

Heart's Desire

by Squibstress

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Includes Minerva/Dougal, Minerva/Amelia, Minerva/Elphinstone

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Notes: *Written for the 2012 [Dysfuncentine](#) fest on LiveJournal. Prompt: "Life contains but two tragedies. One is not to get your heart's desire; the other is to get it." ~ George Bernard Shaw*

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Prologue

When Minerva McGonagall was five, the only thing in the world she wanted was a toy broom.

She had been allowed to ride on one belonging to her Ross cousins when she and her mother had gone to visit her mother's family the previous Christmas at Loch Alsh, and it had had her in its dizzying grip ever since.

When she asked for one for Christmas, Minerva's father pressed his lips into a thin line that Minerva's students would have recognised and that Minerva knew meant she had disappointed him.

"I can think of more appropriate ways to celebrate the birth of our Saviour," said Father.

She knew he didn't approve of magic. He didn't approve of a lot of things, and young Minerva tried to take care always to be among the things of which her father *did* approve, so she said no more about the broom.

But her dreams were filled with images of Little Silver Arrows and Cleansweep Juniors, and her waking hours were filled with hopeless longing.

When Minerva was seven, she received a gift from her mother. She opened the package, carefully removing the string from the wrapping, coiling it neatly into a ball and gingerly unfolding the gilded paper...her father would have disapproved of waste...with a trembling excitement, not daring to hope . . .

She saw the look her father gave her mother, and then saw him soften as Isobel stared him down. Isobel McGonagall didn't often defy her husband, but when she did, he usually backed down, and it was always in the back of Minerva's mind that her father was just a wee bit afraid of her mother...afraid she would decide he wasn't worth the sacrifice and scoop up her three magical bairns and fly away to rejoin the wizarding world. Sometimes...just sometimes, mind you...young Minerva wished it would happen.

Just after the New Year, Minerva broke her arm. She was riding her Shooting Starlet in the barn that sat between the manse and the kirk, pushing off and taking the broom as high as it would go (five feet), then zooming around the empty barn at the astonishing speed of three miles per hour. Truth be told, Minerva was getting a little tired of her broom. In the four months since she had first possessed it, she had exhausted its repertoire of tricks...hovering and zooming...and come January, more days than not, the Shooting Starlet lay untouched in a corner of Minerva's tiny bedroom while Minerva read a book or played a game of plainy-clappy against the barn wall. She'd also taken to playing with a boy from the parish, enamoured of his bools, several of which she had handily won from him and that he'd been trying to reclaim ever since.

Minerva was hovering over the ground...not the soft hay in the far corners...when her brother Malcolm, aged five, grabbed hold of the tail, toppling Minerva unceremoniously to the ground. He ran off the moment he saw how white her face had got, and Minerva was left alone, wailing and shivering with shock, until Dougal happened by, having finished his chores early for once, looking for the chance to win back his favourite pearlie taw. He heard Minerva's cries, and seeing the strange way her arm bent where it should not, ran for the kirk where the Reverend and Mrs McGonagall (who played the organ) were overseeing choir practice.

As Robert McGonagall held his howling child while Dr McKay set the arm, he said, "Lat it be a lesson tae ye, Minerva. Ayeweys be careful whit ye wish for, acause ye juist nicht get it."

Act I

"Gryffindor!" the Sorting Hat cried after an eternity.

Minerva heard someone shout, "Hatstall!" as she hopped off the stool, and she shot a panicked look at Professor Dumbledore, who reassured her with a warm smile. As she took her seat at the Gryffindor table, she made a surreptitious glance at the girl she thought had shouted. She was at the Ravenclaw table, surrounded by a group of other girls. She had a wide face under her jauntily-angled hat, and she was talking animatedly with her companions as Professor Dumbledore called "Montague, Claude" to come forward to be sorted. The Ravenclaw girl caught Minerva looking and flashed her a brilliant grin. Minerva quickly looked away.

~~oOo~~

"Nice game, McGonagall." Minerva looked up, surprised, into the flushed and freckled face of the Ravenclaw Keeper.

She steadied herself with a breath and tried to hide her embarrassment by focussing on shoving her gloves into her locker. "Thanks, Amelia," she mumbled.

"You almost had us," said the other girl.

Minerva was acutely uncomfortable. She had thought she was alone in the locker room, having waited after the game to talk with Professor Dumbledore about beginning her Animagus studies before returning to the locker room to change.

Had Amelia been waiting for her?

Amelia didn't seem to notice Minerva's discomfort...or she simply ignored it...saying, "You would've had us, too, if Prewett weren't so bloody committed to his daft playbook. You know, you should be Gryffindor captain, Minerva. You've got more brains in your left tit than Gareth Prewett has in his whole body."

