dress at Christmas: the one yeh hated?"

Amelia smiled shyly up at Dumbledore, and Albus tried to remember if Minerva had said her niece was five or six years old. Leaning toward his colleague, he laced his fingers together and stretched, causing the knuckles to crack.

"Galatea, are you fearful of rodents?" Albus asked, evoking an odd look from Professor Merrythought.

"No, Albus. Why on earth would you ask me that?" She eyed him warily before waving her wand and casting a warming charm on the bench. Musing at her reaction, Albus also withdrew his wand.

"Well, our young guest here informs me that she had hoped to receive her own personal owl for Christmas, you see, and I thought I might be able to fulfill that wish. A belated gift of sorts." As Albus spoke, Amelia's attention was ensnared, and she watched him with wide, wondering eyes.

"Father Christmas, are we today?" Galatea muttered, causing Albus to grin. "Albus, you could always purchase the child an actual owl..." but she was cut off as Albus began to wave his wand, casting spells, and Professor Merrythought gave up trying to talk him out of whatever elaborate plan he had already set in motion.

"*Accio* wild male mouse," Albus said, and within several seconds, a small, brown mouse had flown to his gloved and outstretched hand. Albus tapped it on the head gently, causing it to lie motionless. As if sensing what Amelia was thinking, he turned to her. "Not dead, my dear, just asleep. Makes the Transfiguration much easier, you see."

Professor Merrythought smirked and shook her head, watching him work as more students and faculty climbed into nearby seats. Amelia's eyes were intense as she watched, enraptured with Dumbledore's wand movements. Marcus' attention, however, was focused across the field, completely ignorant as to what was going on right next to him.

Uttering words in Latin that Amelia couldn't understand, Albus Transfigured the sleeping mouse into a small Tawny Owl and then cast several incantations over the newly formed bird before rousing the animal from slumber. The bird stumbled, then flipped upright in the wizard's large hand, and finally flapped its wings and took perch upon Albus' knee.

Amelia gasped in amazement, turning her uncle's attention back toward the professor.

"Oi! Yeh din have ta fetch Amelia an owl, Professor!" Marcus exclaimed.

Albus tucked his wand away and gently felt the bird's mid-section, then extended a wing, inspecting the animal for signs of deformity. Running his gloved fingers through the thick plumage and ruffling the poor creature's feathers quite thoroughly, Dumbledore at last decided the owl was properly proportioned, and brushed down the upset feathers.

"Actually, Mr. McGonagall ... I'm not giving her an owl, but rather, a Transfigured mouse, which now has the permanent form of an owl." He smiled, looking at Amelia, and pushed his hand up under the talons of the bewildered owl, encouraging the creature to climb onto the offered perch.

"Amelia, this owl is rather special, as it will only recognize you, well ... and myself, as its family. I tried to imprint you and your uncle upon him; however, since I semi-created him, I can't separate myself from his, now magical, resonance. At any rate, he might not be quite as bright as a normal owl, or live nearly as long; however, he will be very loyal to you. You should be able to teach him all the standard tricks a witch's owl can perform...with plenty of persistence and kindness, of course." Hastily, Albus added an idea. "Although you may want to avoid feeding him mice." With a wink, Dumbledore handed the bird to the young girl, who wasn't quite sure how to handle such an animal.

Amelia's eyes were huge as she stretched her tiny arm out to allow the owl to climb upon it, staring at the beautiful raptor. Instead of the typical dark brown Tawnies she was used to, this owl was much whiter, and had dark brown accents on the feathers around his head. The owl seemed far larger standing on her arm than it had on the professor's, and Professor Merrythought laughed warmly.

"Perhaps, Miss McGonagall, you could release your new owl to the Hogwarts Owlery until the game is over. Most owls tend to become frightened during such matches, due to all the players flitting about on brooms - he'll be quite safe if you send him up to the castle. We even have special treats for the birds who bring us mail!" She wiggled her eyebrows at the bright-eyed youngster, which made Amelia giggle. "I'm sure he'll be safe there until you're ready to fetch him."

A bewildered Amelia sat, still perched on her uncle's lap, right arm raised nearly over her head with a similarly bewildered Tawny Owl teetering back and forth on her tiny limb. Marcus deftly reached out to steady Amelia's arm and received a swift nip from the owl, who proceed to squawk and hiss at him. Though Marcus jerked his hand back quickly, he wasn't dextrous enough to avoid the bite and prevent his sheepskin gloves from being torn.

"Hey! Bad owl! Bad!" Marcus fumed as the bird lunged around Amelia's head toward his hand.

Professor Dumbledore sighed and muttered a few choice words in French. Before more mayhem could ensue, Albus reached over with both hands, plucking the bird off Amelia's arm and held its talons firm.

"I didn't realize you were training attack owls, Albus... a new experiment? Should I be worried?" Professor Merrythought teased. An aggravated Albus Dumbledore turned toward the plump witch on his right and tutted.

"Yes, in fact, I'm polishing up a legion of American horned owls to set loose on cheeky Hufflepuff witches," he retorted.

Professor Merrythought raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"Well, in that case, I shall have to shield the dormitories and set a guard cat at every window." Satisfied with her equally sardonic response, she resumed her gaze over the pitch, a smug grin fixed on her face. As Amelia and Marcus watched, one with wide-eyed concern, the other glaring angrily at the winged-beast, Albus uttered several incantations over the rogue owl. Satisfied with his adjustments, Professor Dumbledore turned to the concerned little girl on his left.

"Your new friend should find life less intimidating now. I think he was simply alarmed by all the drastic changes and strange company he awoke to. Now, before he can understand and obey basic commands, you will have to give him a name - inform him what his name will be, I mean. This is part of the magical bond he will have with you." Albus didn't think the youngster's eyes could get any wider until he mentioned the magical bond with her new pet. She nearly jumped off her uncle's lap onto the bench seat below her, which was thankfully empty, and squealed.

"Uncle Marcus! What should I name him?" Amelia exclaimed, her voice filled with excitement. As her uncle opened his mouth to answer, Amelia interrupted and answered her own question. "Oh! I want to name him after the professor! Owl, your name is 'Professor'!" Turning her attention toward Dumbledore, she asked hesitantly. "Can I name him after you, Professor?"

Professor Merrythought hadn't seen Albus Dumbledore blush in a very long time, and she chuckled under her breath as her colleague turned pink.

"It would be an honor, my dear," Albus replied softly.

Professor Merrythought, turning toward Amelia, then briefly explained how to send the bird to the Owlery. Albus, Marcus and Galatea watched as the youngest McGonagall followed the instructions with immaculate detail, sending the owl, teetering on new wings, toward the castle. They all watched, Albus a bit nervously, as the owl got caught in a wind gust and blown off course, only to right itself and soar toward the highest of the Hogwarts towers.

Amelia squealed. "My own owl! Thank you Mr. Professor!" She jumped off her uncle's lap and threw her arms around a very surprised Professor Dumbledore, kissing him on the cheek. Albus felt a blush start and knew he'd have to endure his colleague's teasing, quickly deciding it was worth it. Albus returned the little one's embrace and then released her, looking down at the huge smile encompassing Amelia's face. Albus chuckled, his belly feeling quite warm.

"You're welcome, Miss McGonagall. It was my pleasure."

Professor Merrythought grinned and leaned in close to Albus so that her whisper couldn't be overheard. "I haven't seen you blush this much since that little girl's aunt surprised you, this past Christmas, with a scrimshaw beard comb."

Galatea's voice was intentionally soft, and the combined effect of her warm breath against Albus' ear and the reminder of Minerva's gift caused his blush to deepen. To cover his embarrassment, Dumbledore silently conjured moisture to accumulate in the air around them, creating sleet in the biting winds and forcing a similar blush onto Professor Merrythought's cheeks.

"Unpleasant weather for a Quidditch match, wouldn't you say?" Albus was pleased when he turned toward his Hufflepuff colleague and noticed the color rising against her skin. Galatea shivered in response to the sudden onslaught of icy shards.

"Well, pickles! I don't remember the weather forecast calling for sleet!" she exclaimed.

A loud whistle rang out as players began emerging onto the field, crimson-clad from the left, royal blue from the right. A squelch flared in the air as the commentator announced the beginning of the game.

"Today's match, Ravenclaw versus Gryffindor! Captains Aaron Ollivander, for Ravenclaw, and Minerva McGonagall, for Gryffindor, take the field. The Quaffle is thrown into the air... and MacGruder takes the Quaffle! Gryffindor has the ball!" the young man's voice rang out over the pitch, carrying in every direction.

With that, the game began and the stands around the odd quartet erupted in cheers. Albus suddenly remembered his over-cloak was inappropriately colored, and Transfigured it from purple into crimson and gold.

"MacGruder passes to McGonagall ... Schwartz blasts the Bludger Oooh that was close! And the Bludger is coming back around at McGonagall..."

As the commentator trailed off, Albus heard a company of droning bagpipes, accompanied by a brigade of snare drums, generate from the far end of the pitch. The music grew louder as he watched Minerva and Sara round the far goalposts, followed closely by the Ravenclaw Chasers. Roland McCreedy, the third of the Gryffindor Chasers, flew up and joined his teammates in formation as they, ahead of the Ravenclaw team, zoomed toward the Gryffindor bleachers.

As the three crimson-clad Chasers advanced toward their goalposts, Albus recognized the melody growing loud as "Scotland the Brave". Marcus stood up as his cousin and sister approached their section of bleachers, nearly taking the Quaffle out of bounds and giving Ravenclaw a free goal shot. Marcus started flailing his arms wildly, motioning the Gryffindor team back. Minerva managed a backwards pass to her cousin before she reached the foul line, passing the Quaffle over her head on instinct. Sara caught the ball and turned sharply, taking the Ravenclaw Keeper by surprise. Marcus let out a roaring cheer followed by a shrill squeal from Amelia.

"McGonagall has the Quaffle and is about to ... she's out of bou... no! She makes a backwards pass to MacGruder ... who scores on Ollivander! Ten points to Gryffindor!"

