

Four Versions of June, 7th, 1957

by graou

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First Version

Chapter 1 of 4

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With thousands of thanks to kellychambliss for her patient betaing of the whole story.

ONE

The Transfiguration classroom was subdued on that quiet summer Friday afternoon. Although the June weather outside looked particularly inviting, or maybe because the weather reminded them that it was already June, the fifth-years felt tense.

Besides, their teacher appeared less cheerful than was usual. Not that she had ever been the joking type. But in the few months that she had taught them, they had begun to appreciate the measure of humanity and the ideals of youth that dwelt behind her not-so-smiling face. But beautiful, some thought...though they would never tell.

Their teacher might be a woman, but certainly no one would speculate about her.

Never mind, today, surely no one found her young. Or beautiful. And possibly two boys at the back of the classroom muttered something about old maids that sounded less than polite. But they quickly fell silent.

From the side of the classroom where the professor was currently pacing, students could hear her anger raise steadily, and they cast sideways glances at first, then gave up all pretence and just stared.

"Now, Hornsbee, can you tell me why on earth you are not able to perform such a simple act of transfiguration?"

The boy looked contrite. Transfiguration had never been his best subject. And he certainly did not feel at ease under this severe stare, hearing the professorial temper rise, and not knowing what could have triggered such an unusual reaction.

He had, after all, never been the best... and he knew his wand moves were not very precise... but nor had he ever been on the receiving end of anything like what was apparently coming.

Oh, my...only 15 more minutes and he would have been safe and out of a classroom for the whole week-end.

"No? No? Well let me tell you. For months I have been trying to convince you to let go of this ridiculous flourishing wand-flicking that you probably think looks smart.

"And no doubt Professor Dumbledore has applied all his mighty and superior efforts to that task for the previous four years and a half. But you just think you can get away with it, don't you? Why on earth did I ever think teaching was worth any... any... suddenly beyond my own understanding..."

Let her not give me detention; let her not give me detention. Georges Hornsbee thought very hard, concentrating on the not-exclusively-studious plans that he did have for the next days. He had heard of her temper from the times when she had been a student...Head Girl, in fact, during his second year. And he would admit that he had speculated with some other boys, maybe on a few occasions, on her being more than met the eye, they would say, trying to sound as if they had any idea what it meant. And very deep inside, he could even say that he found it interesting, this somewhat less controlled Transfiguration professor. But he had definitely never wished for this side of her to resurface under such circumstances. And he would just be happy if he could get out of this classroom, and not think about Transfigurations, or O.W.L.s, or wand-flicking... or professors, for that matter. Talk about fairness... He was not that bad.

It seemed, a girl mused in the first row, that their young Professor was not handling pressure that well, after all. Cassiopeia Prewett, Ravenclaw, liked her teacher. Professor McGonagall was good. It had to be the first exam session that she would face as a professor, after only six months of teaching... It might be stressful, Cassiopeia supposed. And she might feel just as insecure as they did, after all.

Well, it did not help, Cassiopeia thought reasonably, looking at her rather disgruntled comrade. For he was certainly not looking more self-assured after that and would probably perform better were he to be left alone, ingrained erratic wand-flicking or not.

Minerva McGonagall seemed to think along the same pattern, for she sighed and said briskly, "I am sorry, Hornsbee. We are all tired, it is Friday evening, and you probably just need to relax. Class dismissed."

Everybody froze and looked hopeful. She sighed again.

"And Hornsbee, do not hesitate to come to me if you need to practice. I will endeavour to be less... irritable."

Hornsbee kept his eyes on his books and packed swiftly. So did most of the class. Fat chance that he would come back willingly. The two boys from the back caught on him as he was exiting the classroom.

"Come on, mate, I don't know what got into her, today. It's not you, you'll be fine."

They were not trying not to be overheard. Cassiopeia filed the content of her bag very slowly and, looking around her, she was pretty sure - and considerably surprised - that from where she sat behind her desk, Professor McGonagall had heard them but had decided to let go, even smiling sadly at their retreating backs. Very peculiar.

Cassiopeia hesitated. She did like Minerva McGonagall a lot. But what could a student do? Then she closed her bag, decided against anything bold, and limited herself to a few words:

"Good bye, professor. Have a restful week-end."

Minerva McGonagall raised her head. "Thank you, Cassiopeia," she said.

Peculiar, very peculiar. Cassiopeia was sure there was more sadness there than the incident called for.

Minerva waited for the students to exit her classroom. The last one finally did, upon wishing her a restoring week-end. Not unreasonable. Cassiopeia was a nice girl.

Minerva waved the door closed. She stood up and looked through the windows. Beautiful weather outside. She cast wards on the door. From where she stood, she could already see some students enjoying the evening breeze around the lake. She looked far away at the landscape and sighed.

This way, behind the hills, a mere two hundred miles, was the village that had seen her grow up. She felt tears coming to her eyes and turned around, leaned on the wall, and thrust her hands vigorously into her pockets. She stood there, looking at the stone wall, taking calming breath after calming breath, for a few minutes. Then she let go and walked to the desk, eyes dry.

She made a gesture to retrieve her wand inside her robes, and a piece of parchment fell from one of her pockets. She picked it up, put it on the desk, sat, and... her vision blurred again.

All right, she would read this letter from home. One more time. Like the emotional 21-years-old that she was. She would cry, once and for all.

And then it would be over. Because her life was here. And because now, there was nothing more she could do.

But as she read again, everything came back. Her mother's writing, unimportant news from the village, her mother's evident hopes, like always that her daughter would have a more satisfying career than she had, indeed a career at all, a life in a world that was hers...and him.

Dougal McGregor.

For just a few weeks, three years ago, she had imagined her life in love with him; for just one night, she had contemplated marriage. And refused.

This had been a tough choice. But she was sure it was the right decision. She had been quite sure. Until she read, this morning, that Dougal was marrying another girl. Which, as far as she was concerned, was good news. Wasn't it? Because he was perfectly right to carry on with his life and...

Minerva took a handkerchief out of her pocket.

It suddenly seemed much more real, much more final, that this other life she could have chosen, this other life was no longer open. People had moved on. The world did not stand still outside, waiting for her.

And it hurt. Like life can hurt the young hearts. And Minerva sobbed like a child and felt waves of regret, insecurity, ache roll through her. Knowing it had to be, hoping it was just a moment, and she would also move on. At some point. Some day. It did not feel like it.

She heard someone knock and ignored it.

She could see in her head strangely familiar images of his face, of an everyday life that had never been. Far away from Hogwarts and her solitary life. That had to stop. Would she always be in love with Dougal? It had been several years, and here she was, crying like the first days in London. Had she been wrong? Was she still in love? Was there such a thing as eternal love? She was not keen on learning about it first-hand, though...