This time she had to have noticed Minerva's blush, which started on the bare skin of her chest and quickly moved all the way up to tint her cheeks. Amelia's almond-shaped eyes sparkled with...what? Derision? Excitement? Minerva quickly dismissed this last and decided to assume it was the former.

"Hardly," she said coolly.

"And to think, we could have had you," remarked Amelia. "Bloody hat."

Minerva must have looked surprised, because Amelia said, "Hatstall, right? Let me guess: Ravenclaw-Gryffindor?"

All at once it dawned on Minerva what that epithet had meant. The word had lurked somewhere in her subconscious for five years during which she had assumed that "hatstall" meant something derogatory, probably about her appearance. How could she have been so thick?

"Yes. How did you know?" she asked.

"Simple deduction. You're far too smart for Hufflepuff, and the hat never stalls between Gryffindor and Slytherin, so it had to be Ravenclaw."

Minerva frowned. "There are plenty of smart Hufflepuffs," she said, pulling on her blouse and buttoning it quickly.

"If you say so," said Amelia, shrugging. "I was a hatstall, too," she declared after a moment. "Ravenclaw-Slytherin. Not as long as you, though."

"Oh," said Minerva, cursing herself for her inarticulateness, but unsure of what else to say

"Anyway, I just wanted you to know I thought you played really well," said Amelia.

"Thanks."

Amelia said, "Listen, if you ever want to toss the Quaffle around, I'd be game. Just let me know, and I can book the pitch. Benefit of being captain, and all."

"Thanks," said Minerva again.

"Well. Ta, Minerva."

Minerva gave a small smile and nod of her head. As she watched Amelia Bones striding out of the locker room, a queer feeling settled in the pit of her belly.

~~oOo~~

Minerva McGonagall became engaged to Dougal McGregor one month after her graduation from Hogwarts.

She knew why he'd asked her. He was afraid she might be up the duff after that last time in the hayloft of his father's barn. It was the third time she'd let Dougal love her, and she'd asked him to dispense with the sheath because she thought it might hurt less. It did feel better, although it was still nowhere near the bliss Augusta had described when she had finally slept with Frank Longbottom.

A week later, they were walking hand in hand through one of his father's fields...en route to the barn...when Dougal suddenly dropped to one knee.

"Marry me, Minerva," he said.

She opened her mouth to say something but realised she didn't know what, and he quickly stood, grasping both her hands.

"Everyone expects it. And . . . and I love you. And since things have gone . . . like they've gone . . . it might be just as well not to wait, don't you think?"

Minerva asked him to let her think about it, and he kissed her and said, "Of course," and they were silent until they got to the barn.

That time, when she lay under him on the blanket they had tossed over the hay, she felt something of what Augusta had described, and when it was over, she had a feeling of warmth and belonging, and tremendous affection for the boy lying beside her, snoring gently. It was a feeling she'd craved for so long, it seemed; she had always been the outsider...the only girl in her family, the one who had forced her mother to tell her father about their magic. Then at school, she hadn't been popular. She was too serious, too swotty, and too uncomfortable with herself to really fit in. Being good at Quidditch had helped some, but she'd only made two real friends: Augusta Bagnold and Pomona Sprout. Pomona had graduated five years earlier, and although they had written one another loyally and met up for the occasional tea on Hogsmeade days, she was now she was off somewhere in Asia finishing her apprenticeship. Augusta was engaged to marry Frank at the end of the summer and would be taking an extended honeymoon on the Continent.

Dougal was her only friend left...the only one at hand, anyway...and the idea of being alone in London was suddenly as terrifying as it had been exciting when she had first received the job offer from the DMLE. If she married Dougal, she could stay in Caithness, near her family. She would be his partner and helpmeet, and eventually, the mistress of the McGregor farm. They would have children...maybe three, like her mother and father...and she would be a proper farmer's wife, fixing Dougal's breakfast, his tea, then his supper when he came home from the fields or the market. She would tell him how her day had gone, which child needed a switching, which ailing neighbour she had ministered to, and he'd tell her which farmer he suspected of poaching their sheep. At night, she would lie in their bed, and he would put his arms around her, and she would belong to someone.

And when their children started showing signs of magic, she would tell him, finally, of what she was and what she could do, and maybe he would be happy; maybe he'd see, as her father had not, that her special talents could be put to good, to morally upstanding use.