The roar of bagpipes was almost deafening in Albus' ears as Minerva overshot the foul line and turned behind their section of stands. As she flew over him on her returning pass, she dropped something into Amelia's lap and raced back across the field, narrowly dodging a Bludger, and sidled up against Feng Chang, the 6th-year Ravenclaw Seeker. Chang sped up quickly as Minerva approached and shot high above the pitch. Clandallin, seeing his captain's interest in the other Seeker, followed suit and saw an approving nod from Minerva as he followed Chang.

Amelia's squeal was lost in the cheering of Gryffindor fans, but her expression displayed surprised joy. Albus watched as she opened a tiny parcel wrapped in gold parchment. A finger puppet of a lion's head, in Gryffindor colors, emerged, and when the child donned the yarn-made toy, it became animated, opening its mouth in a tiny roar. Amelia smiled and showed her uncle, who laughed.

As the game progressed, the Ravenclaw Chasers made several attempts to score and found Keeper Moody an impassable obstacle. Twice, Albus was sure that Ravenclaw would succeed in scoring, but Moody always managed to reach the appropriate hoop in time to block the shots. Dumbledore was quietly impressed with the single-minded resilience that Moody displayed in his position. Alastor's tenacity and reflexes had grown admirably since the previous year, and just as the idea formed in his mind that Moody may have a promising career in Magical Law Enforcement, Professor Merrythought leaned over and shouted over the crowd.

"With reflexes like that, Mr. Moody would make an excellent candidate for the Auror Department, Albus. You should talk to him."

"I'm not sure now is the best time to be joining the MLE, Galatea, with this war looming," he commented. Merrythought cast a noise-softening charm in the air around herself to muffle the acoustic chaos so that she could better focus on what Albus was saying.

"While I too hate the idea of thrusting our students onto the battlefield, it may just be that this younger generation is what makes the difference between a free wizarding world and one ruled by a lunatic. I don't think Muggle Europe would have ever expected Hitler to rise to power so quickly. The parallels can't be ignored, Albus."

Dumbledore understood clearly she was alluding to Grindelwald. Albus had hoped the Quidditch match would be a pleasant distraction from his worries of late; however, he could not begrudge his colleague her concern. Galatea knew more about his recent activities than most, due largely to her involvement with the Auror Department years earlier and her continued influence in Muggle/magical communication between the different law enforcement departments of Great Britain. However, she was also one of his closest friends, and one of the very few he confided in. Dumbledore knew she was worried, not just for himself, but for the entire continent. He also detected some aggravation in her tone, knowing this was due to his vague answers to recent questions she had about the most prevalent developments in the Ministry.

"No, we can't, that is true. Speaking of which, did you remember that I am expected at a Ministry function this afternoon? Would you, or perhaps Reginald, look in on Gryffindor this evening? I doubt I'll be back before dinner." Galatea tutted at his response, disappointed with her inability to get Dumbledore to discuss further matters concerning the war and how he was involved.

"Of course I will, Albus," she remarked and cast a *Finite* on her muffling charm, understanding that their conversation was at an end.

Albus remembered something and turned toward Merrythought.

"Ah, my dear, I nearly forgot. Miss McGonagall will need access to my office for some study materials ... I'll leave a note on my desk with the associated tomes, would you grant her access? She is welcome to remain there as long as she requires, as the necessary materials cannot leave my rooms."

Professor Merrythought nodded in understanding just before the stands once again erupted as Gryffindor scored. Chaser McGonagall brought the score up to Gryffindor thirty, Ravenclaw zero, right before a tiny Scops owl swooped overhead and landed on Albus' knee. The bird looked extremely put out at having to navigate through the chaos of zooming broomsticks. Dumbledore unwrapped the note tied to the little bird's leg and tucked it in the inside breast pocket of his coat.

"I'm afraid that's my cue. Thank you, Galatea." He nodded to the witch before turning to the McGonagalls. "Mr. McGonagall, a pleasure meeting with you again. Miss McGonagall, a real treat meeting you at last." He smiled down at the rosy-cheeked child before rising from his seat. "If you have any problems or questions about 'Professor,' ask your uncle or father to help you write me a letter." He gently patted Amelia on the shoulder.

Marcus reached out a hand to his former professor, shaking it firmly.

"Grand to see yeh again, Professor Dumbledore. Sorry yeh canna enjoy the rest of the game," Marcus half yelled over the din of the activity. Albus nodded but said nothing else and made his way to the exit of the bleachers. Amelia, anxious to get off her uncle's lap, climbed onto the seat that Dumbledore had just evacuated and stood so she could better see over the crowd.

The Gryffindor Chasers dominated the field and carried the Quaffle twice as often as the Ravenclaw team. McCreedy managed to score two goal shots by the time MacGruder and McGonagall had each scored at least half a dozen. Ravenclaw hadn't managed to score once, and their Seeker, Feng Chang, was desperately searching the sky for the Snitch, knowing they were quickly running out of time to gain the upper hand. Young Clandallin had also been widely circling the field, trying not to harass Chang. However, when the Ravenclaw Seeker took a sharp dive toward the ground, Darwin knew he'd spotted the Snitch and dove after him.

Chang was leading Clandallin by at least ten feet and was only a few seconds away from snatching the Snitch out of the air as the ball zoomed mere inches above the frosted turf of the pitch. Clandallin urged his old broom forward, but the decades-old model, one of the school's stock, just couldn't produce as much speed as the newer brooms that most of the players rode. Try as he might, he couldn't advance on Chang and hoped the Snitch would turn sharply, which would give Clandallin an advantage in pursuit, as he was far enough back to maneuver correctly. Darwin made the mistake of looking up as McCreedy made a dive to catch the Quaffle, missing his chance at the Snitch when it took a sharp left, nearly sending Chang headlong into the bleachers.

Damn it, Darwin ... you idiot! You just lost the game! he muttered to himself.

Roland McCreedy pulled out of the dive, catching the Quaffle by the tips of his fingers, and, just before plowing feet-first into the sod, managed to toss it high toward McGonagall, who was fast approaching. Relieved that Minerva caught the pass, Roland let himself tumble forward, where he flipped feet-over-head, and landed firmly on his backside.

Chang was gaining on the Snitch, which had slowed some when it changed directions, and Clandallin watched as the Ravenclaw Seeker pawed the air in front of him, reaching desperately for the ball. Darwin wished, more strongly than ever, that his parents had gotten him a new broom for Christmas instead of the magical castle-building set he had begged for.

MacGruder and McGonagall swerved in and around the Ravenclaw Beaters, dodging Bludgers and bats alike as the team tried everything in their power to stop the high-scoring pair. Minerva passed the Quaffle to her cousin, pulled up and launched forward, hoping to confuse Ollivander at the goalposts. Before Sara was overcome by two Ravenclaw Beaters, who flanked her on either side, she re-passed to Minerva, who rolled the pass into the left hoop, taking Ollivander completely by surprise.

"McGonagall scores for Gryffindor! It's 160 to zero and... oh! Chang has caught the Snitch! Ravenclaw has caught the Snitch, but it's not enough to gain the lead and the game is over! Gryffindor 160 and Ravenclaw 150! Gryffindor wins!"

The Gryffindor section of bleachers erupted in cacophonous cheers. Marcus and Amelia were among the loudest.

Forgiveness and Pain

Chapter 6 of 9

Minerva and Alastor celebrate Gryffindor's victory with relatives and friends. Minerva has an unwelcomed encounter. Alastor asserts himself.

*These characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I appreciate the opportunity to borrow them from time to time. My deepest thanks to the very generous and gracious **AMMADfan** and **Squibstress** for their inspiration, advice, patience and time. Especially their patience and time!*

Chapter 6 : Forgiveness and Pain

Early March, 1943, Hogwarts Castle

Alastor Moody had been elevated from the Quidditch pitch by most of the Gryffindor team and carried, high atop arms and shoulders, to the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade after Ravenclaw and Gryffindor performed their ceremonial handshakes before walk-off. Minerva was met by her brother and niece and eagerly joined them for the celebration down in the village. Though Minerva and her cousin Sara were generally the two garnering most of the attention after victories, Alastor was getting the lion's share this time after playing a shut-out game. Minerva usually thought Alastor a bit of a show-off; however, she was genuinely pleased to see him blushing under all the attention.

He deserved the attention. Rarely, in professional or academic leagues, were shut-outs seen. In fact, Minerva couldn't remember a single occurrence taking place after the first fifteen minutes of a game. A lucky Seeker would, on occasion, catch the Snitch ten minutes or so into the game, long before either side had much time to score. The game today, however, went on for nearly forty-five minutes, with Moody blocking at least two dozen scoring attempts.

The Gryffindor Keeper had been truly remarkable, having saved against some very crafty shots in less than ideal weather conditions. Sleet and freezing, biting winds caused his hands to cramp, his goggles to fog over, and slick frost to cake over his broom handle. Even the Ravenclaw team was impressed. Their captain, Aaron Ollivander, who was also Keeper, came over to join the celebrations, offering Alastor a firm hand shake.

Alastor, however, got the impression that Ollivander's attention wasn't truly centered on him, nor on offering Gryffindor his respect, but on Captain McGonagall's charms. Aaron glued himself to her side, taking the seat directly to her right, wedging between Minerva and her brother after asking to join them at the table. Between Ollivander and Minerva's relatives, Alastor could hardly get more than two seconds of his captain's coveted attention.

In the celebratory mood that had swept over the entire tavern, Marcus McGonagall surprised everyone by ordering the entire Gryffindor and Ravenclaw teams a round of Butterbeers. Minerva and Sara each gave Amelia slow test flights on their brooms outside in the freezing air, allowing their niece to steer while riding double with an aunt. All in all, Minerva decided it was the best after-game celebration in all the time she'd been at Hogwarts, and she thanked her brother for bringing Amelia out for the game.

When Minerva and Sara returned to Gryffindor's table after seeing Marcus and Amelia off, Minerva explained that she had hospital-wing duty that afternoon and excused herself from the festivities.

Walking back up the narrow Hogsmeade street, Minerva thought back to the previous evening just before dinner.