Someone, distinctly, was removing her wards from the outside. Not a student, then. She wanted to stand up and turn her back on the door, but had no time to do so because already someone stood there.

"Professor McGonagall, how are you... Minerva?"

Albus Dumbledore entered the room and paused upon seeing her, arched an eyebrow, thus apparently deciding that she had been quite justified in keeping her door closed and warded, for he waved a hand in the general direction, and the door behind him went back to its previous state. She must be a mess.

"I see that I was not mistaken in wondering about you."

Minerva felt very young, suddenly. And not at all as dignified as she would have wanted. She said nothing and experienced a certain affinity with the wide-eyed, very stupid, and definitely mute fish that populated the lake just outside her windows.

"Would you care for some tea?"

This was certainly not how she would have wished for her former Professor and current Headmaster to find her. She felt immature, stupid. Dumbledore conjured a teapot and proceeded to pour tea into two very colourful cups. Even his antics only tickled at the one string left in her at that moment, and she felt the sadness vibrate inside her. He leaned on the desk and handed her a cup.

"I suppose young Hornsbee is not, after all, the primary cause of your... worry?"

"Have you heard about that?" she asked.

"I overheard two of his comrades; they seemed quite... vehement in finding your temper today... somewhat less than congenial."

Albus Dumbledore was hesitating more than one would expect. Minerva managed a small forced smile.

"I am sorry, Professor, I shall..."

"Minerva, please."

And she fell silent. Albus Dumbledore looked at her closely and indicated the parchment in her hand.

"I happened to notice that you did not look your usual self at lunch, either. Is it a letter from your mother?"

Minerva nodded.

"Anything happened to your family?"

Minerva shook her head, but tears came back, and she did not want to give in to them. She looked away.

Dumbledore walked to the window. He drank his tea, seemingly deep in his thoughts. Minerva looked at him and let his somewhat soothing presence remind her of why it

did make sense for her to be here, of what he had been for her as a teacher, and what she could be to generations of students at Hogwarts. And then he did not turn around, but spoke.

"Minerva, I do not wish to pry, although I have known you, we have indeed known each other for a long time. If you need a leave for the week-end and want to visit your family, you need only ask."

Minerva looked at his back. Her voice felt somewhat tense. "Thank you, Headmaster, I..."

"Albus," he corrected, this time looking at her directly, and she felt taken aback, but he continued, "leave the formalities where they belong... Please, Minerva, it is disturbing to see you, of all people, in such a state..."

"I am sorry, Albus, I... it is nothing requiring a leave of absence. I am... I suppose I am just being..."

What was it that she was being? Young? In love? Overly dramatic?

"... I am being silly, in fact."

Albus Dumbledore came back to her desk and conjured an armchair next to hers where he then sat.

"I doubt that very much," he said, "but I am nonetheless somewhat relieved to gather that it might not be as serious as I thought. No permanent loss, then?"

"That it is, Albus..."

Albus Dumbledore looked at her pointedly, and Minerva felt quite transparent to him and a bit ashamed of her dramatic reaction.

"May I be so blunt and ask you what is?" he said.

Minerva sighed and felt confused. She was not sure whether she was willing to share the tale of her foolish broken heart, which she had never mentioned to anybody, with her long time Professor, father figure of her youth, colleague and headmaster.

"I do not want to force an answer out of you, Minerva. I did not come to you as the Headmaster of this school, and I am asking you as a friend. If you do not wish to tell me, I shall go."

Minerva looked up and felt, not for the first time, that his light blue eyes were acquiring with the years a piercing quality that was anything but comfortable.

But she felt like telling him. She felt she had to say it.

"This is a very ordinary letter, Albus. Usual news from home."

He looked at her.

"My mother is quarrelling with the neighbour again. It seems that some old friends of mine are marrying already..." her voice broke. She had a feeling that he was understanding where this was going, and it would sound ridiculous even to her own ears. She could feel tears swelling, quite independent from her own will.

But he only said, "You have my undivided attention."

She was crying again. "I suppose I never mentioned it," she said, not quite truthful in her casualness, nor very convincing between two sobs, "but I... I received a marriage proposal a few years ago. The summer after my seventh year."

"Did you?" he acknowledged.

"I turned him down."

"So it seems."

She fell silent.

"I am sorry," Albus said, "Not a good timing for pleasantries, apparently. Do I know the poor soul?"

"No, he was... a Muggle boy from Caithness. I had known him since childhood."

She did not really know how to go on without words that she would rather avoid.

"I see, I see," he said... "so he is marrying another woman, isn't he?"

Minerva looked at him and felt, if possible, even more common, young, predictable than before...

"Yes, he is."

They drank tea for a few minutes.

Then Minerva spoke: "I suppose there is not much more to say..."

"I would actually think there is a lot more that could be said. But it seems that you do not wish to say it."

"I do not want to impose my young foolishness on you, Albus."

"I happen not to think of love as foolishness, Minerva."

At the word "love", she looked up sharply. The effect was somewhat deflected by her red, puffy eyes and the tears still rolling off her cheeks.

Albus patted her on the shoulder. It felt quite good, and she tried to regain her composure. And then he spoke.

"Minerva, I do not usually tell this to people, but I did have my share of difficulties as a young man."

She thought that if he was referring to both his parents dying before he even left school, it was without comparison, but she did not voice her opinion.

"You probably know of my parents and their fates. And you probably do not know of my younger sister."

Minerva shook her head.

"My sister, Ariana, had a difficult life. She met with human stupidity at a very young age, and had to bear the consequences..."

Albus sighed. He was telling a very sad tale, of suffering, and unfairness and death, until he paused... it sounded far away, very deep inside him, and present at the same time, after all those years. Minerva thought they had shared many different kinds of moments, but never had her Professor bared himself to hidden surface of his sensitive youth. She finally uttered her thoughts. Her cautious voice sounded fragile, as if assaulted by the silence around it.

"And thus, you came, at 17, to be responsible for your younger siblings after terrible events, and terribly burdened. Albus, this makes me feel even more foolish. I am sorry that I put so much importance in what seems like nothing in comparison..."

"Oh, no, don't be sorry. For despite all of this, what hurt me, what really hurt me in a way that I can still vividly remember, was still to come. And it was love. Young love."

Minerva could not see who was the young woman who would have refused Albus Dumbledore... maybe because of his situation? But her curiosity was apparently not yet to be satisfied, for Albus did not come to the girl yet:

"On that fateful summer, another young boy came to Godric's Hollow. He was bright. Very charming. We had in common this repressed potential that longed to be realized."

He paused. Minerva wondered if this boy had married the woman with whom Albus had been in love. Somehow, at that moment, she could identify with such a thing...

But Albus Dumbledore continued, "We got to know each other. We shared hours of walks, and discussions, and projects. I... fell in love with him."