Her marrying Dougal would make her father happy. He didn't want her to go to London; he hadn't said as much, but she knew it just as she had known that seeing her transform into a cat would have put him in deepest doubt about the state of her soul, even if he never said a word about it. London, being, as it was, the big city with all its temptations and South to boot, might have been Babylon by Robert McGonagall's reckoning. Or Gomorrah. So when Minerva had received the letter from Elphinstone Urquart offering her a position in his department in the Ministry, Minerva's father's lips had straightened into that familiar thin line, that *cordon sanitaire* that prevented any hurtful words from passing from them, but that signalled as brightly as a semaphore the minister's disapproval. He had said nary a word, for or against, but Minerva didn't need to ask to know that this was a test, possibly handed down by her father's God, and its outcome was as preordained as the disposition of her soul. Minerva just didn't know the right answer. She had asked her mother later for advice, and Isobel had responded that Minerva should not mind her father's attitude, that she should follow her heart.

Easier said than done, Minerva had thought. To go to London and work for the Ministry of Magic would be to break forever with her father's way of life, to place herself irretrievably beyond his approval, if not his love. Once she had decided to accept Mr Urquart's offer, the die was cast, and she felt her father's disappointment settle over her like a shroud. Her decision to allow Dougal McGregor to follow his desires (and possibly hers) to their inevitable conclusion had been a natural consequence of that decision. The familiar maxim *in for a penny, in for a pound* had superseded *enough is as good as a feast*, at least temporarily.

Except now, this offer of marriage. Was this her father's God's way of showing her salvation by His grace? Another chance to accept it?

Minerva bent to kiss Dougal's slightly parted lips. When he opened his eyes in surprise, she said, "Yes. I'll marry you."

The engagement lasted thirteen hours and twenty minutes.

Act II

A wave of shocked recognition flooded Minerva when she looked up from her desk to see Amelia Bones grinning down at her.

This, she thought, unbidden. *This is why*.

She had suddenly remembered the feeling of ashamed, visceral longing that had possessed her when she had seen her cousin Hector take to the air several feet above the Ross estate on his gleaming Cleansweep Junior.

The longing that had been utterly absent from her feelings about poor, disappointed Dougal, and that she had known, somewhere in a not-quite-developed portion of her cerebral cortex, existed, dormant, waiting to spring to fulminant life at the right provocation.

At *this*.

"Want to get some lunch, Minerva?"

"Yes, all right. Just give me a moment," a dry-mouthed Minerva replied.

She peeked her head into Mr Urquart's office and said, "I'm going to get some lunch now, if that's all right?"

"Of course," replied her boss, standing. "Can you find your way to the canteen, or would you like an escort?"

"Thank you, sir, but I'm going with an old school friend. She works in the Investigation Department."

"Oh? Well, then, enjoy your lunch, Miss McGonagall."

Minerva joined Amelia, and they shared the Ministry lift, lurching sideways and diagonally, with six other quiet Ministry functionaries and three noisy post owls.

Finally seated at a corner table of the bustling canteen, Amelia asked, "So, how's the first day going? Urquart pinched your bum yet?"

Minerva cursed her pale skin for the millionth time as she felt her face grow hot. "No. Is he likely to?"

"If what the other girls say is true, he might," said Amelia. "He's never done mine, of course, but then I suppose I'm not his type."

"Neither am I, then, I expect," said Minerva, earning her a wry smile.

"Maybe, maybe not," was all Amelia said.

Lunch became a regular affair for Minerva and Amelia. They left Minerva's office together promptly at 12:30 most days, staked out "their" table in the canteen, and sat over stringy ham or stale pickle sandwiches discussing Ministry gossip, or the Harpies' chances in the All-England Cup, or the latest round of Muggle-baiting Amelia was investigating. Minerva's own work was, to her dismay, far less interesting, so they never spoke of it. She tried to remind herself that Amelia Bones had been in her job two years already, while Minerva was just starting out.

One evening, when Minerva had stayed late to finish piecing together the conflicting accounts of a suspected unregistered Animagus sighting, Mr Urquart called her into his office.

"Working late, my industrious assistant?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir. I'm almost finished writing up the report on that wild boar sighting in Chertsey. It sounds legitimate, but it's possible it could have been just a mundane member of the *Suidae* family."

"Very good." He paused, looking at her, and for a moment Minerva wondered if he was going to dash forward and pinch her bottom, just as Amelia had said.

Instead he said, "I notice you spend most of your lunch hours with the Bones girl."

"Yes, sir," said Minerva, suddenly and inexplicably on the defensive. "We're old friends from Hogwarts."

"I see," he said. Hesitating, he continued: "It isn't my place, I realise, to comment on your personal life, but I wonder, my dear, if you are quite . . . cognisant of Miss Bones' . . . personal habits."

Minerva frowned.

Mr Urquart evidently mistook her consternation for confusion. "Why don't you have a seat, Minerva," he said kindly, holding out a chair for her, which she took.

