

# Betrayal and the Art of Salvation

*by Squibstress*

A series of vignettes in which Minerva McGonagall deals with her relationship with Albus Dumbledore. Warning for infidelity.

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

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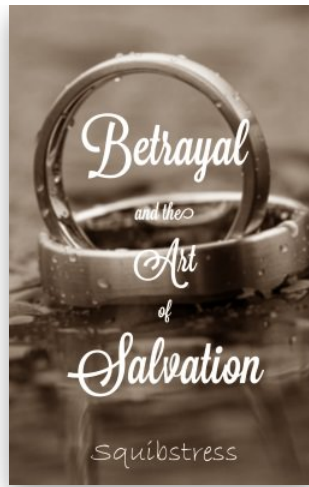
**Author's Notes:** The backwards temporal structure of this story was cribbed, I freely admit, from the late Harold Pinter's play *Betrayal* on the same topic.

Heartfelt apologies to Bryan Adams for the aspersions cast upon his song, "Please Forgive Me". This author finds it a perfectly lovely piece of contemporary music; it's just that she doesn't think Minerva would care much for it.

The other song mentioned is, of course, "Where or When", by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, from their 1937 musical *Babes in Arms*. The version referred to in this chapter is the one by Peggy Lee and the Benny Goodman sextet from 1941.

The brief dialogue between Minerva and Gilderoy in the first part of the "14 February 1993" section of this story is lifted verbatim from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Chapter 13 of the first American edition.

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*Every betrayal contains a perfect moment, a coin stamped heads or tails  
with salvation on the other side.*

~ Barbara Kingsolver, The Poisonwood Bible

**3 November 1996**

*When did a win at Quidditch turn into an excuse for an orgy?*

Minerva's heels would have clicked angrily along with her thoughts as she swept down the corridor, except she was wearing slippers, it being well after midnight.

The scene in the Gryffindor common room had been amusing, if alarming. When she stepped...unnoticed, due to the din...through the portrait-hole, she took in the sight of several couples snogging sloppily among the dancers . . . and just *where* was Cormac McLaggen's hand on Demelza Robbins, and exactly *when* had she divested herself of her shirt?

*In my day, we would never have..*Minerva started to think, but then she caught herself.

*In my day, we were doing exactly the same things.*She added disapprovingly, *But never in public.*

With a wave of her wand, the lights came back up, and the music stopped.

Screwing her features into the very portrait of outraged spinsterhood, she said, "This is unacceptable. Not only is the music far too loud for this time of night, but I am very disappointed to find that some of you appear to have forgotten yourselves entirely."

Miss Robbins hung her head and hurriedly tugged her shirt on. McLaggen, Minerva noted, just looked smug.

*Some things never change,* she sighed to herself.

"I expect this room to be tidied up...there's no reason the house-elves should have to clean up after you...and you all to be in your beds within the hour. Do I make myself clear?"

After the murmured assents, Minerva turned briskly and headed down the corridor to round up any stray couples who had (sensibly, she thought) adjourned to more private locations for their trysts.

"Mr Weasley, Miss Brown . . ."

The two teens leapt apart when they heard their Head of House's voice from the doorway.

"Might I suggest you close the door the next time you intend to engage in this kind of activity, hmm?"

"Yes, Professor. Sorry . . . " mumbled Ronald.

Minerva then gave them a look that suggested they scurry off to the common room, which they, of course, immediately did.

She continued down the corridor, intending to roust the stray celebrants from the corners of the Tower and back into the common room, if not to their beds, when she was halted by the faint sound of luxuriant sobbing.

The noise drew Minerva down the passageway as she quietly cocked an ear to each closed door. When she had located the source, she gently pushed the door open to reveal Hermione Granger, crying brokenly on a rickety chair in the disused classroom.

"Miss Granger?" she asked, stepping into the room a few paces. "Are you all right?"

"Fine, Professor," replied the girl, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. "I'm sorry. I'll get back to my dormitory now," she said, rising and heading for the door.

"Just a moment, Miss Granger." Minerva stepped toward her, conjuring a handkerchief and handing it to Hermione, who took it and blew her nose loudly.

"Thank you, Professor."

"Would your distress have anything to do with Mr Weasley and Miss Brown?" Minerva asked gently.

Hermione's eyes widened, and then filled with tears once again. She couldn't speak.

"I thought as much, " sighed Minerva.

Once Hermione had wiped her eyes and blown her nose again, she asked, "How did you know?"

"I ran into Mr Weasley and Miss Brown a few minutes ago. The rest was not hard to put together."

"You must think I'm an idiot," said Hermione miserably.

"Not at all. It hurts when we are betrayed by the people we love. Or think we do."

The child looked up at her teacher, stricken.

"I do . . . love him," Hermione said. "But he's just such a . . ."

"Git? Arse? . . . Man?"

Hermione smiled for the first time in hours. "All three. I don't even know why I love him so much . . ."

*You are a teacher. Teach.*

"Miss Granger . . . Hermione . . . you mustn't measure love by the degree to which someone is able to hurt you."