Minerva choked on her tea.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I fell in love, deeply in love with him."

Albus Dumbledore seemed very serious about his memory, but nonetheless somewhat enjoying her reaction.

"Oh, my. I am sorry, Professor... Albus. I do not mean to..."

Minerva could feel her cheeks grow red and willed her voice to stay steady.

"That was not judgemental," she said. "I suppose... I think... I never thought about..."

"Whether I would be attracted to men or women?" he said, helpfully.

"Yes, I... I suppose..."

"I would not have expected you to give it a thought, indeed. That would, after all and until quite recently, have been utterly inappropriate."

He looked very amused. Minerva wondered if he was totally unaware of her being a young woman around him, of her having been at some points in the past years indeed very aware of him as a man. Never had it been to the point of a crush, she supposed, but... it was, anyway, not something she would voice in that instant. So she nodded and listened.

After a silence, Albus fixed his blue eyes to some point above her left shoulder and said, "So I fell in love with Gellert Grindewald."

Minerva very nearly spilled her tea, although the cup was at that point sitting between her two hands, on her desk. She wondered if he was feeling more embarrassment at the confidence, or enjoyment at the staging of his tale.

"Very well" she enunciated calmly, as though not surprised, "this is new."

"I thought it would be. I do not usually tell people about that particular part of my youth. Not anybody," he said.

He looked at her pointedly. She nodded.

"It was only the matter of weeks, or months. I will not pretend that he was not dangerous, even then, and I think, indeed, I know, that his presence in my life, and in our house, is the reason my sister died. For which I grieved abundantly, and still do."

It sounded as if he was finding it difficult to continue. Minerva wondered what she should say. But apparently, nothing was required, as he carried on.

"I have thus found out very early that my choices in love were not to be trusted, but I trust you will believe me nonetheless if I tell you that for all the... unbecomingness of its object, my heart was not less devastated."

Minerva felt somewhat overwhelmed. Not that anybody, or she anyway, would have expected anything, well, ordinary, from Albus Dumbledore, even in such matters as young love, but...

"I am sorry if I talked for too long and my stories are not of the cheerful sort," he said.

"Don't be, Professor. Albus. I still do not see very much common ground between your grief and my... doubts... but I thank you for sharing them."

Dumbledore sighed.

"Do you love him?" he asked.

Minerva felt at a loss...

"Do I..."

"Love him?"

She said nothing.

"I think that would be a common ground." He gave her a sad look. "Self-denied love is cruel."

"I think I love him, yes," she articulated slowly, "and I hope it will not be... I hope it will meet an end..."

She opened her mouth and closed it, hesitated a few seconds before asking: "did your... did you... I suppose Grindewald being who he is, your affection did meet an end?"

"It did. Long before Grindewald was to become the stuff of history. So there is hope for your heart."

"I am... happy to hear that."

She did not feel precisely happy. Probably more in perspective than she had. And she was grateful for him allowing her suffering, somehow. She did hope it would go away.

After a long time, they stood up. Albus Dumbledore banished the tea and the armchair. And Minerva gathered herself.

"Allow me," he said, raising his hand to her chin and waving his wand at her face. She suddenly felt less puffy.

"Thank you," she said. He did not let go of her chin. She looked down, but leant on his hand.

After a moment, Albus Dumbledore dropped his hand to her shoulder. She looked up again, and unexpectedly, he opened his arms. She felt good in his embrace. For seconds that stretched only so far... "Thank you," she said again.

"Not at all, my dear, not at all."

And they stepped away.

Minerva felt somewhat foolish. She was not a very effusive type. She looked at him quickly and he bowed.

"Very well", she said. "Dinner, I suppose?"

"I have to retrieve something from my office", he answered. "I will meet you there."

They walked through the door.

"Professor McGonagall," he said, with a smile,

"Professor Dumbledore," she answered.

And he went.

Minerva closed the door, shook her head, and walked decidedly. To the Great Hall.

Second Version

Chapter 2 of 4

"Albus Dumbledore discovered Minerva in tears in her classroom late one evening, after she found out about the marriage of Dougal McGregor to another woman. She confessed the whole story to him, and Albus Dumbledore offered both comfort and wisdom, telling Minerva some of his own family history, previously unknown to her. The confidences exchanged that night between two intensely private and reserved characters were to form the basis of a lasting mutual esteem and friendship," says JKR. This is a development—actually, four possibilities, one per chapter, of how it could have looked, sounded, felt like to a younger Minerva McGonagall and a less ancient Albus Dumbledore.



Millions of thanks go again to Kelly_chambliss for betaing this story, and to nagandsev, the TPP admin who patiently (re)moves the faulty commas and hyphens scattered throughout my chapters. :-)

TWO

Minerva McGonagall was 21 years old. She was Transfiguration Professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. She had taught for six months so far and was enjoying it, despite the difficult task of being Professor Dumbledore's successor, and having to settle in the middle of the school year, no less. She was proud, too, as one ought to be, proud of his confidence in her and of her achievement in holding the position at such a young age.

Nonetheless, on this Friday evening, June, 7th, 1957, she had had her worse week of teaching so far, and she did not feel good. She sat at her desk in the Transfiguration classroom, door closed and a silencing charm in place, relieved by the rare and precious feeling of privacy, despite the corridors full of students just outside her door.

She knew very well that in her bottom right pocket was to be found the letter from her mother that she had received in the morning. Although very light in weight, it felt heavy on her emotions. The beginning, or maybe the remains of a headache lurked behind her neck and at the base of her skull. She shook her head. It did not help.

She reached for the letter and opened it in front of her. She had to accept what was to be. And now was not worse a moment than any other. So she read, again, what her

mother only mentioned in passing. A piece of gossip. How ironic.

Dougal McGregor was marrying. And somehow, this was not only one more wedding in the village. This was not some old childhood friend. This was not just her mother implicitly bringing up the topic of her own possible marriage perspectives. This was not... this was nothing.

And nothing, that day, felt like eternal emptiness of the heart. Dougal had been the love of her prime youth...she had hoped that it was over. It had to be; this was just one thing on top of another, on a difficult evening. After all, she had refused to marry Dougal, and for very good reasons. She thought of her life at Hogwarts, of her life in London during the previous years. Minerva had nothing against Muggles, as her father was one, and so was Dougal. But she appreciated her life in the wizarding world. She appreciated not having to hide. And her parents' example had been enough that she knew: she could get over a broken heart, but she would never have gotten over distancing herself from the whole wizarding world. Better, in that case, not ever having known Hogwarts at all. Rather never having discovered what it was to be a witch.