"You come from a conservative . . . that's not to say, sheltered . . . background, so you may not be aware of some of the . . . more colourful . . . aspects of modern, urban life. But Miss Bones...not to say anything against her, of course; she is a fine worker...represents a particular sort of young woman." He searched Minerva's face for understanding. Once again mistaking her intentionally blank look for non-understanding, he sighed and went on: "That is to say, Miss Bones is known to . . . keep company . . . with other witches. Do you see?"

He was wringing his hands on the hem of his robes in the acuity of his discomfort, something Minerva's father used to do with his cassock when preaching a particularly emotional sermon.

"I believe I do, Mr Urquart," Minerva replied. She said no more, unsure of what he expected.

"Oh, do not misunderstand, Miss McGonagall . . . I have nothing, nothing at all against . . . her sort, but I thought you might appreciate a word to the wise on the matter, seeing as you are obviously not of the same persuasion," he said, his eyes darting quickly over her befrocked form, up to her long hair, and then back to her face. "I should hate for there to be some misunderstanding of intentions between you."

And what are your intentions, Mr Urquart? Minerva thought.

She said, "Thank you, Mr Urquart. I don't think there is any misunderstanding. Amelia and I are friends. We were both on our House Quidditch teams at school," she offered, as if that explained it all.

"Ah. Well. That's all right then," said Urquart. "I do hope you don't mind an old man interfering just a bit with his protégée's private life. Unfair as it is, these things do tend to have an effect on one's career. No offence was intended to Miss Bones, and I hope you have not taken any."

"No, sir," replied Minerva.

She left the office in a fog of anxiety.

The next day, she begged off lunch with Amelia, claiming the depredations of a last-minute report. The following day, she told Amelia that she'd likely be working through most lunch hours over the following weeks. Could they perhaps meet for a drink or a bite to eat after work sometime?

Yes, said Amelia. They could.

~~oOo~~

The Harpies had pulled it off. Just barely, but their Beater had managed to put the Bludger between the Wasps' Seeker and the Snitch long enough for Griffiths to circle around her opposing number and snatch the Snitch right from under his nose.

Amelia and Minerva were on their feet cheering and yelling along with the dark green lake of Harpies fans that filled their corner of the stands. The roars of outrage and disbelief from the yellow-and-black ocean that dominated the rest of the stadium were sweet music to the ears of the witches, and spurred them to greater heights of joy and noisy, soprano adulation for their champions on the pitch.

In their near-delirium, Minerva and Amelia found their arms locked around one another, heaving chest pressing against heaving chest, and Minerva could feel Amelia's breath puffing warmly next to her ear.

Suddenly, the sound of the crowd seemed to fade, and the rhythm of Amelia's breathing and her own filled Minerva's ears, and for just a moment she was able to imagine that they were alone in the world, they two, and it felt just fine. In fact, it felt better than fine, it felt . . . ordained and perfect. It felt like it had the first time she had held the wand that would become hers and cast a simple *Lumos* under Mr Ollivander's encouraging eye.

It was Amelia who pulled away first, and the spell was broken. Minerva was suddenly and painfully aware of the crowd around them, although nobody seemed to be paying the two young women any mind. Many of the witches...and the Harpies fans were by-and-large witches...were embracing; it seemed a perfectly reasonable thing to do under the circumstances.

But something had happened, some door that had been only slightly ajar had been flung wide, and it would not be shut again. Of that Minerva was certain. Something she hadn't even known existed had been suddenly thrust into her hands, and now it was essential as air.

Amelia's remarkable eyes missed none of this, and she turned away, fussily gathering her cloak and Omniculars, to give Minerva a moment to collect herself.

Nothing was said about the incident over the dinner and drinks the two witches shared in the rundown pub that looked more like it belonged in Knockturn rather than Diagon Alley, but nothing needed to be said. Minerva felt her course was irrevocably set, and what she might have wanted or not wanted was immaterial.

They Apparated to Amelia's flat and suddenly the thing was upon her.

If asked later to describe the collision, Minerva could not have given her interlocutor anything more than the impressions contained in brief boluses of visual memory: teeth, parchment-white and impossibly even; the Harpy-green of the pillowcase; a yellowing stain on the ceiling that resembled the shape of her father's bagpipes . . . and skin.

Endless, russet-freckled skin in which one could drown . . . in which she *did* drown, over and over, and gladly. Then the myriad colours of Amelia's skin: white, pink, purple . . . depending on the particular terrain examined. And the burnished gold of hair: on head, on arms, on pubis, on legs, joined in Minerva's memory by the occasional flash of her own black intruding into the frame.

Had this putative questioner pushed for more, Minerva would have instructed him that he must attempt to imagine another dimension. Einstein and Poincaré had it right, she would have said, but they hadn't gone far enough. To the four dimensions accepted and perceivable by man, Minerva would have instructed, add sensation. She would have been completely in earnest.