A rare look of confusion passed over Hermione Granger's puffy features.

"Just think about it," said Minerva, patting Hermione's arm. "And about how much you are willing to give and what you need to receive in return. Then decide whether or not Mr Weasley is worth your tears."

Once the portrait hole had shut behind her student, Minerva smiled to herself, a wry, sad smile.

*Indeed, some things never change.*

~oOo~

She could see from her bedroom window that the light was on in his office, indicating he had returned from wherever it was he had gone.

Popping into her feline form, she trotted silently through the castle until she came to his door, giving the password to the gargoyle, who yawned pointedly before opening to allow her passage.

*Cheeky. Like its master.*

He didn't hear her open the inner door to his office...probably because his eyes were closed and his head was lolling to one side as he snored gently.

Closing the door quietly behind her, Minerva approached Albus' chair, and moving around it, put her hands on his shoulders and began to knead them.

He sighed deeply and put his good hand up to cover hers.

"Thank you, my dear."

"You need to get more rest."

"You've been saying that for the past forty years."

"It's been true for the past forty years."

She continued rubbing his shoulders and smiled to herself when she felt him relax slightly under her ministrations.

As she rubbed, she asked, "Are you ever going to tell me what you do on these mysterious missions?"

"You know I can't."

"You mean you won't."

She didn't expect an answer to that, and she didn't get one. After a minute, she gave his shoulders a gentle pat and came around to sit on the large arm of his chair.

He winced a bit when the chair moved, jostling his charred hand.

"I'm sorry," Minerva said.

"It's quite all right," he replied.

She said, "I don't suppose you're ever going to tell me what happened to your hand, either."

"A tale for another day, perhaps, my angel."

"You still keep secrets from me, " she said, although she was smiling.

"I am sorry, Minerva..." he began, but she headed him off.

"It doesn't matter anymore, really."

And it didn't. His secrets were no longer hers.

~oOo~

## **24 December 1994**

"May I have this dance, Professor McGonagall?" the Headmaster asked. Assuming the answer would be in the affirmative, he had already taken her hand and led her onto the dance floor, where the young people were already swirling around, awkwardly but gamely, in pairs.

After the traditional waltz, the two elders retired once again to the sidelines to observe as their young charges...and some of their colleagues, Minerva noted with a shudder as she watched Hagrid trampling the hard-to-avoid toes of Madame Maxime's dress slippers...went looking for love. She and Poppy had already discussed the necessity of laying in an extra supply of Calming Draughts in anticipation of a sudden influx to the infirmary of broken-hearted girls and the occasional boy with vague complaints of sleeplessness or stomach aches in the aftermath of the Yule Ball.

Minerva thought, with uncharacteristic wistfulness, of the days in which heartache could be mended by the passage of a few weeks and the sudden realisation of an undying passion for a previously unnoticed pair of eyes.

She glanced over at Albus, deep in conversation with Igor Karkaroff, and wondered whether he had lately found a sympathetic pair of eyes in which to drown his recent cares.

*A pert pair of breasts, more likely, she mused.*

She shook off the thought and didn't revisit it again until the dance seemed to be winding down, with only a few dozen students hanging languidly off of one another on the dance floor. She had almost given in to fatigue and allowed her eyelids to flutter closed when her ears perked up at the strains of a familiar tune.

Then he was at her side, asking once again, "May I have this dance, Minerva?" This time, it was not the courtly public voice, but a familiar and seductive whisper in her ear, a voice she had once believed was reserved only for her.

"You may," she answered, and they took the floor to the astonished looks of the young couples around them, most of whom had looked up at the sudden change of musical direction, shrugged, and gone back to their swaying.

*It seems we've stood and talked like this before,*

*We looked at each other in the same way then,*

*But I can't remember where or when.*

As Peggy Lee continued to sing about familiar clothes and smiles, Minerva looked up at Albus and said, "You put Filius up to this."

"You are correct in this, as in most things, my dearest Minerva."

"Why?"

He gave her a wicked smile and leant down to whisper into her ear, "I suppose I was hoping I might...how do the children put it?... 'get lucky' this evening."

*Some things that happened for the first time*

*Seem to be happening again.*

Well, that answered her earlier question, she supposed. She snorted, causing the couples next to them to look over briefly.

"Still enjoying your state of protracted adolescence, I see," she said.

"It must be the constant exposure to all these teenaged hormones."

"I should have thought you'd be impervious to them by now."

"But not to your considerable charms."

"Oh, give over, you old fool."

He laughed, and then she did, too.

*And so it seems that we have met before,*

*And laughed before,*

*And loved before,*

*But who knows where or when?*

When the song ended, the abrupt change of music prompted Minerva to begin to pull away from him, but he held her fast by the waist.

"You are intent on giving the children something to talk about, aren't you?" she said.

"Do they talk about us?"

"You know they do. "

"And here I thought they had you and Severus shagging in every room in the castle."

"That is a terrifying thought." After a moment, she added, "Are you jealous?"

"Oh, indeed. If it is true, I may have to turn the lad into a Flobberworm."