Minerva McGonagall was very sure that it had been the right thing to do. The more she pleaded with herself, however, the more she rehearsed her arguments, the more her heart hurt, and served her with pictures of him, of love, of domestic bliss. It was absurd. Unrealistic. Useless. And it was there. Tears filled her eyes, and her face crumpled.

Life was unfair.

Someone knocked at her door, and she ignored it. She tried to regain her composure. She breathed deeply, several times, and felt the sobs subside. But as soon as she regained thought, she became aware of a brand new lump in her throat and broke down anew.

She heard a knock again. Someone was at her door. And insisted on coming in.

"Professor McGonagall!"

That was the voice of Professor Dumbledore, making adrenaline shoot through her and her mind suddenly race. Her former teacher, both in a classroom and beyond, respected friend, defeater of Grindewald, famous alchemist, current headmaster of the school. Not 21 years old. Not emotional. Not silly. Probably not in love, although Minerva McGonagall did feel the beginning of a sane amusement at that idea. But Albus Dumbledore was not someone to whom you wanted to expose yourself in such a state. Not that there was anybody...

So Minerva calmed down once and for all and conjured a steady voice. She lifted the wards, stood up, cast a charm on her face, knowing that it would not fool him completely, walked to the window and exhaled slowly. "Come in," she called.

And so he did.

"Minerva, how are you?"

She registered the use of her given name and wondered, not for the first time, if he could see through doors.

"Very well, thank you," she said,

Albus Dumbledore nodded, she saw from the corner of her eyes. She thought her voice had sounded tense, but as long as he could not see her face... She deepened her contemplation of the landscape outside. She did not want him to notice. Not that he would tell, anyway. She felt somewhat irritated by his too-good timing and general demeanour.

"I am tired, Headmaster, nothing more."

Dumbledore looked unconvinced in a way that she could sense even with her back on him, but seemingly accepted it.

"I came to offer that we share a cup of tea, Minerva. Shall I suggest after dinner, my office, then?"

She did not exactly express enthusiasm. And he seemed to notice, as he added, "I will let you rest until then. You do seem exhausted to me."

She said nothing. She could feel him stepping so as to stand next to her. This was not the best evening. Neither for school business, nor for worried father figures. She wondered briefly if she could pretend physical faintness and skip dinner altogether. In that instant, however, he insisted, "I will endeavour to make it an early night, Professor. But I would appreciate your company. As I always do. If you think that your youth can bear an evening with my old age."

Minerva McGonagall supposed she would not get out of it easily. Besides, it might very well help her morale. So she resolved herself to a non-passionate, tearless, sob-free, grown-up evening in the company of a fellow adult.

"As you know, I have my content of youth all over the classroom, all day long, Albus. Any specific matter that you want to discuss?" she asked.

"Nothing particular. I thought we would benefit from a last friendly chat before the frenzy of exams is on us."

Minerva felt somewhat soothed by her nonetheless dear colleague. She turned to face him, and he smiled.

"I am happy," he said, "to see that you are not avoiding me, my dear."

"Why would I..." but her voice caught, and she felt tears swell again in her eyes. She turned away promptly.

There was a few seconds of silence. Then she felt his hands on her shoulders.

"Anything I can do?" he asked.

But she shook her head. She could not stop crying, and she felt ridiculous and wished he would leave, but at the same time would not bear to stand here after he left and having given such a spectacle of herself...

Then he spoke again, "Professor, Minerva, I do not want to impose. But I am at loss to understand what would cause such... unhappiness, and I do hope that you are as satisfied with your teaching duties as we are with you."

She did not want him to think that it had to do with her work.

"Yes, Professor, I am. I think I need privacy, right now. I will come to you after dinner."

She walked to the door that separated her classroom from her office and looked at Dumbledore, and at her classroom, unsure of the etiquette.

"Certainly, Minerva. And feel free to attend dinner or not, as you wish. You are excused."

He walked out of the room, and she locked behind him the door to the corridor.

Minerva felt tense, a couple of hours later, as she walked briskly to the Headmaster's office. She was displeased at her own blank, very young voice when she uttered the

password. And she very nearly jumped when the gargoyle sprang aside...she could have sworn it had been more sudden than was usual. The moving staircase felt like a trap. She was a mouse...the irony of this statement was not lost on her; she would have transformed, just to check on her inner cat, had she not set the littlest bit too much importance on keeping her hair neat and proper and her appearance exactly as it should be.

When she finally went through the door and faced Albus Dumbledore's worried expression, she could feel very distinctly how stiff each of her moves must appear.

He led her to the small sitting area near the fireplace, and she sat with more caution that would have been necessary. She wished they would have work to discuss, and she had to hold rolls of parchments. Or a quill. Books. Something. What did one usually do with one's hands when one had nothing to hold on to?

Albus Dumbledore looked at her insistently. She contemplated the landscape, still visible through the window on that bright summer night. From where she sat, across the office, she could see mostly sky. A very young Fawkes stood next to the large desk, between them and the window. He might have burned that same week, just a few days before.

Dumbledore poured some tea and handed her a cup, still silent. She sighed, did not know what to say, but felt she should steer the conversation toward ordinary grounds.

"I apologize, Albus, for my earlier burst of... emotion. I have been tired, lately, maybe somewhat ill. Nothing that cannot be cured over the week-end."

He nodded. But he said nothing and continued to hold her gaze, intently. This was most different from his usual social self. The astronomical instruments clicked with an annoying regularity.

"So," Minerva McGonagall tried to impel some normality, "how are the preparations going? Will we be on schedule for the exams?"

Albus Dumbledore looked hesitant, but then answered conversationally, although his eyes still looked sceptical, "Oh, the usual last minute preoccupations... foreseeable unforeseen developments... nothing that cannot be smoothed..."

But he fell silent, and the conversation stalled.

"Minerva," he said, with much more intensity, and seeing her try to look unconcerned, he covered her hand with his, "Minerva, I am worried. I can see that you are not yourself. I know that the first term of teaching can be taxing. But I think you have done very well. I can not tell you how much I have appreciated your competence."

He searched her eyes, but she tried to avoid his. He knew her way too well...

"Does it have to do with Hogwarts?" he asked.

She shook her head, and she could have sworn he let out a relieved breath. Minerva McGonagall really looked at him for the first time that evening, and wondered if he had been afraid. Maybe he had thought that she did not want to stay, that she would quit at the end of the year... She felt ashamed, but at the same time, professional plans seemed a very grown up and proper topic. Something in her was glad that Professor Dumbledore had speculated in that direction.

"Does it have to do with me?" said an amused Dumbledore, although she was not entirely sure what was lurking under the amused façade.

"No, Albus, not at all."

A flicker of something went through his face. Relief? And he immediately looked like himself again.

"Do I really have to guess, Minerva?" He was smiling benignly now.

"It is somewhat private, Professor."