When the sun had begun to fight its way through the small, dirty window over the bed, Minerva, sleepless most of that extraordinary night, looked at Amelia's face, so unguarded in repose.

This is why, she thought. Then she slept.

~~oOo~~

The letter came as a surprise.

She had applied almost as an afterthought, never thinking that a young woman only two years out of school might seriously be considered for the post of Hogwarts' Transfiguration teacher.

Yet there it was, in florid purple script: *It is my pleasure to offer you . . .*

Another test, was it? Another chance at salvation? But *this . . .* this had felt like salvation for so long. Until it hadn't. She loved Amelia, felt loved by her, but this wasn't what she planned for, what she had ever wanted . . .

She wanted a vocation, not just a job; she'd always wanted it. Her father had been passionate about his work, and it had been his salvation, Minerva thought. She was old enough now, and distanced enough, to understand that her parents' union had not been what either of them had wanted or expected. That her mother and father loved one another was obvious, but it hadn't, in the end, been entirely satisfactory for either. Disappointment had hung like stale dust about the manse, infiltrating every corner and cranny, making the food taste flat and the colours seem dull. Her father had found escape in his parish, in his vocation, in his faith, while her mother . . . she had withered. When last Minerva had visited (*too long ago*, she admonished herself), Isobel had seemed smaller than Minerva remembered . . . diminished. Her children gone, she had little connection to the magical world and had retreated into an early dotage, it seemed. Robert McGonagall, however, was as vigorous and vibrant as he'd ever been.

So here it was, another test, she thought. Another offer of salvation by her father's God, but the salient question was: Did she want to be saved?

She left the office early for once and made dinner, adding to her modest culinary efforts a bottle of wine grander than they could afford and a pudding richer than she normally liked.

As she melted the chocolate on the double boiler, she thought, *Who are you trying to convince?*

Amelia was alternately charmed and suspicious, and when Minerva finally told her about Dumbledore's offer, she was uncharacteristically silent.

Finally, she said, "Why?"

"Because I'm bored," Minerva answered, and she immediately realised how it sounded.

"With me?"

"No. Of course not. No."

"Then why?"

"I'm stifled here...in the Ministry," she quickly corrected. "Report after bloody report . . . a few field visits like a pat on the head for a good dog . . . it isn't enough. Amelia, I'll be able to do some research. Finally."

"What about us?"

"We'll have weekends."

"Weekends," Amelia repeated dully.

"Yes. I could come down . . . or you could come up . . ."

"To the school?"

"Yes. Well . . . no, I suppose . . . we'll have to . . . we'll work it out."

"It's a *fait accompli*, then, is it?" asked Amelia.

"No, I wanted to talk to you about it first."

"Your tenses are showing, Minerva. Future. Not conditional."

Minerva could not look at her.

~~oOo~~

The letter from her mother was only the cherry on the cake of Minerva's day.

And it had been a day of such promise! Not only had Gryffindor handily won the game against Slytherin, but that arrogant lout of a boy, Lucius Malfoy, had managed to land himself in the hospital wing as a result of a well-aimed hex (not that Minerva wished him any serious harm. Not really.) His incapacitation, coupled with her surprised discovery that his assailant was not one of her cubs, but a disgruntled Hufflepuff, meant that Minerva suddenly had the afternoon free. Mr Malfoy's scheduled detention with her would have to wait until the boils on his silk-clad posterior had been healed, which Poppy had assured her would take several days. It had been a good hex.

Fifty points to Hufflepuff, Minerva had thought.

What happened next was inevitable, she reflected. Six years of long-distance love and weekends and holidays snatched whenever they could manage it were a recipe for infidelity. She asked herself if she had known, somewhere in the pit of her belly...that same belly that still danced and somersaulted with excitement whenever she saw Amelia...when she had decided to surprise her lover that Saturday afternoon. Had she wanted to discover what she had?

No, she told herself firmly. *I didn't.*

But did she believe it?

The fight, the apology, the promises, and finally the assertions that she, Minerva, was equally to blame...for wasn't it she who had chosen the separation of her own free will?...followed in their depressingly predictable order once the interloper had been shooed off, Minerva wishing she knew how to do the Hufflepuff's hex while she watched the woman's shapely bottom as she hurried out of the flat.

The enormity of what had happened didn't completely register until she had Apparated back to Hogwarts and was safely ensconced in the cocoon of her quarters in Gryffindor Tower.

Is this how Christ felt at Judas' kiss? she thought, and then shut her eyes, horrified at her own unspoken blasphemy.