When she had approached Professor Dumbledore's office, after he suggested meeting before dinner that evening, the door was open, and three men in Ministry robes

were standing in his office, speaking with him in hushed tones. Albus saw Minerva appear just outside the door and excused himself from the small group to address his student.

"Ah, Miss McGonagall, I'm afraid I can't meet with you this evening; however, I did want to speak with you." With that, the Transfiguration professor stepped out into the hallway with Minerva and shut his office door. Minerva had the sense that she was interrupting and thought she noticed an aggravated look on two of the visiting men's faces before the door closed.

"Professor, I didn't realize you were busy...I can come back ..." Minerva started.

"No, no, my dear. It is I who have been rude, as we had agreed to meet this evening, and I beg your forgiveness. The Ministry has become impatient of late, and I'm afraid I can't put them off," Albus explained. "I've not had time to speak to the Headmaster about your taking N.E.W.T.s early, however, I must advise you ... I've never heard of any student being given the privilege of taking either fifth- or seventh-year exams early." He saw his student working up a protest, and he raised a finger to request she wait for him to finish. "I also have not yet had time to discuss with you your reasons for requesting such a benefit, and so I wish to give you the opportunity to explain when I am able to give you my full attention."

To this, Minerva nodded, though she looked somewhat disappointed.

"Also, I know we've discussed Animagi theory at length, and you seem adamant about the prospect, but I'm not entirely sure you realize just how much work is involved, which is why I'm going through my library in order to prepare a list of works that should be able to, at the very least, give you some sense of how much time and dedication such aspirations would require."

He paused, taking a pocket watch out of some unseen pocket, and checked the time.

"Heavens!" he exclaimed. "Again, I'm terribly sorry for my ungracious behavior, but I've kept them waiting too long already. Please see Professor Merrythought tomorrow after the Quidditch game for instructions on the Animagi information." With that, he tucked his pocket watch back into his robes and gave her a farewell wink, turning back toward his office.

"Thank you, Professor," Minerva said hesitantly, still feeling as if she were being selfish and demanding far too much of the Deputy Headmaster's time.

As Minerva turned to head back toward the Great Hall, she saw something that startled her. Normally dextrous on his feet, Professor Dumbledore had hissed audibly and grabbed his leg, stopping mid-stride before reopening his office door. Minerva moved toward him to offer a steadying hand when he smiled weakly and shook his head.

"Not to worry, my dear. It's just a cramp." He winked again, stood up straight, and headed back into his office.

As Minerva ascended the incline on the road that led back up to Hogwarts Castle, she tried to remember if, in the past six years, she had ever seen her Transfiguration professor indicate pain of any sort. She couldn't quite put her finger on the reason, but seeing her mentor as anything but indestructible alarmed her.

"Minerva," she heard distantly as she came out of her thoughts. Without turning around, she dismissed the call, chalking it up to the brisk north wind distorting sounds. She pulled her heavy Quidditch cloak tight around her as the frigid gusts bit at her skin, and kept walking.

"Minerva!" This time the call was much louder and close behind. She didn't recognize the masculine timbre at first and turned around, only to feel her stomach drop.

Tom Riddle was hurrying up the sloping road toward her, his cheeks bright pink from the cold.

"Minerva, I wanted to apologize," he said quietly as he took the last few steps toward her. Instinctively, she stepped back and felt for her wand inside her cloak pocket.

Without any warning, Tom's wand slipped from somewhere inside his sleeve, and he made a few swirls toward an object he held in his opposite hand. Minerva whipped her wand out and thrust it into his face, only a foot or so from his nose. Tom froze and stepped back slowly.

"I was Transfiguring this stick into a rose. A sign of peace," he said somewhat flatly, though Minerva was sure she could see the faintest tinge of alarm in Tom's face.

Minerva lowered her wand only after seeing a small group of students heading up the road only twenty yards away and decided he was unlikely to attack her in such a public area. Bile rose in her throat, and adrenaline pumped through her veins as she tried to control her emotions. She could feel static electricity pulsing over her skin and heard the tell-tale crackling sound, knowing perfectly well this wasn't a result of the dry air. Her heart pumped wildly in her chest, and she mentally chastised herself for her fear.

"A sign of peace, Tom? You honestly expect me to believe that?" Her tone was stern and unwavering, she was thankful to note. She found it easier to control her fear if she let her anger take over.

"Yes," he replied, his face emotionless. "Why else would I apologize?" With her wand lowered, he resumed his Transfiguration spell, turning a dead twig into what appeared to be a yellow rose and holding it out to her.

Minerva looked from the rose to Tom and back again, and her father's voice crept into her thoughts.

If God can forgive us of our most heinous sins, can we not forgive each other?

She was ashamed to realize, though she knew her father spoke from wisdom, that she was unwilling to forgive Tom Riddle. She knew she was *deciding* not to forgive him, and in this, she was directly defying God's will. Before this moment, however, she had not been confronted with even the *idea* of forgiving Riddle, yet now, it had been thrust upon her, ready or not. For a moment, while brief, she was ashamed, although she wasn't sure if she was more disgusted with disrespecting her father or with disobeying God.

Then her anger took over, and all shame and regret were gone.

"Oh, I can think of several reasons you'd stand here asking for forgiveness," she replied coldly, her brogue thickening. "And none of them are honorable."

Tom wasn't expecting that response. For several seconds, he stood staring at her, staring into those intense green eyes, still offering the yellow rose. *This isn't going to be easy*, he thought to himself and lowered the arm that was holding the rose. His other arm already rested at his side, though he had not released his wand.

"I can't explain what came over me, Minerva, but I am horrified at my actions." His tone was soft and might have seemed genuine if Minerva hadn't seen him switch from the kind gentleman he portrayed himself to be into the beast she remembered from the dueling incident.

Minerva thought she could easily explain what came over him...what drove him to attack her...but she kept her ideas to herself.

"I want nothing from you," she replied as the group of students approached the bend directly behind the Slytherin and Gryffindor pair. She recognized them as half of Ravenclaw's Quidditch team, and she turned from Tom and joined their group, doing her best to appear at ease and make small talk as they walked back up to the castle.

Tom did not move other than to step to the side of the road to allow the other students to pass and watched Minerva retreat up the road and, eventually, out of sight. He

looked down at the rose in his hand and crushed it, enjoying the feel of the thorns as they bit into his hand and drew pinpricks of blood. After tossing it to the side, he smiled as it burst into flame, burning into a tiny pile of ash.

"That's right, you cunt, run back to Dumbledore. You can't hide behind him forever," he muttered to himself and turned back toward Hogsmeade.

Tom took only three steps before Alastor Moody materialized, seemingly from thin air after uttering a Finite and canceling his Disillusionment Charm. Having already put his wand away, Tom was too slow on the draw to react to Alastor's right fist as it sailed through the air and connected with Tom's nose. A loud crunch was audible just before Tom was knocked backwards on his arse, lain prone with Alastor standing over him.

"I heard what you said after Minerva walked off, you miserable excuse for sheep tripe," Alastor said as he looked down at the fifth-year Slytherin. His nose and mouth bleeding heavily, Tom had the gall to grin up at his attacker, showing off a bloody smile.

"I see Minerva's still got you on a tight leash, Moody. Should I be more concerned with rabies or fleas?" Tom retorted sarcastically and rolled over just in time before Alastor's boot could meet with his groin. With pit viper dexterity, Riddle flipped his wand toward Moody's face, casting an offensive spell that Alastor had never heard before.

"Expecto fervens piper."

Immediately, Alastor was blinded and choking on a noxious spray that shot out from Tom's wand and covered the upper half of his body. Feeling his trachea constrict and his lungs burn, Alastor dropped to the ground and clawed at his throat. In desperation, Alastor tried to utter the spell to cancel the curse but could only manage weak gasps, and soon, panic began to take over, consecutive with his inability to breathe.

Alastor couldn't see Tom stand up, quickly hiding his wand in his cloak pocket, nor could he see the swift approach of Professor Merrythought who, thankfully, had just been walking down from the castle. Moody had already lost his sight and had almost gone deaf as he drew closer and closer to losing consciousness. His last few thoughts were of his younger sister, who idolized him, and his ailing grandmother, who raised them both, and the absolute disgrace that he was to die thanks to some Slytherin pariah who didn't deserve to lick the mud off Alastor's boots. And besides all that, he was dying a virgin!

Before dropping completely into the realm of unconsciousness, Moody heard a familiar voice close to his ear. It was a woman's voice, which soothed him unexpectedly. Once he started understanding some of the words she was saying, he instantly recognized the speaker and felt a huge rush of relief. The constriction in Alastor's throat released as his hearing returned, and he could hear Professor Merrythought speaking to someone in a tone he'd never heard from her before. She was angry. The Gryffindor then heard the audible crack of someone Apparating and instructions given to a house-elf to take Riddle somewhere. Alastor's pulse coursed through his ears as his blood pressure stabilized, and he thought he heard Tom try to say something just before another loud crack shot through the air. Only after he felt his Charms instructor's hand on his forehead, along with several soft incantations that he did not recognize, did the pain return to his eyes with a vengeance. It felt like his face was on fire...hot pokers skewering his eyes. The pain was so intense that Moody didn't even care that he was blind.

"Mr. Moody, do not be alarmed, I am Levitating you up to the hospital wing...consider yourself safe with me." Alastor felt Professor Merrythought's hand on his shoulder simultaneous with the slight shifting here and there of the turbulence of her Levitation Spell.

"Professor Merrythought ... I'm..." Pausing, he coughed heavily a few times before continuing, "I'm blind." Alastor choked out the last few words, his swollen, constricted throat making speech difficult.

"I am aware, Mr. Moody, and I'm sure Madam Alumno will be able to handle any hex or jinx that Mr. Riddle may have thrown at you." Alastor didn't quite think this was going to be so mild as a hex or jinx, but he said nothing other than to ask one more pertinent question.

"Tom ..." His voice was very weak, but he found he could speak without coughing too badly if he paused between words and spoke very slowly. "Where ... is ... Tom?" Alastor couldn't help it, his close call with what he thought was death had shaken him badly, and he reached across his chest with his left hand to find Merrythought's hand and grasped it for comfort.