"I see, I see." He looked disappointed for a few seconds, but then it passed, and it was just the usual Albus Dumbledore again, that suggested, "If you wish to have a visit from your family over the week-end, we can still accommodate the schedule..."

But she shook her head vehemently.

"... or from a friend?..."

Minerva wondered if she had the kind of friends with whom one could cry over long lost opportunities and permanently broken hearts... She supposed not.

They sat in silence for a long time.

It was Dumbledore who spoke again, "It must be very lonely, in this castle, for an active young woman such as yourself."

She pondered the possible answers. On another day, she would have dismissed the notion. But truth be told, she did feel lonely. She heard Dougal's voice, years before: 'will you marry me?' she wondered what her life would be, had she...

"Minerva?... Minerva..."

Tears welled up in her eyes. Again. She wanted to shake herself.

But instead, she heard herself ask exactly what she did not want to be asked, "Professor?"

"Yes."

"Have you never wanted to marry?" She had barely avoided saying 'regretted not to', but then thought it too intrusive.

Albus Dumbledore sighed. He sank in his armchair. For a moment, he seemed to take her question more as an answer and looked at her knowingly. But then, he looked down, and spoke.

"Marry? No, no. I have never seriously considered marriage. Probably, I have never found the right person."

"Do you think there is such a thing? The right person?"

"I don't know. This is not what I was implying, though. I have probably never encountered someone with whom I would have considered a lifelong partnership and who would have considered it with me."

"Oh..." That did not sound good. Professor Dumbledore was not young, and if he had never found the opportunity... She refrained from asking if he had ever been in love and scolded at herself for still bearing in her a giggling young woman who wanted nothing more than to discuss people's feelings.

"You see," Albus Dumbledore said, regaining her attention, "I have been in love once."

After all those years, it was quite disturbing that he, more often than not, seemed to answer her thoughts. She knew, positively knew, that it was not legilimency. And who could complain when people answered the questions one did not dare to ask?

"Actually," he told her, "I might have been your age." He looked at her and smiled. "A few years younger, in fact. I was barely out of Hogwarts. I trust you are a bit too

young to have heard much about the rumours that surrounded the Dumbledore family, even as a student?"

She shook her head, and he took a breath.

"I will let you unearth the rumours if you wish. But I can give you my own account of what happened. I have, as you may know, a brother and a sister. Both younger."

"I do not think I ever heard of your sister."

"And for a reason. My sister, Ariana, had a very short, and not a very happy, life. Well, I think she had been a reasonably happy infant. But she was attacked, at the age of six, brutally, and was never the same afterwards. This is what prompted my father's retaliation - the aggressors where three muggle boys, they did not stand a chance - and his sentence to Azkaban, of which you may or may not have heard, maybe from your grandparents..."

"Never."

"Well, I am glad that I had made my name famous enough for other reasons by then that they would have forgotten the old scandals... My sister was never the same, though... My mother kept her home and cared for her... she needed constant attention, but we... my mother did not want her put in an institution... that is also why we moved to Godric's Hollow... it was a very isolated life for our family, and my mother wanted it to be so..."

He paused before continuing. "And then, one day, my sister was fourteen, and I was just leaving school, something happened, an accident. Ariana was still very unstable, all those years, and could not control her magic... my mother died."

Minerva gasped. But Albus Dumbledore did not stop.

"So I had to stay at home. To care for my sister. To abandon my other plans. I was her guardian."

He paused, and Minerva remembered what had prompted the whole story. She thought that maybe, it was not teaching, after all, that had stood in the way of his love story. But it looked painful, still, and when he spoke on, she could swear she was not the only one whose eyes held more salt water than they should,

"So I stayed, at Godric Hollow. And that summer, unexpectedly, I met someone there. Someone that I had never met before, who came from a distant land to live with a relative who happened to be our neighbour. Someone brilliant and cunning and ambitious, to whom I could relate, intellectually, and share my interests, my desire to see the world, my feelings at being trapped - if you pardon my young selfish feelings - in that situation..."

"I don't think you were wrong," Minerva McGonagall said. "This must have been very difficult... and at 17... I am glad you found someone in those difficult times." Truth be told, she also felt dwarfed; it all seemed like the history of far greater people than she felt herself to be. But she was not going to say so. Instead, she asked bluntly, "So what happened? Did she not want to stay with you, because you where stuck with your sister?" Minerva thought she would have stayed, under such circumstances. With a wizard. But that was moot. And what had happened to Ariana? Minerva McGonagall was quite sure that Dumbledore had consequently begun a very early career.

"What happened, my dear Minerva, was that he - for he was a man - he was Gellert Grindewald."

Minerva was suddenly not so sure that it made sense any more. But she motioned for him to speak on, anyway.

"I had become friend, and possibly more, with young Gellert Grindewald. We shared ideas that were brilliant, but not pretty. And, which is worse, he was dangerous. My brother could feel that, but I was blinded. I kept spending time with him, for weeks, often letting my brother care for Ariana, at home, probably much better than I could have... and I invited Gellert in our house, where he was not always welcome. There was tension, but I refused to see it. There was hatred."

Minerva was mesmerized. She did not want to say anything.

"And one day, it all exploded. I am not sure I can talk about it, even now."

Truth be told, Albus Dumbledore's voice had cracked. He was on the verge of crying. Which did not seem very possible to Minerva. She had no idea what to do. So she just listened.

"My sister died, Minerva. She died. And it was all over. Gellert went away. My brother and I were alone. But we were never together even in our common grief. He never forgave me. Gods know I never forgave myself..."

Minerva McGonagall looked at him, uneasily. His tears glistened in the evening light, but did not fall. She thought she could hand him a handkerchief, but he already had one. She thought she could pat his arm, but she did not dare, and the moment passed. He recovered.

Somehow, she did not feel like it was the right moment to ask if he had ever felt attracted to a woman. She wondered why she wondered. Well, it was all a surprising piece of news about someone you had known pretty much forever...

"I think, Minerva, nothing makes us vulnerable like love."

"Have you never fallen in love again?" This seemed like a much more appropriate question.

"I don't think I allowed myself, after that," he said, "or maybe I never encountered..."

"... the right man," she finished for him.

He sighed. "Yes, maybe I never encountered the right person," he acquiesced.

"I don't suppose being a teacher gave you a lot of that kind of opportunities, either."

"Worried, Minerva?"

There was a silence. "Should I be?" she asked.

"I don't think so, my dear. I am sure such a young woman as you can not escape notice from the outside world, even if she spends her days and nights behind the thick walls of Hogwarts. Is it what troubles you?"

Minerva hesitated... "Partly, yes," she said, "although I think I might have passed up my chance already..."

"Why would you think so?" Dumbledore looked surprised.

Minerva dropped her eyes. She did not feel that young any more. "Because," she said, "I may have turned him down a few years ago."