And yet, she couldn't shake off the idea. Had her father's Saviour watched events unfold in the Garden of Gethsemane as if from outside himself? Had he felt powerless to stop it, to say, "No, this is not what I want" even as he begged his Father to let pass the cup? Had he heard himself say, "Put up thy sword into the sheath: the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" as if the words were coming from someone else's mouth?

Minerva sat in her quarters feeling untethered from herself as words like *finished* and *alone* marched through her skull, and she tried to grasp their meaning.

She went to her office. Work would be her sobering tonic. The letter was in a small pile of correspondence, and she opened it eagerly, hoping that her mother's familiar handwriting and her words about home and Father and the trivial news of a provincial village would bring her back to herself. Tucked into the news of the parish, her mother had written:

... and you will be pleased to hear that your old friend Dougal McGregor has married Angus and Marie Gordon's youngest daughter, Bess. Your father conducted the ceremony, and we all saw them off to the Bibster station afterwards. They looked very happy, and I have hopes it will be a good match.

The image of a devastated Dougal asking her...no, *begging* her..."Cannae ye at least tell me *why*?" assaulted her, and she broke down.

Albus found her crying at her desk twenty minutes later.

"Minerva, my dear . . . what is the matter?"

She handed him her mother's letter and when he had read it and looked at her questioningly, she told him the story of her brief engagement to Dougal McGregor. Her friendship with Albus Dumbledore was not yet in its full flower, and Minerva didn't think she could bear to speak Amelia's name in any case, so she didn't tell him about her. Not then.

Interval

"My dearest Minerva," Elphinstone said, kissing her fingers.

She had a fleeting sense of *déjà vu* as he then swept her into his arms, throwing caution to the winds and kissing her lips soundly.

"Please, El . . ." she remonstrated, drawing back, although it was summertime, and there was nobody to see them but the birds and the Giant Squid, who was lazily skimming the surface of the loch, sunning its tentacles.

"I do apologise, but I'm so very happy," said Elphinstone, releasing her but, keeping hold of her hands. "When shall we do it?"

"Soon, I should think," said Minerva.

"Afraid you'll change your mind?" he asked.

"Not when it's taken me this long to make it up," said Minerva. "But neither of us is getting any younger."

"Me in particular," he said. "But I think I'm still able to manage a honeymoon," he added, with a slightly suggestive wink. "Where shall we go? Now that You-Know-Who is gone, we're free to go anywhere you like."

A week later, as they lay in bed in the small wizarding *pensione* they had found in Florence, he asked her, "What changed your mind?"

"About?"

"About marrying me."

"I got tired of listening to you ask," she said.

He chuckled at that. "My mother taught me the value of persistence," he said. "But I'm serious, Minerva. I'd like to know."

"You-Know-Who's defeat, I suppose," she said. "I didn't want to put you in harm's way."

It wasn't completely a lie. She had been concerned that her work with the Order might make Elphinstone a target. The Death Eaters had shown they weren't beyond killing a loved one to get at an enemy, and it was no great secret that Minerva McGonagall had been...how had El put it all those years ago?...*"keeping company"* with Elphinstone Urquart.

Despite Amelia's long-ago implication that Mr Urquart was a bit of a cad, it had taken him nearly three years of monthly dinners, lunches, picnics and what-have-yous before he had laid a less-than-gentlemanly finger on her.

She had been surprised to find that he was a vigorous and generous lover, and despite the various short-lived romances she'd had in the interval between the disintegration of her relationship with Amelia and the advent of Elphinstone's pursuit of her, she had found herself heaving a sigh of relief at the prospect of a semi-regular, familiar presence in her bed.

No, she hadn't wanted to put him in danger, but Voldemort's demise wasn't what had made her accept El's proposal of marriage at last. More than twenty years of life in what often felt like a cloister had made Minerva almost ruthlessly introspective, and once the business of the Order of the Phoenix had been so suddenly and unexpectedly eliminated, she had recognised with some surprise that she was unutterably lonely.

She'd walked into her quarters that day after seeing little Harry deposited on his aunt's unforgiving doorstep, distressed and irritable. Why had she gone to Privet Drive? Why not join in the celebrations that were erupting all over wizarding Britain in the wake of the madman's downfall? Lily and James were dead, yes, and a baby scarred and orphaned...reasons enough to eschew fireworks in favour of a dram of strong Firewhisky...but that wasn't the whole of it. Looking around her empty rooms, she realised with considerable shock that she had harboured a tiny, barely-formulated hope that baby Harry might be entrusted to her.

She'd never given much thought to having a child...not since leaving Dougal standing in the morning fog wearing the look of a man who'd been cold-cocked and mugged...but somehow she'd allowed the notion of raising Lily and James' son to worm its way into her thoughts in the brief hours between learning of their deaths and meeting Dumbledore on Privet Drive.