Professor Merrythought's words were both informative and comforting and made Alastor smile inwardly.

"I called a house-elf to escort Mr. Riddle straight to the Headmaster's office ... before being transferred to the hospital wing. As you may already know, he looks to have a broken nose...perhaps a few teeth as well. He's nowhere near us now and will have no way to hex you anytime soon, seeing as I have his wand."

Alastor, delirious due to intense pain, and understanding just how close to death he had come only minutes before, wondered momentarily if Professor Merrythought was an angel. He had never been so thankful to a teacher for catching him in the act of breaking the rules. His emotion suddenly got the better of him, and his damaged eyes started shedding reluctant tears while his chest heaved with sobs.

"Thank ... you ... Professor ..." He paused to control his breathing, especially now that his sinuses were swelling due to his emotional state. "You ... saved ... my ... I..." That was all he could get out before a heavy sob erupted, and he turned his head to his left side, embarrassed for being such a nancy boy.

Merrythought smiled and gripped his shoulder harder, giving it a gentle shake.

"Think nothing of it, lad. I've sworn an oath to the Four Founders of Hogwarts, to this *school*...all employees must take the oath before performing their duties at Hogwarts, be it the Headmaster himself or the gardener...and *Hogwarts has an extensive memory, mind you*... I pledged to do everything in my power to protect the students of this legendary establishment. I hardly think casting a Finite for a nasty hex could be considered divine or heroic."

Alastor couldn't see that, after her speech, she smiled down to him. It wasn't until several days later that he pondered why Professor Merrythought would choose such an odd description...the word *divine*...in her explanation to his emotional proclamation.

A few moments later he heard surprised gasps and excited murmurs as Professor Merrythought led him through the castle doors and up to the hospital wing. Madam Alumno's thick Castilian was instantly reassuring.

"¿Quien es, Galatea?"

"Carmen ... this is a British school, and I, *for one*, do not speak the king's Spanish!" Merrythought chastised. "I've got a very sick boy here...blind and having great difficulty breathing, not to mention significant pain so please...speak English!" Galatea kept her hand on Alastor's shoulder, almost subconsciously, as the mediwitch swiftly ran diagnostics and darted toward the medical cupboard.

By the time Alastor Moody heard Minerva McGonagall enter, gasp, and rush across the room, Madam Alumno had given him two spoonfuls each of pain and relaxation potions that were leavening his breathing and helping him relax. Professor Merrythought left only after the potions had begun working, giving Alastor a reassuring pat on the arm before departing. Minerva was given a briefing on the patient and instructed to apply burn ointment to Mr. Moody's face and upper torso while the mediwitch searched medical texts for treatment on burn hexes to the eyes.

After several minutes of researching, the mediwitch performed a variety of healing charms to Alastor's eyes with no perceived effects.

"¡Maldito, esto no trabaja!" She swore in aggravation before returning to her bookshelf for extended research.

Minerva began folding up Alastor's school robe, as he had to be stripped to the waist for burn treatment, laying it on a nearby shelf, and lowered her voice.

"What did Riddle hex you with?"

Moody's answer was groggy, an obvious effect of the potions.

"I dunno ... never heard it before." His eyes, unable to focus, stared straight ahead...past Minerva...which she found both disturbing and distracting.

"Do you remember the incantation? Any of the words maybe?"

Alastor's face broke into a crooked smile.

"Why? You want ta try it on me next," he chuckled, drooling a bit when he did, "when I catch you alone on prefect rounds?" Minerva stiffened at his glib reaction to her question.

"I'm trying to save your vision, you inebriated addlepate!" she whispered scornfully. "Do you remember *anything* he said?"

"Er, what I do 'member ... eh ... dun think yeh'd want ta hear ... think I broke 'is nose ..." And the rest of his words were too muddled and slurred to understand. Alastor's head dipped on his pillow, drool running down his chin, and Minerva realized the potions would make any information-gathering impossible.

Considering the options, Minerva looked across the room at the frustrated mediwitch pouring over an old tome and had an idea. Glancing quickly around the hospital wing and finding it otherwise empty, she made her way towards the stout, aging woman.

"¿Señora, ayudaría a conocer el texto exacto de la maldición?" Though Minerva knew of few other students who were fluent in Spanish, she took no chances that she'd be overheard and almost whispered her inquiry.

"Sí, por supuesto, pero nadie recuerda lo que se utilizó," answered the mediwitch.

I think I can remedy that Minerva thought.

††

Translations from Spanish to English.

"¿Quien es, Galatea?" = "Who is this, Galatea?"

"¡Maldito, esto no trabaja!" = "Damn, this isn't working!"

"¿Señora, ayudaría a conocer el texto exacto de la maldición?" = "Madam, would it help to know the exact text(words) of the curse?"

"Sí, por supuesto, pero nadie recuerda lo que se utilizó." = "Yes, of course, but no one remembers what was used."

The Hospital-Wing

Chapter 7 of 9

Chapter seven

Alastor Moody and Tom Riddle are admitted to the hospital wing. Professors Dippet and Merrythought discuss recent events.

These characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I appreciate the opportunity to borrow them from time to time. My deepest thanks to the very generous and gracious **MMADfan** and **Squibstress** for their inspiration, advice, patience and time. In this semi-AU, Professor Merrythought is, at this time, the Charms instructor.

Ten points (to your professed house) to the first person who can point out (in this chapter) my nod toward *MMADfan's Regarding a Misunderstanding*.

Transformation of a Scottish Lioness

Chapter 7

The Hospital-wing

Galatea Merrythought had just explained the incident she'd seen involving Tom Riddle and Alastor Moody to Professor Dippet in the Headmaster's office and was quietly waiting for his response. Armando sat in in the oversized oak chair at his desk, alternating holding his ornate pipe in his hand or between his teeth while contemplating her words, saying nothing. After a few minutes, Professor Merrythought could no longer contain her contempt.

"Armando, you simply have to look at this directly." Her voice changed from her typical analytical teaching style to a more insistent delivery. "Whatever Mr. Riddle cast upon Mr. Moody was not a simple hex. The boy was *not breathing* by the time I had arrived, and he was very near losing consciousness. I dare say Mr. Moody might have died had I not been walking down the path at that very moment." Her voice was urgent, and she pressed her advantage by placing both of her hands on his desk, and despite her short stature, leaned over, pushing herself into the Headmaster's personal space.

Armando Dippet reacted as she expected, pulling back and taking on a defensive posture.

"Galatea, are you implying that Mr. Riddle intended to kill Mr. Moody?" He wouldn't meet her eyes, and instead looked down at the ivory-and-cherry wood pipe he held in his hands. Professor Merrythought, taking the not-so-subtle hint from the Headmaster that she was approaching his boundary line, returned to a casual stance but did not alter her penetrating stare.

"I think it's a possibility you should consider."

The Headmaster did not expect that answer. Armando stood up and slammed his pipe down on his desk, startling the former Defense professor.

"Galatea, you are not at the Aurors' office here! Do you understand? We don't have murderers at Hogwarts! These are *children*!" He was now shouting. Galatea blinked a

few times, startled by his outburst. An idea popped into her mind as clear as glass. *Dippet was afraid of the possibility that the previous year's death was not due to an Acromantula.* Now that she could smell his concern, she would not be quieted, not in a field she knew so well.

"We did last year," she reminded him.

Silence followed her rebuttal. Armando's bluster was taken out of him, and he fell back into his chair, deflated, his pipe forgotten.

"Galatea, you simply cannot look for, and expect to find, dark witches and wizards around every corner. I thought we discussed this when you came back to teaching full-time! You are no longer the crusader." Now he looked up at her, his honey-brown eyes tired and pleading. His words, and his gentle gaze, gave her pause, and she second-guessed herself.

Maybe I am looking for demons where there are none, she thought.

Without pondering any longer, she removed Mr. Riddle's wand from her robes and set it upon the desk.

"Then let us put it to rest and see exactly what he did cast? Go back oh four spells?" she requested, and as the Headmaster raised his wand, a loud knock came at the door. Armando paused and nodded to Galatea, who trotted over to the door and opened it a crack, and after a quiet murmur, allowed Miss McGonagall inside. As the Headmaster opened his mouth, probably to ask why Professor Merrythought would invite a student into the office at such a delicate moment, Galatea spoke up as she and Minerva crossed the room.

"Miss McGonagall has hospital-wing duty today, and Madam Alumno needs to know the spell that Mr. Riddle used on her patient, Mr. Moody. Evidently, he is still blind and his breathing is not improving," Professor Merrythought explained to a bewildered-looking Headmaster.

"Ah! My apologies, Miss McGonagall, I had completely forgotten you were working on your medical internship in our hospital wing. Right then." Without any more hesitation, Professor Dippet cast the incantation over the wand to reveal the last four spells its owner had cast. Minerva politely requested a sheet of parchment and quill so she could record the offending incantation exactly.

Four spells, written in fiery yellow lettering, hovered over the wand that lay on the desk, each spell listed according to the order they were cast. The first spell, being the last that was cast, was one that puzzled each of the witnesses: a spell that conjured pepper juice and sprayed it forth, or at least, that was what Professor Merrythought explained as her best guess, as the spell was nothing that either of the learned professors had ever heard of:

Expecto Fervens Piper.

"I recognize this one" Minerva interjected, pointing to the second listed spell. "Tom used that to conjure a rose during a brief discussion. Alastor must have ... been behind me."

Subsisto Crocus Rose.

The third spell, from what Minerva could guess, was some sort of binding spell, or rather, something that enforced a promise:

Spondeo Silentium Factum.

The fourth spell was a Hogwarts-banned copying spell, which seemed odd to Minerva, as it caused ill effects to the intended copy as well as set off alarms at the school. The two professors glanced at each other, somewhat bewildered, and Minerva guessed their reaction was due to that last, odd spell:

Effingo Litterae Exigo.

Armando looked across the desk at Professor Merrythought, silently urging her to dismiss Miss McGonagall as their student finished scribbling down the incantations. Galatea gave a brief nod to her colleague.