She stiffened in his arms as she suddenly heard the refrain of the ridiculous song:

*Please forgive me, I know not what I do*

*Please forgive me, I can't stop loving you . . .*

"And did you put Filius up to this, too?"

"Not at all. This is, as far as I know, the first time I've ever heard this particular tune."

"Good. Because if I believed you'd subject me to this kind of claptrap, I'd hex you in a very sensitive spot."

"After everything I put you through, you'd hex me over a bit of music?"

"This bit of music, yes."

Nevertheless, she allowed him to continue to move her about the dance floor. In truth, she did rather enjoy dancing with him. It was as close as they'd been in years, and whatever else had happened between them, she often missed his solid physical proximity. She knew he knew it, too.

*I remember the smell of your skin,*

*I remember everything . . .*

"You're sure you didn't ask Filius to play this?" she asked.

"Quite sure. But you know Filius...ever the romantic. He still harbours hopes for us, I think."

"Why is it that when someone becomes entangled in a romantic relationship they suddenly feel the urge to pair up their friends and colleagues?"

"He wants to share his happiness, I suppose."

"Well, I'm glad he's happy with that Peasegood fellow, but he should know better in our case. He was there for the train wreck, after all."

Albus only gave a noncommittal, "Mmmm."

The wretched song finally ended, and Flitwick announced the last dance of the evening.

Minerva took her leave of the Headmaster and her other colleagues and went to do a final set of rounds before heading back to her quarters.

The dances and conversation with Albus had unsettled her more than she would have liked to admit. It was the first time in ages he had expressed any sexual interest in her, and while she hadn't exactly been pining away for him in the years since they had split up, she was still attracted to him, and it had been an embarrassingly (and frustratingly) long time since she'd taken a lover.

She was almost tempted to seek him out in his quarters, but quickly decided against it. It would set a dangerous precedent, and besides, she didn't want to arrive at his door only to find another woman's scent in the air, or worse. That was one thing she decidedly didn't miss.

As she rounded a corner, she could hear a pair of voices engaged in the most predictable gossip.

"I think that seals it. You saw them...they're off to have a shag."

It sounded like Lavender Brown.

The other voice...Miss Patil's it would be, if Minerva's guess about the first voice was correct...replied, "Oh, gross!"

"I don't think it's gross. Besides, old McGonagall seems like she could use a good shag. Maybe then she'd let up a bit with the homework. I had to skip the last Hogsmeade day to get her stupid essay on inter-whatever-it-was done."

Minerva smiled to herself. Typical teenager: even when wishing her teacher the benefits of healthy sexual activity, she made it about herself. Minerva decided to make her presence known before she could overhear any more speculation about her sex life and its effects on Ms Brown's social calendar.

"Miss Brown, Miss Patil," she said as she stepped toward the window seat the girls occupied, making them nearly jump out of their skins. "It is past time for you girls to be in bed. Off you go."

She gave no indication that she had overheard the girls' conversation, but she knew with smug satisfaction that the two would be wondering and worrying about the potential repercussions of their highly inappropriate speculations.

*Highly inappropriate, no doubt about that.*

Nevertheless, Minerva shortly found herself at the door to the Headmaster's private quarters rather than in her own in Gryffindor Tower. As Deputy, she knew the password well enough, but she knocked anyway. It was years since she felt entitled to enter his quarters unannounced, and even then, it had generally been a bad idea.

The door opened, and when the Headmaster saw who his visitor was, he broke out in a beaming smile that was charmingly ingenuous. Or perhaps that was the calculated effect. It didn't matter, anyway. This time, the only thing she wanted from him was something he was prepared to give.

Before he could say anything, she said, "It's a bit early for Hogmanay, but I thought we might enjoy a bit of auld lang syne."

He said nothing, but pulled her in the door, waving it closed.

~oOo~

"Gods, that was good," she exhaled, letting her sweat-moistened head flop back against the pillow.

"It was, wasn't it?" he said, still breathing heavily.

*He is a hundred and thirteen,* she reminded herself.

Once his breathing had slowed to a less alarming pace, she said, "Nice to know we haven't forgotten how."

"Mmm. It's like riding a broom . . . you never forget some things."

"I sincerely hope, Albus Dumbledore, that you did not just compare me with a broomstick."

"Ah. A poor choice of metaphor...my apologies."

Later, when she was safely and properly back in her own quarters, she would think about just how good it had been. Making love with him had felt like coming home. It was a nice change from her more recent lovers. The sex with them been always been good enough in its way, but in the last few years, it had seemed like too much effort for too little payoff, given the infrequency with which she could be with anyone. They never seemed to have time to become truly intimate...to know every inch of one another's bodies, their likes and dislikes, their kinks. She and Albus already knew one another like a pair of well-loved and much-read books; each knew precisely what places to touch, and how hard, and the things that would make the other scream with pleasure delayed or fulfilled.

He pulled her into the crook of his arm, and they lay, not speaking, for a few minutes, as her hand moved in small circles over his chest and his stroked her arm languidly.

She brushed his beard aside to continue her meanderings about his chest. "Your beard is so much longer than the last time we did this. I was afraid I was pulling it."