Albus Dumbledore quirk an eyebrow.

"He was a boy from a neighbouring farm," she went on, "in Caithness. I decided against that way of life. It was not him, you know...", she sighed, "it was definitely not about him. But I could not envision settling in the Muggle village, marrying, and leading that kind of life, you know..."

"Your mother's life?" he asked.

"Something like that, yes. It was years ago, anyway. The summer after I left school."

"Oh. Fateful summers, after one leaves school... And you never regretted your decision?"

"I don't know." Of course she knew. "I learned to live with it. I thought it would pass, with time."

"Has it not?"

"I thought so." She was not going to tell him where she kept Dougal's letters. "He is marrying, now. Dougal. That boy. The one I could have..." She paused. "He is marrying, anyway. A nice girl, I know her. They will certainly be happy. Happier than..." She knew she sounded dramatic.

"Perhaps," Albus Dumbledore said, "perhaps one should not decide for people whether they will be happy and what will make them so. What would, however, be of interest to me, is your own feeling on the matter. Are you unhappy here, Minerva?"

Minerva McGonagall was not sure what to answer. She liked her life. She would want no other. Yet knowing that she could not have another, that hurt.

After a silence, Albus Dumbledore spoke again, "I am sorry, that was an impertinent question. I would not presume that having tea with an old teacher once in a few weeks makes up for a happy marriage amongst your family and friends."

"No," she said, "I do not regret being here. Hogwarts is my home, as much as Caithness would be."

Albus Dumbledore looked up.

"It is," she insisted, "I have lived here nearly half of my life. And I love teaching, Professor...Albus, I will never thank you enough for giving me that opportunity. I feel wistful, though. It is not easy to let go of dreams... but I could never have everything."

"You could still meet someone else, Minerva. You do realise that it is not unheard of for Hogwarts teachers to have a family."

"I realise that, yes. But not yet, I think. I... this was not just someone, you know. I think I..."

"You loved him?"

"Yes."

She looked elsewhere. Fawkes moved a bit on his perch. And she sniffed. She pushed herself a bit, because she felt like she needed to say it, "I don't think I am over it, yet."

Albus Dumbledore looked at her. Fawkes trilled. She saw Dumbledore breath deeply, and the lines on his brow softened; she felt relieved, too. She looked in his eyes and thought she saw them twinkling. Give it more time, and he would look like Merlin in the one portrait that was left of him. She wondered if Albus Dumbledore would some day be as legendary as Merlin. Fawkes trilled again. She wondered if it slept in the same room as Albus. If it sang in the morning. If it made Dumbledore happy, if a phoenix's song always felt like it just had. She wondered how it would be, to live with a Phoenix.

Third Version

Chapter 3 of 4

"Albus Dumbledore discovered Minerva in tears in her classroom late one evening, after she found out about the marriage of Dougal McGregor to another woman. She confessed the whole story to him, and Albus Dumbledore offered both comfort and wisdom, telling Minerva some of his own family history, previously unknown to her. The confidences exchanged that night between two intensely private and reserved characters were to form the basis of a lasting mutual esteem and friendship," says JKR. This is a development—actually, four possibilities, one per chapter, of how it could have looked, sounded, felt like to a younger Minerva McGonagall and a less ancient Albus Dumbledore.



Thanks to all those who are still reading. The fourth version is coming, and I think it is my favourite.

Also, my sister, who studies cinema, is planning on making a short movie using the plot of the First Version. A kind of "fanfilm". It sounds very exciting to me. I will post a

link if we really do it.

THREE

Seasons came and went at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Albus Dumbledore had been there for many years, and the successive winters and summers began to blur after several decades. This year, though, had brought its share of novelty in the teaching of Transfiguration at Hogwarts and in Albus Dumbledore's routine.

Change had come in the form of a letter, interrupting a long evening of the previous December. Young Minerva McGonagall had been writing, which was always a pleasure. It did not seem that she was enjoying her work very much, at the Ministry, but he liked to read about her life in London, about her thoughts and reminiscences of her time as his student. Albus Dumbledore had always had a soft spot for Miss McGonagall and had very fond memories of her training to become an Animagus. This letter, however, had been different. Minerva McGonagall wrote to inquire about a position at Hogwarts.

There was no vacancy at that time. Yet, he could not think of a better successor on the Transfiguration post, and he had been there for a long time - maybe it was time to inject new blood? He was reasonably sure that on his recommendation, the Headmaster would agree to the advantage of training a young Transfiguration professor under Dumbledore's tenure. And Minerva McGonagall's skills were common knowledge. It was only a few days until the next meeting of the Board of Governors. Albus Dumbledore decided that, sometimes, time to dwell upon a decision was superfluous. And he stood up.

A few weeks later, he was waiting for Minerva McGonagall at the gates of Hogwarts. When he caught sight of her, walking along the path, no luggage apparent, he walked to her. He noticed that she hesitated before extending her hand to him. He bowed, took her hand delicately in his, held it, and kissed it lightly.

"Welcome back to Hogwarts, Professor McGonagall," he said.

Albus Dumbledore believed that her cheeks had grown slightly redder than they had been a minute before in the cold Scottish winter, but she looked more pleased than ill-at-ease with her new title.

The former Head Girl was welcomed and accepted quickly by the rest of the faculty. She was a beautiful woman and a powerful witch. Albus Dumbledore watched her integrate promptly, and he acknowledged the changes in her appearance. There was something strong in the lines of her face, that he could remember from her adolescent years, and something stern, that had probably developed later, mitigating the fiery gaze, like an afterthought.

They taught in adjacent classrooms, and he often went to see her in the evening when she did not come to his laboratory and ask about his progress in demonstrating the tenth use of dragon blood. Albus Dumbledore liked this sharing of duties more than he would have thought, and he had not had so much time for research in more than twenty years...and that was when he had been stuck for a few months in a cottage with his brother's goats... well, a different situation, anyway. He could feel that this equilibrium would meet an end after a few years, if only because she would wish to progress to full teaching responsibilities. And he did not know what the next opportunity would be, which path life would open for him...but he appreciated this situation like a breath of fresh air in between the long years of his life.

That evening, he walked to her classroom, happy with his work, eyeing the nice summer weather through the windows. He knocked and nobody answered. He was about to go back when he thought he heard something from the other side of the door. It sounded like a sobbing child. He listened on, but could hear nothing more. Albus Dumbledore wondered whether he should intervene. In doubt, he cast a charm and a patch of the wall became transparent.

But there was no student. Only Minerva McGonagall. She was crying. Severe, restrained Professor McGonagall was bent over her own desk, sobbing voicelessly. Through the blur of the enchantment and behind her hands on her temples, he could see her face wet with tears but her eyes dry, as if she had been crying for too long and there were no tears left in her.