"Miss McGonagall, if Madam Alumno has any difficulty understanding the intent of the offending spell, let her know that it basically casts a spray of pepper juice. Hot peppers, at that. Best get that information to her quickly," Galatea offered, patting Minerva on the back and urging her to return to the hospital wing.

Minerva suddenly looked down to the seated Headmaster, then again toward her Charms professor and gasped. Armando was the first to question her concern.

"Is something wrong, Miss McGonagall? Besides the obvious, I mean?" he questioned.

"Alastor is allergic to peppers!" Minerva almost shouted. "And he's been embarrassed about it as long as I've known him. He has been adamant about keeping this, well, what I thought was a minor problem, under strict confidence. The only reason I know about it is due to a visit several years ago when his family had supper with ours." Her initial shock turned to irritation as Minerva began to understand just how close her friend might have come to death and likely all due to pride.

"Well that explains a lot," Galatea replied as she and Armando exchanged concerned looks.

"I doubt Carmen thought to use an anti-inflammatory charm on his eyes if she had no knowledge of the allergy ... or the obscure spell, for that matter," Merrythought added as Minerva finished writing the last spell and replaced Professor Dippet's quill on his desk.

With parchment in hand, Minerva thanked them both and dashed out the door. The Headmaster cleared the air of the fiery lettering and picked up Riddle's wand, rolling it through his fingers. He felt the intensity of his colleague's eyes upon him.

"I dearly hope, Galatea, *dearly* hope, you are not going to suggest that Mr. Riddle knew of this allergy, and intentionally tried to murder young Moody."

Professor Merrythought sighed. Now that she knew about the allergy, Mr. Moody's physical reaction to the hex made sense, however, she was fairly sure nothing was listed in Moody's health files especially if what Miss McGonagall said about the secrecy of the information were true.

Part of the registration process of new students to Hogwarts was listing all permanent ailments, disabilities and allergies, and she couldn't remember ever hearing anything about a pepper allergy in all the years she'd been teaching. Nut, animal, grass and tree allergies were fairly common at Hogwarts, and as thus, the instructors used far fewer offending ingredients while teaching, or at least they tried. Rodents seemed to be the worst aggravator, which sometimes caused a few students to have the sniffles or break out in a rash. It would be unlikely that Mr. Moody notified faculty of this particular allergy, and thus, less likely that Mr. Riddle would be aware of it.

"No, it would seem that Riddle really would have had no opportunity to learn of this allergy, at least not here at the school, and as secret as Alastor has kept it, quite doubtful Riddle would have discovered it, even accidentally." She sighed and sat down heavily in one of the plush chairs that faced Dippet's huge desk.

"It still doesn't excuse Riddle for pulling a wand in the first place, when fists could have sufficed," she continued, her former bravado evaporating, as she knew Riddle was not actually breaking any rules, since Moody attacked first, and minus Moody's allergy it would have been a fairly harmless spell.

"I'd prefer they not even use fists ... barbaric really," Dippet said and rose from his desk. He moved around the front, facing toward his Charms colleague, and leaned back on edge of the desktop. As if his large size wasn't enough to dwarf the short woman, he leaned forward, closing the distance between them.

"Dare I surmise that we are in agreement, my Head of Hufflepuff, and *favoured student* so many years ago?" He chuckled as she looked up at him and saw that she did, indeed, agree with him, and she wasn't one bit pleased about it. He moved forward and stood beside her, facing the long window that overlooked the lake, placing his right

hand on her shoulder.

"Don't try to butter me up with your flattery, Armando..."

"But you *were* my favorite student. I was teased relentlessly by my colleagues about my bias."

"Pish, Armando. Likely only because they were jealous that they were not winning such a coveted position as the Deputy Head's pet, who they likely saw as being in line for Deputy when you became Headmaster. They simply couldn't understand how a *woman* could possibly achieve a position anywhere else, in academia that is, besides library work or the medical field and everyone knew I had no interest in that." Armando tried to speak but Galatea cut him off, continuing her good-humored rant. "Naturally, they assumed I'd stay here, where I already had an ace *you* and I would soar to ridiculous heights, not on my own merits and qualifications, *mind you*, but upon your high opinion only." As she said this, she sank lower and lower in the chair, and Armando moved around behind her and began to rub her shoulders and neck, figuring they were stiff, as they often were.

The Headmaster joined in the cheeky exchange.

"*Oh no*, not Galatea Merrythought, prefect of Hufflepuff for two years and Hogwarts' Head Girl. No! She was a pioneer, you see. She had her sights set much higher and managed quite well on her own, I might add, to secure the first female Auror position in a department that had been fraught with trouble ever since its inception as a Muggle LE and MLE liaison in fact. I remember the uproar over that by the Victorian hold-outs, just how unfitting that would be for a '*woman of her breeding*!'" He paused, chuckling softly as he dug his thumbs into a particularly nasty muscle doing a great impression of an iron beam. Merrythought hung her head low, stretching the muscles he was loosening, and began to relax. Uncharacteristically, she didn't rise to the bait and chastise her employer for his cheek, but remained silent, as she was simply too tired to debate further.

"You know, Thea, I was never more proud of you than I was at that moment when you took that job and told the newspapers ... What was it you said? Oh! I remember, 'to find something more scandalous to write about, such as the mating rituals of merpeople', or you were going to insist on royalties over the amount of ink they were wasting arguing back and forth about an issue that was really none of their business. Not their business, unless, of course, they were one of the lucky few whose life you saved when some cuckolded husband finally discovered his wife's *Daily Prophet* journalist lover in their marriage bed'."

Galatea's shoulders began to shake, and Armando paused momentarily, until he heard her sharp, barking laughter.

"That shut them up," Dippet mused.

"I *cannot* believe you still remember that word for word ... what is it? ... 45 years later?" she said, rising up out of her seat and extending her arms, stretching her shoulders. "Armando, much as I absolutely love that, I always worry its going to get back to your wife, and she's going to assume we're up to deceitful shenanigans."

Armando crossed the room to a small bar and took out a bottle of some sort of whiskey and two tumblers. Galatea shook her head "no," making him put back one of the glasses. Pouring himself a marginal amount, he sat down on a sofa set off from his desk in a visiting area of the office, where they could sit and talk, less as colleagues and more as friends.

"Thea, I think I have told you at least a dozen times, Eleanor is not a jealous woman, nor looks for, nor expects to find, such dark and painful affairs, because there *simply are none*. I rub your shoulders because you can't do it yourself and the pain is significant. Can people not aid others simply because we do not wish our friends to be in pain?" He leaned back on the couch and sipped his liquor.

Galatea remained standing, letting her head swing round several times and took time to stretch her shoulders and upper back. To his question, she said nothing. She was quite sure if Chadwick, her husband, walked in on such a situation, that he *would* see one of those dark, painful things, even though there certainly was no such thing.

However, Chad rarely visited the castle during term ... and I am far too old to be worrying about something so adolescent, for Heaven's sake! Chad couldn't care less, and selfish fantasies of rival lovers is positively ridiculous for a grandmother, she chided herself.

Merrythought crossed to the large window and stood looking out, only a few feet from where Armando was laid out on the couch.

"We still need to bring this to Horace's attention, you realize. That forbidden copying spell could get Riddle expelled, not to mention the havoc it would cause if he's somehow figured out how to manipulate it so the wards don't recognize it. And that Riddle can find a great deal of trouble using magic against students outside of a duel, especially when the other student is not armed with a wand." She paused, thinking. "In fact, I think we need to write up a new list of approved defensive spells and make them mandatory if they must defend themselves with magic, they are to use X,Y, or Z format, which may help with avoiding near-disasters like the one I stumbled upon earlier."

Armando, tired and feeling the effect of his whiskey, had lain out completely on the couch, his eyes closed, and sighed deeply.

"I know. I know. I just want a few ticks to relax my eyes and think, and then ... well, then we'll find Horace. I'd appreciate it if you stayed to explain the situation to him, as you were the one who found the boys. Oh, and of course, how the spell affected Mr. Moody. We also need to decide upon a course of action for Mr. Moody's discipline, perhaps if only to spare Albus one more duty upon his return."

Galatea wanted to nod and agree with him about Riddle. She was tired, and she knew Dippet had to be exhausted after working with Dumbledore to sort out all this Ministry business with the Polish Muggle conflict over the last few fortnights. She really did not want to be contrary. But Miss McGonagall's face would not fade from her mind. Merrythought had to know her boss' ... *no her friend's* ... reasoning for not punishing Riddle more appropriately for what seemed, by all logic, to be an intentional sexual assault.

Although she intended to approach the subject cautiously, she was unable to avoid her characteristic Auror behavior, launching headlong into the fray.

"Armando, why did you let Riddle off so lightly for his altercation with Miss McGonagall?" The Headmaster's sigh was audible before she had even finished her question.

"Must we discuss this now?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"Do you wish to keep my trust?" she responded, also knowing the answer.

Headmaster Dippet inhaled deeply before replying to her, but kept his eyes closed and rested his drink on his large belly.

"As you know, young Mr. Riddle is an orphan..."

"Oh Armando! You can not be se..."

"Galatea, do you want my answer or not?"

Merrythought sighed and remained silent.

"Mr. Riddle has no family. None. He is a wizard who was formerly raised in the Muggle world, with no family of any kind and no prospects to speak of. Not even a home he can return to after he finishes here at Hogwarts. If he were expelled, his prospects in the wizarding world would be greatly diminished..."

"That still doesn't excuse him for..."

"Are you going to let me finish or continue to cut me off?" Dippet asked coolly, opening one eye and looking across at his reddening Charms instructor. Again, Merrythought quieted, breaking eye contact and gazing out the window.

"Should Tom be expelled, his life in the wizarding world would likely be ruined, and as he has no family ... well, I'm sure you can deduce what that could do to a young man." He floated his tumbler over to an end table and struggled to sit up on the sofa, looking much less rested than he had before he lay down.