"It was actually rather arousing, feeling you pulling on my beard while you rode my cock."

"I'm glad you thought so," she answered with a chuckle. "Although I daresay you'll have quite a time untangling it."

"That, my dear, is what charms are for."

She couldn't help asking, "Tell me, is that why you've grown it so long...to enhance your erotic adventures?"

It was less like picking at a scab than running one's fingers lovingly over an old scar.

He answered her in the old, familiar way: by kissing her mouth and moving his hands teasingly across her breasts.

Now, it was just fine with her.

~oOo~

12 February 1993

"I don't think there'll be any more trouble, Minerva," Lockhart was saying.

Good gods, had he just *winked* at her?

Minerva said nothing and turned back to the line of Gryffindors she was attempting to shepherd back into her classroom, which had just been cleared of the smoke and odour that had resulted from one of the youngest Mr Weasley's wand-related mishaps.

But Lockhart didn't give up. He moved next to her again, saying, "I think the Chamber has been locked for good this time. The culprit must have known it was only a matter of time before I caught him."

Still no reaction from Minerva. Maybe if she didn't respond, he'd take the hint and bugger off.

But no. The insufferable git stepped directly in front of her as she attempted to follow the last student back into the classroom, saying, "Rather sensible to stop now, before I came down hard on him."

Now he had gone too far. The extra inflection on the word "hard" was impossible to miss, especially when coupled with the second wink he had given her in the space of five minutes.

According to Poppy, Lockhart had already tried and failed to seduce Rolanda, declaring loudly, "Well, that explains it," upon being discreetly informed that the flying instructor preferred women, as if that were the only possible explanation for her resisting his charms. Apparently, the git had focused on a new target, as he was now asking pointed questions about the Transfiguration mistress, Poppy had told her grimly.

Minerva now fixed him with her most withering stare, and he stepped hurriedly out of her path. But he wasn't quite done.

"You know, what the school needs now is a morale-booster. Wash away the memories of last term! I won't say any more just now, but I think I know just the thing . . ."

His plans became nauseatingly apparent later that day in the staff room.

"Decorations, singing-valentines . . . it will be brilliant!" exclaimed the unbearable popinjay.

Nobody replied, and he turned his attentions to the Deputy Headmistress. "Come now, Minerva . . . surely you have many admirers who would be thrilled at the opportunity to express their devotion."

"Hardly," she sniffed, hoping he would take her not looking up from her book as a sign that she was less than interested in this conversation.

"Really, Minerva? Well, I must say, that surprises me," he said, moving over to sit on the arm of the settee on which she was seated.

Several pairs of eyes looked up to watch the spectacle unfold.

"Or is there, perhaps, someone special you've had your eye on? Someone who could use a little . . . nudge in the right direction?"

This time, Minerva looked up. "Now you mention it, there is someone I'd dearly love *tonudge* in a particular direction."

The smirk on Severus' face was just too much. She could not look at him.

"Well, well, well," said Lockhart, oblivious, as usual, to the subtext. "Perhaps I can help you with that. Compose a few verses for a secret valentine?" He emphasised his idiotic point by placing one of his meaty hands over one of her small ones. When she shook it off, the arse took another tack.

"But you must confide in me...who is he? Can I guess? Could it be . . . our esteemed Headmaster?"

The utterly confused look that blossomed on his face when most of the staff room burst out laughing was almost worth the price of admission.

Minerva closed her book, got up, and said, "If you'll excuse me, I think I feel the need to have another wash." She strode quickly across the floor, not daring to look at anyone's face for fear of doubling over with laughter, and went through the door.

She did not, however, think she could bear to miss Lockhart utterly putting his foot in it...not to mention whatever Severus would say...so she quickly transformed into her feline form and slipped back in the door unnoticed to crouch behind the tea table.

"I'm happy to provide such amusement, friends, but can someone please tell me what the joke is?" Lockhart was saying.

"The joke, you *arse*," said Severus, "is that you have just suggested to our Deputy Headmistress that she send a secret valentine to her ex-husband."

"What . . . you mean . . . Minerva and the Headmaster . . . ?"

"Were married, yes," said Pomona Sprout.

"But they aren't any longer . . ." Lockhart continued.

"That is usually what is meant by 'ex-husband'," said Severus.

"I had no idea . . ." said Lockhart.

"Understatement of the century," Minerva heard Filius mutter.

"How very interesting," the dolt continued. "How long..."

He was interrupted by a bass voice from the doorway. "Thirty-four years this Valentine's Day. That is, it would be, if Minerva hadn't been so wise as to divorce me after nineteen of them."

Everyone turned to see Dumbledore standing in the door.

"Oh. Yes. Quite," stammered Lockhart, paling.

Stepping into the room, Dumbledore said, "I have reviewed your proposal for some St Valentine's Day festivities, Gilderoy, and find them acceptable. I'll leave it to you to arrange them, then, shall I?"

"Um . . . yes . . . I . . . thank you, Headmaster. I'll . . . I'll just go see to them," said Lockhart, fleeing the room as fast as his legs could carry him.