Albus Dumbledore felt that he was intruding in something nearly indecent, and he lifted the charm promptly. Somehow, Minerva McGonagall's grief felt a lot more private than that of a student to him. He hesitated. But then he knocked again and immediately unlocked the door in a whisper and pushed it open before he could ponder what he was supposed to say or do once he would be inside the room.

Minerva McGonagall looked up. She felt caught in flagrance, that much was apparent.

"Oi, Professor, I am sorry, I thought I was alone. I... just give me a minute and I will be ready..."

She looked like a student in that instant. Just a few years younger than she actually was. He remembered their evening sessions during her sixth and seventh years.

"Don't apologize, Miss McGonagall, Minerva. I, if anybody, should be sorry for marching in on you like that. This is, after all, your classroom, Professor."

She smiled weakly.

"But what happened?" He saw the letter in front of her. "Did you receive bad news?"

"I... Well, this is not exactly the kind of story I expected to..." She sighed, "oh, well..."

Albus Dumbledore stepped closer to her chair and patted her shoulder. She leaned on him, her head resting on his sternum, and had he had any doubt, Dumbledore would have known then and there that Minerva McGonagall was not herself that evening.

"I am being silly, Albus," she said, "crying about the past..."

"Are you?" Albus Dumbledore conjured an armchair and sat next to her. Then, he frowned at her own wooden chair, and she suddenly fell back on chintz cushions. She glared at him briefly, but he could tell she was at least somewhat amused. She still carried in her the girl she had been, close to the surface. He wondered how much longer he could afford to do that before she became too much of an adult. He wished it would not change. People seemed to grow up at an alarming rate, as he grew old himself, and they went on to become unsmiling, self-important ministry officials quicker than a professor could congratulate them for their NEWTs.

Minerva McGonagall dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief and sniffed. Dumbledore looked at her sadly.

"Do you wish to talk about it?"

"I don't know," she said and seemed to think things over, "it is quite personal... besides it might sound foolish..."

"You sound like someone who wants to talk about it, if I may say so."

She smiled at that, although it did not reach her eyes.

There was a silence.

Finally, she said, "I have been in love, Professor."

"That happens to the best of us."

"And he is marrying."

Albus Dumbledore looked pointedly through the window.

"And not marrying you, obviously?"

"Obviously." She glared at him, but he could see she felt more herself already.

"Oh, you wouldn't believe how surprisingly important things can just happen without my knowledge at the most unseemly moments... But that is not the matter, in that instant... His loss, in my humble opinion, his loss."

"How so?"

"That he is not marrying you. I would think him to be a fool for rejecting you... but then, love has its ways..."

She seemed to shift uncomfortably, before telling him, "Well, in fact, I refused him."

She avoided his eyes.

"You make me curious," Dumbledore said, arching an eyebrow.

"It was years ago. He was a farm boy in Caithness. A Muggle. His name is Dougal. I had just left school, you know... and I did not want to..." her gaze drifted above the classroom, and she went silent.

"You did not want to?"

"I wanted to live as a witch. I did not want to hide."

"Would you have had to?"

"I don't know. I would have married a Muggle farmer in the Scottish countryside, you know. Not the ideal background for a magical career..."

"I suppose not. Pardon me for being oblivious to what it is to be a woman, in addition to being a witch."

"Anyway. I chose this life. I have it. I live at Hogwarts, and there could not be a more magical place in the world. I ought to be satisfied."

Albus Dumbledore looked at her and could see her steel herself. He could see her sit up and stiffen on the squashy old armchair he had transfigured. He felt sad.

"And yet you were crying."

"Foolishness."

"I am not so sure. For one, I have never known you to be a foolish person, Professor McGonagall. And secondly, love is hard on those of us who chose to resist..."

"It is long past. And he is marrying someone else, now. It is too late for regrets."

"I was not suggesting that you go after him."

"Then what?"

"I do not know. But I find that it helps to allow oneself the proper time for grief."

He could hear her sigh.

"It was years ago, you know."

"I know, I know, forgive an old man like me for not keeping track of time."

She smiled, at that. Somewhat sceptically. "You," she said, "are not an old man. You are using it as a rhetoric."

"Well, 76 this summer, my dear."

She quirked an eyebrow.

"Surprised?"

"You do look younger."

"So I am told, yes." He smiled and saw her look at the classroom, probably thinking of lessons for the next day, already. Minerva McGonagall was good at diluting problems in her work.

"And so," Dumbledore said, "you are satisfied with your life choices."

"I have to be."

"You have no regrets."

"What would it help?"

"You don't cry at night..."

"Of course not." She said it in a voice that was too strong to be true.

"Of course not, my dear. You wouldn't be the kind of woman that keeps her letters next to her bed, attached in a red ribbon."

"I... what... how do you...?"

She looked outraged, and he knew instantly that it had been the wrong thing to say. Oh my, she kept his letters...?

"Come on, dear, this was a wild guess. I am sorry."

She looked at him fixedly. He suddenly felt exactly why her students would not think of disrupting her lessons in this same classroom. He looked at the desks around him and found himself amused. But it was obviously the wrong timing. He turned his mind back to the current cause of her ire.

"I swear I never searched your bedroom," he said.

He smiled, but she kept a stubborn face.

"And I don't bribe the house-elves."

Her expression finally relaxed, grudgingly. "Well, I am sorry, Professor... I guess you could not bribe a house-elf, anyway..."

"Oh, you would be surprised," he saw her squint, "but I don't, and I certainly would not want to intrude in such things..."

"I know you don't," she said defiantly.

Albus Dumbledore looked surprised.

"There is no ribbon, and the box is under my bed."

They both smiled at the feeble attempt at humour.

Albus Dumbledore still felt that he had trespassed on her intimate realm. And he did not like the tension.

"You know," he said, "as unintuitive as it may sound from an old man like me," she rolled her eyes but he went on, smiling, "I have also been in love, Professor."

This classroom was turning into the most interesting parlour for both of them. Albus Dumbledore fervently hoped that it was private enough. He quickly checked the door.

"I have been told that it happens to the best of us," she said slowly.

"And as you can see, we were not blessed with a happily ever after. Though that might have been my fault for a disastrous blindness in my choice of inclinations. And I do not think that he ever married, either."

"He?"

"Yes, well... yes." Dumbledore hesitated, "It was a long time ago. I had just left school, my father had passed away in Azkaban a few years earlier, and my mother died in an accident. My brother was of age, but I wanted him to go back to Hogwarts. I had to care for my sister. I was trapped. It was not a beautiful time. And I met the worst person possible under those circumstances."

He was pretty sure that was enough information to lose anybody. But she did not blink and immediately asked, "Who was he? Do I know him?"