"On the other hand, what Tom did was wrong, yes, I fully recognize that. Did he take advantage of Miss McGonagall? Of course he did. Is there more to the story than either of them is telling? Likely. Were they enjoying a tryst out there in the woods when the activities became a little too much for the girl? Most likely. Should Tom have used magic to subdue her? Of course not!" And now he leaned forward to stand and resumed his position by Hufflepuff's Head of House, joining her in gazing at the Black Lake.

"What I decided, as far as punishment for Riddle, certainly does not follow the rules of Hogwarts to the letter. I decided not to punish the boy as he probably should have been because of the dire consequences that would have come of it." Armando looked down at Galatea for a moment and saw contempt in her taut expression.

"Miss McGonagall did not deserve this," Merrythought said non-combatively.

"Of course not. But look at the young lady's position, if you will. Miss McGonagall comes from an influential and moderately wealthy family..."

"I hardly consider the minister of a small kirk to be considered influential," snorted Merrythought, speaking about Morgan McGonagall, Minerva's father.

"No, but her mother is one of the most respected Healers in the country, and the MacGruders, her mother's side of the family, are well connected. Despite that, Miss McGonagall is, arguably, one of the most brilliant students I've ever met and atop all of that is Albus' pride and joy. She has quite the insurance that Mr. Riddle lacks."

Galatea wasn't satisfied with his justifications, and Armando knew it. He sighed and placed his hand on her shoulder again, hoping to remind her that he was not an unkind man. Hoping to show her that he deeply cared for his students, and his professors.

"Thea, I honestly thought, in this case, despite what Miss McGonagall deserved, that the full disciplinary action would cause Tom's life to unravel and could very well result in disaster for the boy. Don't forget that Minerva dished out, although unintentionally, some justice of her own for his actions. I doubt he'll ever forget that. He seemed, when I talked to him, to feel shame for his behavior. I believe he knows he did something horrible." He hoped Merrythought would, if not agree with his decision, at least accept it for what it was.

"Miss McGonagall has lost trust in Hogwarts, Armando. She has lost trust in us." It was Galatea's turn to look up at him with pleading eyes, a tactic she'd picked up from Dippet himself.

"I was afraid of that. Truly, I was. I don't, however, know how to avoid it without destroying Tom's life." He looked down at her again and squeezed her shoulder.

"I think we should overlook Mr. Moody's actions against Riddle. I think he's suffered enough." Galatea said.

"Moody is a prefect we can't have barbaric prefects."

"So is Mr. Riddle." She reminded him, but continued. "If this behavior trend continues, then I will agree with you. I ask that you let this infraction against Alastor go."

Dippet shrugged and nodded.

"Seems we *all* have our favorites, don't we?" Dippet responded and gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze, indicating his understanding.

Galatea had to resign herself to the fact that the Riddle disagreement was not an argument she was going to win. While it did not sit well with her, for many reasons, she had to admit to herself that part of her agreed with the Headmaster. Still, something about Tom Riddle unnerved her. She wasn't convinced that the boy was remorseful for what he had done. She was also unconvinced that Tom was at all sorry for what he had done to Alastor. In fact, when she had come upon the boys earlier, she had had the feeling that Tom was actually proud of himself.

"We should inform Horace of the situation before Riddle is released from the hospital wing," she said as she rose from her seat.

"Agreed. What is the Potions elf's name, do you know?" he asked, heading toward his desk and rifling through a drawer, looking for the house-elf assignment sheet.

"Peter, of all things."

"Peter?" Armando blinked. "Never heard of an elf named Peter." He shrugged and called the elf, who Apparated into the Headmaster's office within seconds and was sent to request the Potions master's presence.

The elf was gone only twenty seconds before returning, his hands behind his back.

"Peter returns, sir, but Master Slughorn has explosion with students. Master Slughorn can't be coming to see Master Headmaster right now. They is taking him to hospital wing for care him and some students also."

"Great Scott! Is he hurt? How many students were involved?" Armando nearly shouted, grabbed his over robe, left his tumbler on an end table and hurried out the office door, Galatea following in his wake. Peter, the elf, had no time to answer before they bustled off, and snapped his fingers to Disapparate back to the Potions lab. He had a right mess to set straight. *Careless wizards ... not respecting magics. A wonder more don't end up blowing off arms and legs* Peter thought to himself as he began to scrub down the tables and chairs.

Tom Riddle had arrived in the hospital wing while Minerva was in the Headmaster's office and was being fussed over by Madam Alumno. Minerva returned, purposefully ignoring Tom, and made her way to Alastor's bedside, casting unnecessary diagnostic spells to give the appearance of looking busy.

"Such handsome boy, Tom, why you to be fighting too much?" the mediwitch admonished in her broken English as she set to correcting Tom's nose with a snap. Tom winced.

"Why, so I can see more of you, of course." He gave his Healer a cavalier grin, eliciting the hint of a flush from the woman while she cleaned his face and robes of blood.

"*Ridículo*," she responded and allowed the young man to return to his House.

Minerva then explained the nature of the hex cast upon Alastor, whereupon Madam Alumno spent another twenty minutes trying to regulate the young man's breathing and decrease the swelling in his eyes, to no avail. Despite the mediwitch's vast medical expertise, Alastor had to be admitted to St. Mungo's.

Minerva had hardly finished aiding a hospital orderly with Levitating Mr. Moody through the Floo before the doors to the hospital wing burst open and two house-elves Levitated Professor Slughorn in on a stretcher. Six students and two more house-elves followed suit. Chaos erupted briefly before Madam Alumno could address the situation.

Minerva's first concern was for the injured professor, who had scorched clothing and burns on his abdomen and was wide-eyed in fear, gasping for breath. Madam Alumno rushed over to a Hufflepuff boy whose arm was badly burnt. An olive-green elf with a bulbous nose explained that a potion containing pine tar and lye had exploded while

Professor Slughorn was giving a make-up exam for a group of fourth-years, and that the professor took the brunt of the explosion. Minerva immediately cast a diagnostic spell over her professor, recognizing significant lung damage, and *Accioed* an oxygen mask from the cupboard.

It was an hour before the last of the students was tended to and another two hours for the appropriate paperwork to be filled out on Alastor's mystery allergy, the charred professor and the injured students. The evening meal was long over, and Minerva was quite thankful to be relieved for the night. Professor Slughorn and two Slytherin students had to be admitted to St. Mungo's for toxic-fume inhalation and second-degree burns. The remaining students were kept in the hospital wing for overnight observation for possible residual inhalation problems. Needless to say, the St. Mungo's hospital staff was a bit alarmed by so many admissions from Hogwarts for one evening.

Tired and hungry, Minerva passed through the empty Great Hall and ventured down into the kitchens, hoping to procure some leftovers. After finding a young, cooperative elf who put together a take-away tray with various food items, Minerva decided to take advantage of Professor Dumbledore's offer to use his office for study. It was nearly half past eight o'clock before she reached her Head of House's office door, uttered the password given to her and Transfigured a wooden chair into a simple table. Her spell work was off, another indication of her fatigue, but she didn't much care, so long as the table would hold the food. She could Transfigure it back fairly easily.

She practically inhaled her lukewarm bowl of potato-and-ham soup, sliced peaches (a treat from an exchange student from a U.S. state called Georgia), sliced bread and butter, and tea. The ticking and whirring of various instruments created a soothing white noise, and she eagerly selected the tome she had been hoping to read on the British Animagi history, and ate her dinner.

She summoned Gibber, the elf that had served them the evening she ate dinner with her professor, who obediently popped in and startled Minerva with his promptness.

"Is Miss well?" Gibber asked with wide eyes, possibly confusing her surprised state with fear or maybe even illness. Minerva felt utterly foolish.

"Oh, yes. You startled me, is all." When she said this, Gibber opened his mouth, and Minerva worried that her statement would sound like she was displeased and that he might suddenly start harming himself as punishment, so she cut him off.

"What I mean, really, is that you were so prompt with your arrival after I called you, and I was impressed by the high level of devotion you must have for Professor Dumbledore." She breathed easier now that she saw the elf was standing a bit taller with his little chest puffed out and his ears held straight.

"Gibber has served Master Dumbledore since before Master Dumbledore resided in Gryffindor Tower since he first came for meetings with Master Dippet and Mistress Merrythought. Gibber was laundry worker before Master Dumbledore comes, but Master Dumbledore sees Gibber and picks Gibber for personal elf. Gibber is proud for Master Dumbledore is..." and here the middle aged, blue elf smiled shyly, "...a great wizard of much power and many works to perform, and not only in castle, but many call him for working magics and advisement from all the where." He waved his arms wide for emphasis. "Gibber is almost overcome with pride when Master picks Gibber to serve. Gibber is most fortunate house-elf to have such a master." His little blue face now took on a more purple hue, no doubt from his blushing pride.

"How may Gibber serve Master Dumbledore's Miss?" he asked tentatively, rolling his feet and standing upon his toes in anticipation. Minerva found him utterly adorable but didn't want to insult the elf by doting on him. She couldn't help but grin.

"Gibber, I would like a pot of chamomile tea, a small pitcher of milk and a small bowl of sugar, with one teaspoon and one tea mug ... oh, one of your sturdier tea mugs the larger brown-and-blue ones with the hefty handles? Do you know what I speak of?" Minerva tried to demonstrate the size of the mug she had in mind with her hands, as she hated some of the daintier tea things that many English used.

Gibber nodded with a smile. "Those mugs in back of the kitchens, closest to gardens. Gardeners prefer them. Gibber fetches you nice, solid mug that makes Miss happy. Yes." And with a gentle pop, the elf was gone, along with her empty dinner dishes and tray.

Now that she had eaten and was no longer completely exhausted, she felt her magic strengthen and Transfigured the table back into its original form and went to make the room more inviting by raising up a small fire in the grate and lighting sconces. She lay down on the sofa, donned her reading glasses and stretched out, preparing to read, when she realized something was missing.

Of course! Music! Dumbledore wouldn't mind if I opened his music box, would he? She wondered, looking over at the small wooden box that sat on the bookshelves behind his desk. She really couldn't see that being something intensely private, not when he had shared it with her a few nights ago. As usual, her curiosity got the better of her, and she slipped behind his desk and gently opened the box. Instantly, Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* began filling the room with a relaxing, sometimes haunting, but mostly deeply reaching, melody that couldn't help but elicit emotion. The volume was perfect loud enough to be heard over the whirring and spinning gadgets in the room, but soft enough to put someone to sleep.