Dumbledore moved back to the door and looked out. Turning back he said, "Minerva, my dear, I believe it is now safe for you to transform."

The tabby cat padded out from behind the tea table and changed back into Minerva with a pop. "Albus, you cannot mean you're going to allow that . . . that . . . *top* to carry out his plans for Valentine's Day?"

"Certainly, my dear. Why ever shouldn't I?"

"It's . . . it's . . ."

"Obscene?" offered Severus.

"I was going to say 'unseemly'," Minerva said, shooting Severus an amused look.

"Oh, I think it's fairly harmless," replied Dumbledore. "It will amuse the students, and besides, it will keep our resident celebrity occupied for the next few days, at least."

Once the other staff had gone their separate ways, and Minerva had finished importuning Albus about various small budget crises, he took her hand, asking, "Will you be offended if I send you one of Lockhart's singing valentines?"

"Only if you're the one doing the singing," she replied. "I hope you don't expect one from me."

"Minerva, if you were to send me a valentine, I think I would die of shock and delight."

"Don't tempt me, Albus. Don't tempt me."

He laughed, lifted her hand and kissed it, and they left the staff room together, and then took their separate paths to their respective quarters.

~oOo~

## 12 June 1978

Approaching the entry to the Headmaster's office, Minerva gave the password and slipped past the stone gargoyle as soon as the aperture was large enough to allow her passage. She took the stairs two at a time and blasted the mahogany door open with a flick of her wand, striding through it to stand, hands on her hips, staring at the room.

Replacing her wand in its pocket, she moved to the nearest bookcase and swept her arm across it, sending the various mementos and doodads crashing to the floor. She repeated the procedure with several other shelves and finally tipped the now-empty bookcase over on top of the heap of detritus.

She moved about the room, alternately sweeping items to the floor and hurling them to shatter against the walls of his office. The Heads' portraits fled for the safety of other paintings.

In her final paroxysm of fury, she pushed against the glass shelving unit that held the phials of the memories he had stored for later examination. It didn't budge, so she hurled her full weight...all seven stone of it...against the shelf, glad of the burst of pain the impact produced in her shoulder; glad to have a physical sensation to compete with the agony of her other hurts. When the shelf still wouldn't budge, she withdrew her wand, pointed it at the offending item, and sent it hurtling against the wall, where it shattered and crumpled into a defeated heap.

Panting now, she stood back and surveyed her work.

It would do for a start.

She was about to leave when she espied the heavy stone Pensieve in the corner. Wiping her sleeve across her perspiring face, she approached it, thought for a moment, and then used her wand to withdraw a long, silvery strand of memory from her head and deposited it into the Pensieve. She then backed away from it, barely hearing the crunch of the debris under her feet for the coursing of her blood in her temples.

She backed through the open door, and then turned and fled, the long tendrils of hair that had escaped her bun flying about her face like the Gorgon's snakes.

~oOo~

It was late...after dark...when she heard the door to her quarters creak open. She opened her eyes...she must have dozed off...and saw him silhouetted in the doorway. He didn't step farther into the room, and she didn't speak a word, either in greeting or rebuke.

He finally took a step inside and waved the door closed behind him.

"Minerva," he said.

"No."

"What?"

"You don't get to be kind."

Moving farther into her sitting room, he asked, "What can I say?"

"Nothing you haven't already said."

"If I had known you were coming, I never would have . . . exposed you to that."

She gave a bitter laugh. "Oh, Albus. Only you could be concerned that fucking another woman would offend my *sensibilities*."

"You're hurt."

"Fifty points to Gryffindor, Mr Dumbledore. Although you'll forgive Mrs Dumbledore if she doesn't rejoice that we are now in the running for the House Cup."

"It meant nothing."

*Sweet Nimue, will he never tire of speaking in clichés? Even tame?*

"It never does, to you."

"Tell me what you want."

"What I *want* is no longer possible."

He sighed and went to the sideboard, poured two tumblers of Scotch, and silently handed one to her, which she accepted without comment.

He stood opposite where she was perched on the settee. He didn't attempt to sit down. After taking a sip of his drink, he asked, "Would it help if I told you I have no idea

why I do it?"

"No. And as an excuse for infidelity, it leaves something to be desired."

"Perhaps if you would accompany me to these things, I wouldn't be..."

"Damn it, Albus, you will not make this my fault! I'm your wife, not your nanny!" she exploded.

He hurled back, "Sometimes, Minerva, it is hard to tell the difference."

"That's not fair."

"Fuck fair."

"No, that's your department."

"Christ, Minerva, can you stop being clever long enough to talk to me? Gods, if I had a Sickle for every time you tossed off *don mot* in order to avoid dealing with the issue, I'd be richer than the Blacks."

*So it's to be the "best defence" gambit tonight, is it?*

She spoke very quietly. "I am dealing with the issue."

"By destroying my office?"

"That was only a fringe benefit."

She was shocked when he hurled his glass at the wall.

He then hung his head and buried his face in his hands.