Fool, she'd thought. *What business would you have with a child?*

It wasn't a child she wanted, not really, but she wanted someone. She lived with three hundred other individuals in this castle, but when the door to her quarters shut behind her each night, she was utterly alone. The recent war had ensured that she hadn't had much time to dwell on it, but now . . . her own footfalls on the polished wood of her floor seemed to follow her, saying *no one, no one, no one*, in their sharp staccato voices.

And the following summer, when Elphinstone Urquart made another of his semi-annual proposals of marriage...almost jokingly by then...she'd shocked him by answering in the affirmative.

As they'd stood in front of the registrar, El's sister on one side and Albus Dumbledore on the other, she'd thought fleetingly of her father, dead some nine years, and of Amelia, who had sent a heartfelt note after his death.

~~oOo~~

When Minerva found El lying on the floor of the small greenhouse he had built in their garden, she checked his pulse, and finding he had none, sat holding his hand for some minutes as she wept.

You old fool, she thought, but whether addressed to her late husband or to herself, she didn't know.

She kept the cottage, but moved back into her old quarters in Gryffindor Tower, and for some weeks, her friends and colleagues took care that she was almost never alone.

She was plagued by a constant stream of owls bearing condolence letters, and tried to take heart at El's posthumous popularity. He'd been loved and respected by many people, it seemed, and Minerva allowed herself to hope that this surfeit of affection had made up for the fact that his wife had never quite given him her whole heart, a fact of which he had to have been perfectly aware.

Minerva dutifully answered each letter and smiled at each correspondent's personal reminiscence of her husband.

This time, there was no note from Amelia.

Act III

14 August 1995

Dear Amelia,

I'm writing to express my thanks for your efforts with the Wizengamot on Harry Potter's behalf. Albus tells me you made every effort to ensure that that farce of a hearing proceeded fairly and according to established Magical Law, despite the Minister's obvious bias.

As Mr Potter is in my House, I feel very much in loco parentis to him, and I was tremendously relieved to hear of his acquittal. I can assure you that, contrary to Fudge's mischaracterisation of the boy, he is a fine young man, and an honest one. Dumbledore believes that he saw You-Know-Who come back, and, for what it's worth, so do I.

Quite aside from troubling recent events, I trust that this letter finds you well and happy.

It really has been far too long.

Warmest regards,

Minerva

14 August 1995

Dear Minerva,

Fair is my job.

Fuck You-Know-Who.

Dinner Saturday?

Yours always,

Amelia

They met for dinner at Atalanta in Diagon Alley.

Amelia had suggested the restaurant, new, noisy, and frequented almost entirely by witches, if the innuendo in the *Daily Prophet's* gossip column was to be believed.

Minerva recognised it as a test, but she found she was weary of tests. By god, she'd spent enough of her life on them. Let someone else worry about the answers for once. She was fagged out.

Their conversation revolved primarily around the Ministry and its failure to appreciate the changing Dark Lord situation.

"I envy you, Minerva," Amelia said.

"Why?"

"You killed one of those buggers during the last war. Wish I'd had the chance."

"Be careful what you wish for, Amelia. It's no great pleasure to kill," Minerva said softly.

Killing Domnall Rowle had been surprisingly easy, given the situation, although as she told Amelia, Minerva had taken no pleasure in the act. Her soul had long since been weighed and measured, and she no longer worried over each decision and what it meant. She could not shed her destiny, whatever it might be, but she could apply her own version of efficacious grace.

Minerva reached out a hand and covered Amelia's with it. "I'm sorry," she said. "They never discovered who killed Edgar and his family, did they?"

"No," said Amelia. "Damn," she said, dabbing at her eyes with her napkin. "It's been fourteen bloody years. About time I stopped crying over it."

"I don't think so," replied Minerva. "There are some hurts one never gets over."

After a few moments of silence, Amelia brusquely changed the subject to Quidditch, and the rest of the meal progressed comfortably.

When the coffee had been drunk and the bill paid, the two witches stepped out into the warm August evening.

Amelia offered Minerva her hand, and she took it. She didn't release it once the requisite moments had passed, but instead clasped it more tightly.

Just close your eyes and jump.

Minerva remembered saying it to her brothers when they were hesitating at the top of the hayloft. You'd either land in the soft hay and laugh, or you'd land badly, maybe split your head open, but it was in God's hands, and it felt good to test Him, Minerva had thought secretly.

She was no longer sure about God, but she still believed in providence of a kind.

So she leapt.

"Come home with me."

"Home where?" asked Amelia.

"Hogsmeade. My house."

Amelia paused, searching Minerva's face.

"We could go to my flat..." she began, but Minerva interrupted.

"No. My house. Please."