Lying back down on the couch, she found herself completely at ease, in perfect comfort, and sat there, doing nothing, thinking nothing, for several moments, just to enjoy the serenity of it all.

When Gibber returned with the tea ... with the larger, heavy mug, as per her request ... he found that the Miss was fast asleep on the sofa, listening to piano music the elf simply called "sleep music". Gibber decided to lay her tea things on the small end table by her head with a note to call him should she need it warmed or wanted some cakes or scones later. He had actually brought her a tray of one of his favorite biscuits, even though she had not requested anything to eat. But Ginger Newts were perfect with tea on a cold night, and he felt that Master Dumbledore would be pleased that Gibber extended such consideration for his special student.

Before the elf left, he toned the fire down a bit, as it could easily overheat the room, and put out the sconces over Minerva's head so that she could rest easier without light shining in her face. He left one sconce burning on the far side of Albus' desk. Between the small fire in the grate and the sconce on the wall, he felt there was plenty of illumination in the room, and he hoped she would not wake bewildered at her surroundings. Lastly, he removed her reading spectacles, so she could not roll over and break them, and taking a napkin from the tea set, he Transfigured it into a glasses case and slipped them inside and placed them on top of her book. Gibber wanted to keep the noise level down, so instead of popping out, he left the conventional way, through the front door, and carefully closed and locked it behind him, knowing that the Miss had the password to open it if she needed.

Gibber hoped Master Dumbledore would be pleased at how he cared for her, even if she never did get to enjoy the fruits of his labor.

Medical Expertise

Chapter 8 of 9

Minerva finds herself in an uncomfortable position with her Head of House, Headmaster and Charms professor.

Minerva awoke at the click of a closing door and bolted into a sitting position, forgetting where she was, her surroundings slowly dawning on her. Professor Dumbledore was standing next to the couch, eying the tray of biscuits.

"I've done it again." She groaned and swung her legs around onto the floor.

"I see Gibber has kept you well stocked for studying," Dumbledore said, his voice hoarse and tired.

Minerva was embarrassed and averted her eyes when she responded.

"Yes, Gibber was very kind." She stood, quickly finding the tome she was reading under her new glasses case. "Professor, I am so sorry, I promise you..." but he cut her off.

"No apologies needed, Miss McGonagall, I know what sort of schedule you keep." He made his way across the room to his desk, and Minerva noticed his traveling cloak was muddled and the left shoulder torn. "By the way, how many hours are you *turning* each day?" he asked in reference to her Time-Turner, looking at her over the tops of his spectacles.

"I ... um ... well, normally I only use three turns a day, but lately..."

"Mmhm, that's what I thought." he said, gingerly peeling off his battered cloak, in obvious pain. Minerva laid the book back on the end table and stepped forward.

"Professor?"

Albus winced while pulling his left arm from the torn garment to hang it on the cloak rack. Now that she got a good look at his face, she was alarmed. He was ashen and looked ... well ... ill.

"Professor, I think you should make a visit to the hospital wing. You look ... terrible."

Dumbledore smirked uncharacteristically and moved toward his office chair before faltering, and instead leaned against his desk.

"I appreciate your concern, Miss McGonagall; however, I'm afraid tonight is not working out as expected, and we'll have to continue our ..." He paused, bending his head and removing his spectacles to wipe his face on the sleeve of his robe. He replaced them and said, "The questions you had for me will have to wait until next week."

Minerva understood she was being shooed out of his office, and while normally this would have embarrassed her, she suspected he was injured far more than he let on, which helped her care far less about imposing.

Professor, I'm rather worried about you." She took another step forward, wringing her hands.

"Miss McGonagall, I assure you, I will be fine," he said unconvincingly, still leaning against his desk.

"I think I'll just call for Madam Alum..."

"No!" he barked and then sighed after startling her. "No. Thank you for your concern, but you will just have to leave it go. I will be fine. We will have time to discuss your concerns at a later date."

Minerva faltered for a few moments. *This was not normal.*

Something was terribly wrong. So she took a very Gryffindor stance.

"Professor, why did you make me a prefect?"

"Pardon?" Now irritated, he looked up, over his spectacles at her.

She swallowed.

"I think you heard me," she responded quietly, but her mannerisms - standing erect, hands clasped in front of her, one eyebrow raised - said otherwise.

Albus blinked. *Did she just arch her eyebrow at me? Did she ... just ...? Well that little...*

"Miss Mc..." He paused. "I do not have time for this tonight. You really must leave."

Minerva inhaled and then let her breath out slowly.

"If you were in my shoes and I in yours, Professor, would you let me dismiss you if I were in such a condition?"

How am I going to answer that? he wondered.

She continued. "Professor, half my family are in the healing business ... Do you really think I don't know something is very wrong here?"

And Dumbledore might have started shouting at this point, if Professor Merrythought hadn't flung the door to the office open at that precise moment.

"Albus! I've been waiting for..." She paused, only just spotting Minerva as she barged into the office. "Miss McGonagall, what on earth are you doing here at this hour?"

"I ... um..." But Dumbledore spoke up before she could finish.

"She was studying ... the texts that can not leave my rooms, as I told you about earlier." He reminded his colleague of their previous discussion at the Quidditch game.

Now that Merrythought got a good look at Albus, who was doing his very best to maintain his temper and his composure, her mouth dropped open. Looking between the Deputy Headmaster and Minerva, alarm rose in the woman's expression.

"Albus! Good God, man! What have you done to yourself?" she exclaimed as she crossed the room toward him. Albus groaned in aggravation. Galatea gave him a once-over, and spying blood on his left shoulder, she touched him there, causing him to flinch.

"Are you wearing trousers?" she asked abruptly.

"Pardon?" Dumbledore said, taken aback.

"Are you wearing trousers? Under your robes?" she repeated.

"Yes." He snorted, not seeing why that mattered.

"Right then, off with the robes," Merrythought demanded.

Albus stared at his colleague for a moment in frustration but yielded, knowing the battle was lost. He was especially irritated that his student was seeing him in this state, but to have his colleague force him on the matter was more than his good nature could bear. With much contempt, he began to shed his robes.

Slowly, and only with his right hand, did he unfasten the buttons on his traveling robes. They weren't as long as his usual attire and were a rather heavy, gray wool. He had some trouble coming out of them, and Galatea helped him out of the sleeves. Minerva just stood there, unsure what to do.

"You can go now, Miss McGonagall." Dumbledore reiterated sternly.

"No, Albus, she stays," Merrythought retorted as Minerva turned toward the door. "Miss McGonagall, you are to remain here. I need your medical expertise on this." The look that Albus gave Galatea was withering, and Minerva looked down as she approached, feeling chastised and very much out of place.

Now that his heavy robes were discarded on his desk, Minerva saw that he was wearing a simple cotton tunic with long sleeves and a loosely laced, deep V-neck along with gray trousers. His chest hair was darker than the auburn curls atop his head, and she could see a good deal of bruising along his left collar bone. Professor Merrythought also saw this and gently pulled the fabric to the side, exposing his entire shoulder. It was purple and black, swollen and weeping a yellow, cloudy fluid from two large puncture marks spread about a hand's width apart.

"I'll Floo-call St. Mungo's," Merrythought said quietly, moving toward the fireplace. Albus shook his head and grabbed her arm before she passed by him.

"No, Galatea. You can't."

The older witch looked at him, head tilted, and almost laughed out loud at his gall.

"Yes, Albus, I can. And I will." She attempted to pull out of his grip, but he held firm.

"No ... Galatea, you really cannot. Ministry security measures. I simply *cannot* go to the hospital. Besides..." He faltered a bit here, looking away. "They've got their hands full right now. Our ... exercise ... was successful, but not without a great deal of damage. The hospital has several injured parties already."

Merrythought stared at Albus, and Minerva had the suspicion that her Charms teacher was trying to suss out just how much of what he said was true and how much was to placate her into doing what he wanted.

Minerva could keep her tongue no longer.

"Professor Merrythought, I do believe that is an envenomed wound. It will not heal on its own and it could kill him, depending how long the venom has been in his bloodstream, not to mention the tissue damage its already done to his shoulder. He has an infection." Here she indicated the weeping fluid over the blackened tissue. "And without treatment, that will spread." Feeling emboldened by the resolve of Professor Merrythought, Minerva relayed all this very quickly. "He *has* to see a Healer," she added, adamantly.

Now looking alarmed at her student's words, Galatea turned back to Albus, searching his face, and called her personal house-elf.

A soft crack was heard and a diminutive, female house-elf popped into the room.

"Mistress calls Gamby?"

Without taking her eyes off her male colleague, Professor Merrythought gave instruction to the elf to fetch the Headmaster and the school mediwitch. Albus barked at her again, growing more flustered, and tried to move forward, perhaps to argue his point, but he stopped short, feeling weak, and fell against Galatea, who attempted to catch him and roll him around to a chair directly behind her. She only succeeded in part, managing to push him into the chair after he fell short. Minerva helped her steady him in the seat.

Defeated, he sat down, wincing in pain.

"Albus, this is no time for your idiotic stubbornness," Galatea admonished.

"Professor!" Minerva said loudly to Merrythought, "Madam Alumno is not equipped to tend to something like this. He *needs* a proper Healer. Preferably one with venom expertise!" Minerva was growing fearful now, seeing her favorite professor deteriorate rapidly.

The office door swung open and a disheveled Headmaster Dippet, in a tawny dressing gown, and Madam Alumno, still in her hospital attire, walked into the office. It was only moments before the four faculty were embroiled in a heated argument, with three insisting that Dumbledore be admitted to hospital and Albus fighting against it.

Minerva, taking the initiative, as no one was paying much attention to her, moved toward her Head of House's fireplace, stuck her head into the low flames and called out to "MacGruder Home". With the din of argument still loud in the background, Minerva managed to get a hold of her oldest brother, Mathew, telling him to wake their mother. Once her mother poked her drowsy head into the flames, Minerva relayed the basic information and requested her assistance.