When he regained his composure, he said, "I'm sorry, Minerva. For the glass . . . for everything. There is nothing more I can say. You've heard all my apologies, all my excuses before. You have every right to be angry, and to strike out at me in any way you can."

She moved to put her glass down and winced at the sudden pain in her shoulder.

"You're injured," he said, and moved to where she sat.

"It's nothing, just a bruise," she said.

"Let me..." he said, reaching toward the injured shoulder.

She brushed him away angrily. *"Don't touch me!"*

She thought: *We're going to go through the entire sordid play, aren't we?*

His face contorted with his pain. It was genuine enough, she thought, and was surprised that seeing it actually hurt. She wished she could enjoy it, just a little.

"Minerva . . . oh, Minerva . . . I . . ."

She shook her head violently and put her hand up to stop him, and, closing her eyes to block out the sight of him, took several deep, steadying breaths. She had promised herself she wouldn't cry. Not this time.

When she felt in control of her voice again, she spoke.

"It has to end."

"It already has. I told her I would not be seeing her again."

"I meant us. *We* have to end."

During the long silence that followed, Minerva felt the planet shift underneath her and wondered if he was experiencing the same feeling of disarticulation that seemed be pulling at her very bones.

"You don't mean that. You cannot."

"I do." The irony of those words spoken in this context was lost on neither of them.

The part of her that had maintained a certain detachment over the years as a form of self-preservation observed the twitching and quavering of his moustache with clinical interest. How would he try to play it this time?

"Minerva, tell me what to say . . . what to do . . . I'll do anything . . ."

*Oh. "Passing the Knut".*

It was either a testament to his skill or her enthrallment that it very nearly worked.

"I don't think so," she said quietly. "I'm leaving you."

*There.*

*That wasn't so bad, was it, Miss McGonagall?*

*Why, yes . . . yes it was.*

"Minerva..."

She rose, moved to the small desk, and opened a drawer, speaking over him a bit louder than was actually necessary. "I've withdrawn two hundred Galleons from our joint Gringotts account and had them stop the automatic deposit of my wages."

She withdrew a rolled piece of parchment from the drawer and held it out to him. "This is my letter requesting a sabbatical for the autumn term. You'll see I've waived any request for wages during that time, given the short notice for finding a suitable replacement."



Pulling out another piece of parchment, she continued, "I've taken the liberty of making a few suggestions as to my replacement here. You are, of course, free to dismiss my recommendations. You have copies of my standard lesson plans. I had planned to revise them over the summer as usual, but I think I shan't this year, unless you insist. I suggest you ask Filius if he would fill in as Deputy during my absence, but whatever you decide will be fine with me. I won't object if you choose to offer him the position permanently, regardless of whether I ultimately decide to return to Hogwarts, but in all honesty, I would be surprised if he accepted.

"I would appreciate it if you would recommend to the board that they approve my request. I don't especially want to make any irrevocable decisions regarding my position here right now, but if my request is denied, you should know that I intend to tender my resignation. I would like to take the next few months to decide if I can continue working here with you. I think you should consider the same."

She pulled one more sheet of parchment from the drawer. "I have retained a personal solicitor...her name and contact information are here...please owl her with the name of yours once you have settled on one so we can begin initiating divorce proceedings."

He hadn't spoken during her oratory, and he seemed incapable of speech now. She held out the sheets of parchment...the ones that summed up in dry pulp and stark, black ink their future as employer and employee rather than man and woman...but he simply stared at them as if they were Venomous Tentacula spines.

Slowly she lowered her hand and turned to place the parchment on her desk.

Finally, he spoke: "All right, Minerva. If that's what you want . . ."

"It isn't what I want, but it's what I intend, nevertheless."

He nodded.

She continued, "I'll take only the necessities tonight, but I'll return within the week to clear out these rooms."

"You're leaving tonight?"

"Yes. I see no reason to draw this out any longer than necessary."

"Where will you go? To the cottage?"

She gave an involuntary shudder at the idea of going to the small holiday cottage on the island of Formentera they had bought ten years previously, back when betrayal was an abstract notion that only applied to other people.

"No. I'll spend a few days with my brother until I can organise something more permanent. I'll owl you when I know where." After a moment, she added, "Please don't try to contact me."

He just stood there, wearing the look of a man who had just lost a wager larger than he could afford.

"If there's nothing else, I should like to get on with things," she said.

"Yes . . . no, there's nothing." Before he stepped through the doorway, he said, "I am sorry, Minerva."

"I know."

The he was gone.

*I'll just be getting on with things. There's nothing else.*

She went to her bedroom to continue her packing.

~oOo~

#### **14 August 1971**

Minerva had just emerged from the steam-filled bathroom when the knock came on the door.

Pulling her dressing gown tightly around her, she peered out the peephole. She had thought it might be Griselda, looking for a bit of company with whom to wander about the streets of Paris, poking through dusty Muggle antique stalls.

But no, there was no one.

She Summoned her wand...just in case; one could never be too careful, peacetime or not...and cautiously opened the door a crack. Seeing no one, she was about to close it when a sound came from the direction of her feet.