Amelia slid her arm around Minerva's waist and said, "Lead on, Macduff."

"That's a misquote," Minerva said, and before Amelia could answer, she turned and Apparated them home.

~~oOo~~

Times had grown darker once again. Albus mustered his old troops, and Minerva tried not to worry about his judgment in allowing green and relatively untried witches and wizards into the Order. Some of them would surely die, and Minerva had taken enough losses by now to know to distance herself from the children who had once been her students. She found she had grown to understand her father better as she had grown older; she no longer mistook his remembered coolness for disapproval or disregard. And hadn't they all flown away from Caithness and their father's God in the end?

She put her foot down at Amelia's joining the Order, though. Of course, that wasn't how she'd put it to her beloved.

"You'll be more effective if you stay Head of MLE," Minerva said. "You need to be seen as neutral."

Surprisingly, Amelia acquiesced to Minerva's request. But she worked her special magic...the kind that had nothing to do with her wand...behind the scenes at the Ministry, blocking every suspected Dark sympathiser from advancement, insisting on the most thorough investigations of every magical "accident" with potential ties to Death Eater activity.

Despite their respective busyness with fighting the emerging threat, and despite her growing frustration with Albus and his mysterious machinations involving Harry Potter, Minerva was happy. She had work she enjoyed, work that was important and at which she was very good, she had a few close friends who had become a surrogate family, and she had Amelia. If this was her destiny, she would live and die a happy woman.

They shared Minerva's small house in Hogsmeade on weekends and school holidays, and when the summer rolled around, Amelia proposed giving up her London flat in favour of a permanent move to Hogsmeade.

"It's really easy enough to Apparate wherever I need to go," she said. "You're not here during the week when term begins, so my odd hours and comings and goings won't disturb you. The flat's more for appearance's sake now, and if you don't care anymore..."

"I don't."

Amelia pulled Minerva close and kissed her mouth, and they finished the conversation forty-five minutes later, in bed.

"Perhaps it's wicked to say it with everything that's happening, but I'm utterly content," said Minerva, her long fingers tracing half-remembered Runic symbols on the still-taut expanse of Amelia's belly.

"Are you?" asked Amelia. "I've never known you to be content, exactly."

"Age," replied Minerva. "And this . . ."

"I don't say it enough, Minerva..." Amelia began, but her lover interrupted her with two fingers to her lips.

"You needn't. I know," said Minerva. She'd had a sudden feeling that, if the words escaped Amelia's mouth, they'd carry the force of a jinx. Best not to tempt fate with too much happiness. Irrational, Minerva knew, but still . . .

"So shall I sell the flat?" asked Amelia.

"Yes. Do."

~~oOo~~

Minerva was at the cottage, re-setting the wards, when a noise from behind startled her. She whirled around, wand drawn, to see the tall figure of Albus Dumbledore standing just outside the garden gate, no trace of a smile on his weathered face.

"Albus! You startled me," she said, lowering her wand.

"I need to speak with you. May I?" he asked, gesturing at the gate.

Minerva adjusted the charm and allowed him to open it.

He stepped into the garden and started toward her, his face grave, his arm outstretched. "Minerva..."

"Don't!" she cried, but no power on earth could stop what came next.

He took her to the flat, empty of furnishings, but now bustling with Amelia's co-workers, white-faced and deadly serious about their work.

They moved solemnly aside as Minerva crossed to the corner where it had happened. Nobody stopped her when she reached out a finger to run it along the wall, gathering residue from the scorch mark that was all that was left of Amelia Bones.

She looked at her finger and thought how strange it was that the formidable witch who had been part of Minerva's life for forty years, and the centre of it for the past one, could be reduced to a few molecules of carbon and lipid.

Until that day, the most acute pain Minerva had ever experienced was when she had walked into the flat all those years ago to find Amelia in another woman's arms. She almost laughed at the memory now.

She had loved Amelia Bones all her life; even, it seemed, before she had even known her, even as each of them had found other people, other loves. Amelia had always been part of Minerva's orbit, sometimes visible, sometimes not, like the sun, but always there, and now that it had been blotted out, Minerva felt chilled to the very soul. She

shivered as she stood, even after Albus draped a cloak around her shoulders, and knew she'd begun the long winter of her life.

The funeral was a boisterous affair, well-attended and with the highest security in place...Amelia Bones had been an important witch, after all...and Minerva was quietly accorded the place of honour. She did not speak, but she accepted words of condolence and sympathetic hands on her arm with grace and resentment.

Later that night, she could not bring herself to sleep in their bed. She Transfigured a chair into a cot, and her body finally succumbed to its exhaustion.

She dreamt, not of Amelia Bones, but of her Shooting Starlet.

~Fin~