"Give me two shakes to get decent and fetch my bag, and I'll Floo into the hospital wing if it's open," shouted the haggard woman over the myriad of voices. Madam Alumno, overhearing the Floo conversation, nodded to Minerva and turned toward the door; Minerva suspected to go open the wing's Floo grate.

Merrythought and the Headmaster quieted, giving each other one more look of determination, and then acted, forcibly moving Dumbledore to his feet and steadying him.

"I can Levitate him, as that's easier on all of us, if you clear the hallway, Headmaster?" Merrythought said, though she already had her wand out, ready to proceed. Armando Dippet nodded to his professor and went to open the office door while Galatea Levitated the weakened Transfiguration professor into a horizontal state. Minerva rose from the fireplace and went to gather her things when she heard Professor Merrythought's voice calling to her from the hallway beyond.

"And you, Miss McGonagall, on my heels," she stated, not as a request.

Madam McGonagall

Chapter 9 of 9

Healer McGonagall comes to the hospital wing to tend to Professor Dumbledore.

*These characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I appreciate the opportunity to borrow them from time to time. My deepest thanks to the very generous and gracious ~~MMADfan~~ and **Squibstress** for their inspiration, advice, patience and time.*

In this semi-AU, Professor Merrythought is, at this time, the Charms instructor.

Chapter 9: Madam McGonagall

Madam McGonagall rushed out from the Floo grate in the Hospital Wing like a gale wind, passing her anxious daughter, and hurried over to where Albus Dumbledore was being settled on a hospital bed. She was a short, slightly plump woman with strawberry-blond hair streaked with silver. Despite her having been awoken from slumber, her hair was neatly coiffed atop her head and her Healer's apron starched, lying perfectly crisp over her long, navy-blue robes. She took no time for discussion, flicking her wand over the prone Transfiguration professor, drawing up various charts mid-air. Archaic runic symbols flowed like transparent scrolls as she looked through them quickly, assessing the situation.

"Well, this doesn't bode well, Albus. Playing with dragons again, I see? Was your sixth-year mishap with that Chinese Fireball not dangerous enough for you?" The Healer cast an accusatory look at the hapless Dumbledore, who groaned.

"Dragons?" Headmaster Dippet questioned, looking down at Albus, then back toward the Healer. Merrythought cast a concerned look to the Headmaster.

"Mmm, a Peruvian Vipertooth, if I'm not mistaken," Madam McGonagall explained. "Albus, I need to know exactly what happened, what you've done since you were bitten, and the amount of time that has elapsed between the bite and now." The demanding nature of her voice had everyone, save for the injured, standing at attention.

"Ministry business, madam, I can't..." Albus began and was cut off.

She shook her head in aggravation, barking at him.

"I don't need to know the details, just what happened to you after the bite. How long has it been since?" She was studying a chart on her left that hung between herself and Headmaster Dippet.

"An hour, perhaps ... an hour and fifteen minutes," he answered quietly, quickly adding, "But I did take a potion."

"How long after the bite and what color was the potion? Did you get a look at the label?"

Albus searched his memory.

"I believe it was light blue ... and as for the time ... I took it twenty minutes or so after the bite."

"Tch! Albus Dumbledore, you know as well as I that you have been grossly negligent," she scolded and turned to her daughter behind her. "Minerva, get some saline, iodine, and gauze and drain that shoulder wound," she ordered, then turned to Madam Alumno. "He's been bitten twice, once on the left shoulder as well as the left leg, and both his tunic and trousers must be removed. I also need him on a saline drip immediately."

Minerva rushed over to the first-aid cabinet, gathered the items onto a rolling tray, and began to fill a few large syringes with saline.

The Headmaster and the Charms professor stood back as a flurry of activity erupted around the injured professor, both feeling quite helpless. Madam Alumno deftly sliced through Albus' trousers, up one leg and down the other, revealing a very ugly wound just below his left knee. She then Summoned a blanket and draped it over his torso and right leg to afford him some modesty when she Vanished his trousers to the hospital laundry bin. She then cut off his tunic and added that to the heap of his destroyed clothing and hurried over to a far cabinet to ready the drip.

"Madam Mc..." Armando started, but Healer McGonagall held up her hand to silence him, still studying her floating charts. The Headmaster nodded and closed his mouth, standing quietly as the others worked.

Twenty-five minutes later, Albus lay under a myriad of charts and equipment, hooked up to several apparatuses. Madam McGonagall finally crossed the room to address the Headmaster and Professor Merrythought, and the news was not favorable.

"I will do everything in my power to see that your professor is restored, but I must warn you, significant necrotic damage was already done to both his shoulder and his leg before he ever got back to Hogwarts. Not only that, but his kidneys are shutting down due to the toxic strain of the venom, and his heart is unstable," Healer McGonagall explained. Professor Merrythought's hand flew to her mouth, her eyes wide. The Headmaster paled significantly.

"Will he live?" Dippet asked.

"I think so, Headmaster, though I can't promise his systems will survive the ordeal without damage, nor his limbs."

Both professors gasped.

"Dragon bites are no trifling matter, and Peruvians are the worst of the lot. Their venom is an ugly combination of hemotoxic and neurotoxic venom. Sepsis is at work here, and I am not sure if we can stem it in time before more damage is done. And I have no idea what effect the venom will have on his nervous system, as it's too soon to tell."

Dippet and Merrythought looked at each other with both worry and confusion.

"Perhaps you could put that in layman's terms, Madam McGonagall?" Dippet asked. McGonagall took a deep breath and rested a small hand on the Headmaster's arm, her eyes full of compassion.

"The poison is rotting him from the inside out, Headmaster. Even if I can save his life, I am unsure I can save both his arm and his leg. His heart and kidneys are working overtime to shed the venom from the body, straining both organs. His nervous system—his brain, spinal cord, and nerves—won't show their damage until we are about eight to twelve hours out from the bite."

Merrythought teared up at this, and the Healer added, "My son Marcus just started an internship with Britian's most proficient venomologist ... I will be bringing him here later to help, unless we can get Albus to St. Mungo's. I assure you, we will do everything we can."

"May I speak with him?" the Headmaster inquired.

"Of course, though his speech may be slurred due to the heavy sedation we have placed him under. I strongly urge you to convince him to accept hospital care," McGonagall answered, and the look that Dippet gave her said that was his intent, to get Albus to St. Mungo's.

Dumbledore rolled his head over to focus on the Headmaster's face as Dippet bent down over the prone professor.

"I'm sorry to bring all this trouble, Armando..." Albus started, but was cut off as Armando grasped Albus' right arm.

"Albus, please reconsider going to St. Mungo's. You're in a dire situation, and the Healer has explained that you may suffer permanent damage to your organs and may well lose a limb or two." Armando's entire face gave the impression of a street beggar, and Albus waved him to move closer, so he could whisper in his ear.

After a few moments of Albus' whispers, Dippet returned to the small group gathered to relay his response. Minerva stood rigid, focusing all her attention on the

Headmaster, hoping beyond hope that her professor finally understood the gravity of the situation and would heed her mother's diagnosis and go to a proper hospital.

Dippet sighed and shook his head.

"I'm afraid I have to agree with Albus. He can't go to hospital. This has to do with a Muggle situation in Poland." He paused, rubbing his forehead. "Madam McGonagall, we will pay you whatever you require if you would do your best for our Transfiguration professor."

Armando looked fondly at his young student, resting a hand on her upper arm and giving it a little squeeze.

"It's not every day that I appreciate a student speaking out of turn or going against my wishes. Well done, Miss McGonagall. You very well may have saved the life of your Head of House. I can't thank you" he glanced at Madam McGonagall "and your mother enough for your services. Fifty points to Gryffindor for your insight."

Minerva didn't know what to say, where to look, or what to do, so she simply stared at the floor, unable to return the Headmaster's gaze.

"Thank you, Headmaster."

"Minerva is a sharp lass. I'd have her hide if I got wind of her not stepping in when she should. 'Tis no shame stepping on toes if a life hangs in the balance," Madam McGonagall replied, glancing at the clock on the wall before returning her attention to the Headmaster.

"The next few hours will be crucial. We will need to monitor how far and how fast the swelling develops as the antivenom works, if we aren't too late already. Sadly, he took only half a dose of antivenom for a Welsh Green bite, which likely won't do any good whatsoever, and since we are only getting the correct dose of potion in him nearly an hour after the bite, well ... I can't say what the prognosis will be, but he must be monitored over the next twenty-four to thirty-six hours as the venom runs its course. I can take tonight, but I must leave by six this morning. I may be able to reschedule some of my appointments tomorrow, but in the meantime, your Mediwitch..."

Here, Madam Alumno spoke up in her broken English.

"No no, the kitchen elves have elf-pox. I needing to take them to quarantine. They needing care for five or six days."

Dippet rounded on the Mediwitch in shock, and, in an apologetic display, the Mediwitch threw her hands up in the air.

"I was coming to telling you when Galatea calling me to Dumbledore's rooms. No no, all house-elves will being bad sick if I not get them quarantine."

Dippet sighed and nodded, resigning himself to the situation.

"Headmaster, my daughter is perfectly capable to help in this situation, and I am fairly sure my son can come for a few days. He is an intern at St. Mungo's, and I do have some sway with the hospital in such matters. If you can, I'd prefer you leave your hospital Floo open for convenience."

"Of course, madam. Ah ... is there anything we need to..." Dippet looked around the sparse Hospital Wing.

"No ... I have most of the materials we will need between my private office and our apothecary. Mathew, my oldest, may also be able to assist as he is more knowledgeable with potions than I am. If you don't mind my family and I tending to our professor here, I believe we can do this."

Merrythought looked over at the Headmaster, nodding to him, then back to the Healer.

"Madam McGonagall, I believe Hogwarts is in your debt." Then she turned to Minerva. "Thank you, Miss McGonagall, for contacting your mother. I will be giving you use of my personal house-elf, Gamby. If there is anything she can do, just call her. I must warn you, however, she faints at the sight of blood."