An elf wearing a neat, sky-blue tea towel bearing the crest of the Hôtel Morgan le Fay Paris was holding a small, white box tied with a tartan ribbon.

"De livraison pour le Professeur McGonagall."

"Merci," said Minerva, bending down to take the box.

The elf gave a small bow, then popped out.

Minerva took the box into her room, placed it on the bed, and sat down, opening the small card that was attached. She smiled indulgently at the bright purple ink as she read:

*Hoping to remind you of the beauty of your homeland, that you might return all the sooner. The world is grey and colourless without you.*

*Missing you terribly,*

*Albus*

Pulling on the ribbon to open the box, Minerva was startled when several long, grey stalks popped up from inside and began to grow longer, then delighted when they eventually popped open to reveal six large, umbrella-shaped blossoms. The blossoms were also grey at first, but they gradually began to change to brilliant hues of orange, pink, and yellow.

*Nice bit of magic, that,* she thought with admiration. Then: *Pomona will have his head if he got these out of her greenhouse*

She scooped up the flowers, took them into the bathroom, and Transfigured a vase from a drinking glass, and filled it with water and settled the blossoms into it.

Looking at the flowers as she continued getting dressed, she was gripped by a wave of affection and longing for her husband.

The conference didn't end until Sunday afternoon, but surely it wouldn't be the end of the world if she skipped the final day of symposia, just this once. She had already given her talks and heard all the ones that were apt to be especially interesting. And Griselda could certainly manage without her for an afternoon; it wasn't as if she didn't know anyone else here, and the fact that her French wasn't as good as Minerva's wouldn't be a problem unless there were an issue with the hotel bill, in which case Griselda was perfectly capable of roping another English-speaking witch or wizard into helping her out. Besides, the formidable old witch would have no problem having any problems addressed chop-chop, language barrier or no.

By the time she had slipped on her shoes, Minerva had made up her mind.

She quickly packed her few things and went down the hall to knock at Griselda's room. When nobody answered, she slipped the note she had dashed off under the door. She then went to the small lobby and settled her bill.

*Six Galleons and twelve Sickles!* she thought. *It's criminal how they jack up the prices during a conference.*

But she paid it with a smile and was off...Paris to Le Havre, show one's trans-channel Apparition licence at the checkpoint, then Le Havre to Portsmouth, show one's Magical British Passport, then, after the nausea wears off, Portsmouth to Newcastle, and Newcastle to home. To home and to Albus.

An hour after leaving Paris, Minerva was standing outside the gates to Hogwarts. The late summer sun was just beginning to duck down behind the Astronomy Tower as she hurried up the path to the castle, her charmed valise floating dutifully along behind her. She was glad she met none of the few souls who remained in the castle over the summer holiday on the way; she wanted to surprise her husband with her early return.

She went to her quarters to drop her things off and to have a quick freshen-up before going to find him.

She checked his office first; not finding him there, she mounted the spiral staircase that led to his private quarters. She gave the password to the portrait that guarded this entrance to his rooms, and slipped in. He wasn't in the sitting room, nor was he in the small study in the alcove just off it.

The bedroom, perhaps?

*All the better,* she thought with a wicked grin.

She crossed the sitting room quietly and was reaching for the knob to his bedroom door when she was stopped short by the sound of voices from within.

The low rumble was definitely Albus, but there was another voice, one she couldn't quite make out.

*A house-elf? But not Heflin.*

She crept closer and listened for another moment.

She heard the voice give a quick laugh, and that was when she knew it was a woman.

A woman.

In Albus' bedroom.

*There's a logical and innocent explanation for this,* she told herself, but even at that first moment of recognition and denial, she didn't believe it.

She didn't believe it because she knew with sudden clarity that it all made perfect, logical, terrible sense. His late evenings at the Ministry, when he couldn't be reached; the little gifts "for no reason"; the pecks on the cheek at inappropriate moments; the increased frequency of their lovemaking combined with a definite reduction in quality...they all led to this conclusion. This utterly banal and impossible conclusion.

She backed away from the door and allowed herself to see the other evidence for the first time. There was a wine bottle on the table by the fireplace, flanked by two glasses, one still partly full. There was what appeared to be a yellow silk wrap hanging partially over the back of the settee, and a pair of dainty women's shoes lay strewn haphazardly at the foot.

*Betrayed. I've been betrayed.*

She hated how overly dramatic the word sounded in her head, but it was the only one that seemed adequate.

By the time she got back to her own quarters, she was numb.

When she saw him coming through her door the following afternoon with a broad, beaming smile on his face and a bottle of Hogwarts' best mead in his hand, she suddenly knew she would say nothing, and nearly fainted with relief.

She let him take her in his arms and kiss her. Later, when they went to bed, she claimed a headache brought on by Apparition. She declined his offer to rub her head. If it puzzled him, he didn't say.

Over the days that followed, the numbness gradually wore off, to be replaced by the predictable pain and anger that was the stock-in-trade of the woman wronged. Curiously...to her rational self...those feelings soon gave way to self-doubt and self-recrimination, as the question of *why* began to overshadow the *what*.

She kept telling herself that she would confront him...make him admit it to her, prove that she wasn't crazy or paranoid, or any of the other adjectives that tramped through her head late at night...but as the days wore on, and the beginning of the autumn term neared, she simply let the matter fade away. With the beginning of the school year, he wouldn't have the opportunity to disappear to London for a night, nor would she be away nearly as often as she had over that busy summer.

It was a lapse, she told herself. It wouldn't happen again. And if it did . . . well, then she would confront him. A single slip was one thing, but she was not a woman to tolerate a philandering husband.

For one thing, it was a cliché she had always hated.

~oOo~

**14 February 1959**

"Put me down!" Minerva commanded her new husband, laughing in spite of herself.

"Certainly not; we're going to do this properly," Albus replied, "and it's traditional for the groom to carry his bride over the threshold."

"Somebody will see us!"

He put her down, drew his wand, waved it in an arc, and replaced it in his pocket. "There, Madam Professor. I've cast a Disillusionment Charm. Your reputation is safe." With that, he scooped her up in his arms again, gave the password to his quarters, and carried her inside.

"All right, now you've done the thing properly. You can put me down."

He let her down, but didn't let her go. She pulled his head down to her and kissed him deeply.

They stood snogging for a few minutes, her hands on his chest, while his crept down to rest on her buttocks, pulling her close up against him.

She rubbed herself against his erection, moaning into his mouth.

"Mmm. As lovely as you are in that dress, I must say I can't wait to get you out of it," he said, drawing her across the floor.

"My sentiments, exactly, darling," she said as they walked into his bedroom. "I thought we'd never get out of that register office. Why I let you talk me into getting married on St Valentine's Day along with every other magical couple in Britain, I'll never know."

"It was a bit crowded," he admitted. "But Reggie tells me it's even worse on Samhain. And I thought we found some rather pleasant ways to pass the time," he added.

"Thanks to your prowess with Disillusionment Charms," she said with a grin. "The look on Reggie the Registrar's face when we popped out in front of his desk was priceless. Tell me, was he surprised you were getting married at all, or was it *whom* you were marrying that was such a shock?"

"Both, I expect," he said, kissing her neck.

She unzipped her dress and let it fall to the floor, and there was no more talk for a time.

A while later, when they were lying sleepily in one another's arms in the middle of the enormous four-poster bed that dominated the Headmaster's bedroom, Albus said, "I almost forgot to tell you: Filius has arranged a little soirée in our honour this evening after curfew."

"Oh, no," she sighed.

"He means well, my love."

"Oh, I know he does, and he's very dear; I shouldn't resent it. But I was sort of hoping to have you to myself for the evening."

"And so you shall," he said, moving his hand to circle her breast. "We'll put in the necessary appearance then take an early leave. I'm sure none of the staff will begrudge us that," he said, moving his mouth to where his hand had been moments before.

~oOo~

"To Minerva and Albus," Filius said, raising his glass, prompting the rest of the small group gathered in the staff room to do the same.

"Thank you all," said Albus, his arm around Minerva's shoulders. "And thanks especially for minding the store to allow us the day off."

"Yes, and don't you two *dare* show up for breakfast tomorrow, either," said Poppy, with an annoying wink.

"And now," said Filius, "I believe it's customary to allow the bride and groom the first dance of the evening." He pointed his wand at a strange-looking contraption with what looked for all the world like an Erumpent horn attached at the top, and music began to fill the air.

*It seems we've stood and talked like this before,*

*We looked at each other in the same way then,*

*But I can't remember where or when.*

As they danced, Minerva forgot the embarrassment and annoyance all the attention had caused. She allowed herself to get lost in the pleasant sensation of moving about the floor in his arms.

When the song ended, however, her embarrassment returned twofold when the couple was assailed with cries of "kiss her!" which Albus promptly did, and soundly. She subsequently endured dances with Horace Slughorn, Silvanus Kettleburn, Apollyon Pringle, Hagrid, and even Cuthbert Binns (a discomfiting experience, if ever there was one), before Albus stepped in.

"I think that's enough, gentlemen. You're going to tire my bride out before I even get a chance to be alone with her," he said, prompting Minerva to give him the kind of look that generally sent her students running for shelter.

When they had gotten back to his quarters, Minerva said, "Well that was a painful, if instructive lesson on just how far we haven't come in reconciling our traditions with modern ideas about marriage and partnership."

Albus looked at her with surprise and asked, "How so?"

"It's just that I felt rather like a prize Jobberknoll, being passed from hand to hand before finally being claimed by my husband."

"I'm sorry, my love, if I made you feel like a bit of chattel. It wasn't intentional."

"I know, darling," she said, crossing to him and putting her arms around his neck. "It wasn't that bad; you know how I get when people fuss over me. And ~~it~~ was nice to dance with you."

"But I am sorry."

"You are forgiven," she said, kissing his mouth quickly.

He moved her backwards towards the bed, and she said, "Just don't do it again."

"No, Professor," he murmured, kneeling and pressing his lips to her belly. "Never again."

~FIN~