Dumbledore looked at her for two whole seconds.

"He was Gellert Grindewald."

"Oh..."

Of course, that called for more explanation.

"My sister had been attacked as a child, because she was showing signs of magic, by three Muggle boys. She was left permanently branded, traumatized. My father was sent to Azkaban for having sought revenge on them. Ariana was never whole again, unable to control her magic, could not be sent to Hogwarts. And my mother died in an explosion of Ariana's magic. You can see how easy it would have been to convince me of the culpability of those Muggle boys, of the irresponsibility of Muggles in general... the necessity to control them..."

"Oh, you..."

Dumbledore wondered if it was disappointment or compassion in her voice. But it felt strangely good, anyway, to talk.

"I was young, and hurt. I would never advise to bottle up hurt and anger, even in order to do what one feels to be right and proper."

"And what happened?" she prompted him.

"A catastrophe, of course."

Minerva McGonagall looked at him.

"And my sister died."

Minerva McGonagall did not look at him any more.

"And I was never in good terms again with my brother."

None of them looked anywhere. Albus Dumbledore felt as if he stood naked in front of her. He was not used to people knowing of his past sins.

She spoke first. "Why did you tell me?"

"I apologise if I disappointed you, Professor McGonagall."

He knew she was looking at him, but for the moment, he felt better keeping his eyes on an empty point. She called him back to the present.

"Don't apologise..."

He finally gathered himself and nodded.

"I have admired you for as long as I can remember..." She resumed, "It is not a secret that you are the person that played the most important part in my life outside of my family." He could see her blush, but she continued, "And you have never disappointed me. I feel honoured that you would confide."

Albus Dumbledore felt his heart warm at that. And slowly levelled his eyes with hers as she added, "I apologize, Professor, if I have been brusque this evening. I hope that you know it was not against you. I owe you so much already..."

"Minerva, I can understand that one would be protective about private matters, and I will forgive your alleged brusqueness if you forgive my certain lack of tact. And consider that anything you owe me has just been repaid by accepting this confidence."

She looked like she slowly understood how important this was to him. He added, "To answer your unasked question, yes, you are the only one I ever willingly told about that."

"I am greatly honoured, Professor."

Some time passed in silence.

"And, Albus... that was about time, wasn't it?"

"Right, as always, my dear Professor, right you are."

Fourth Version

Chapter 4 of 4

"Albus Dumbledore discovered Minerva in tears in her classroom late one evening, after she found out about the marriage of Dougal McGregor to another woman. She confessed the whole story to him, and Albus Dumbledore offered both comfort and wisdom, telling Minerva some of his own family history, previously unknown to her. The confidences exchanged that night between two intensely private and reserved characters were to form the basis of a lasting mutual esteem and friendship," says JKR. This is a development—actually, four possibilities, one per chapter, of how it could have looked, sounded, felt like to a younger Minerva McGonagall and a less ancient Albus Dumbledore.



This is the last installment: the fourth of the Four Versions. I have a personal soft spot for this one, for reasons that may become obvious as you read it.

I also have a story planned in the continuity of this fourth version, though set about two decades later. And, if I dare to mention it, a strange idea about a graphic study of the relation between the two characters throughout the years. But my drawing is slower than (and probably not really as good as) my writing. May the motivation stay with me.

FOUR

Minerva McGonagall was blushing. Profusely. Her cheeks burnt despite the relatively cool air of the room. At 21 years old, Minerva McGonagall was not given to blushing. The most usual cause to red cheeks would have been the winter wind on her face during a Quidditch game...but she rarely played Quidditch anymore, and her hip still hurt occasionally. Or temper, she might admit to having a healthy, vivacious temper. But she would not admit to being prone to... She was not the kind of women that...

Minerva McGonagall was blushing discreetly, though, hiding her face against the shoulder of a very paternal and appeasing, if somewhat surprised, Albus Dumbledore. And this, the man, the tickling beard, the faint unexpected scent - what had she expected, really, that he would smell of Transfiguration textbooks? - this was not helping. This came actually very close to being the cause of her blush. The secondary cause.

Minerva McGonagall was blushing, although trying to ignore any collusion between her thoughts of deluded persistent love and the man sitting next to her - all right, the man against whom she was uncharacteristically cuddling - cuddling, for Merlin's and Morgana's sakes... the man who had nothing to do with the original, with the real cause of her heartache.

**

It had all begun earlier that Friday evening, in the relative quiet of the Transfiguration corridor after classes. On such evenings, Albus Dumbledore, Professor of Transfiguration at Hogwarts, and Minerva McGonagall, his young apprentice of a few months, were often to be found together in his classroom or in hers, discussing teaching methods of Transfigurations, working, or otherwise indulging in what could only be described as having fun, although students might have resisted the concept of their friendly transfiguration games described as such. Whatever younger students may say, repopulating Dumbledore's classroom with unlikely objects and beings and transforming them into even more unlikely objects before he would catch up on her was one of the few precious things that made Minerva McGonagall laugh heartily those days.

Only, this evening, she had declined the cup of tea offered by her mentor and expressed her wish, if he did not need anything from her as an apprentice, to remain in the privacy of her quarters for the night. And so it happened that Dumbledore was to be found alone, tediously marking papers and occasionally gazing through the window, while all other doors along the corridor remained closed.

**

In fact, Dumbledore had been looking forward to an evening talk with his apprentice, maybe a game of chess... He could get used to this life of working together. He appreciated that they could talk about research, books and *oh, books*. That was what he had forgotten. He was supposed to give her back the book she had been reading.

Albus Dumbledore sighed. He did not like to disturb his young apprentice when she had expressed the rare request for a quiet night, but he could at least place the book at the door of her rooms. She would find it all right. And the short walk through their classrooms would be a welcomed distraction from the fourth years' essays.

He stood, closed from afar the door to the corridor, turned on his heels and went through the other door. He shuddered, crossing the cold, unused office that was situated

between their classrooms where he had been wanting for months to install a working space for them, or maybe a relaxing space - but somehow, it had not yet happened, and the classrooms had always seemed enough. He waved open the entrance to her classroom without thinking. He walked in decidedly, past the last row of desks, toward the other side, planning to conjure a shelf next to her private room's door. He was already gleefully designing in his mind an orange pattern for the wood panel to be.

But this was made useless. By said Minerva McGonagall. Sitting on the ground under a window. Reclining on the wall. Clutching a piece of parchment. Crying as if her life depended on it.

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Dumbledore stood motionless for an instant, bewildered, before covering the awkwardness of going and kneeling beside her by a waterfall of sentences.

"Minerva, dear, I am sorry. I thought you were in your room. I would never have marched in on you like that. Minerva, are you all right? What happened to you?"

Minerva McGonagall dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief and did not answer. She was mimicking a reasonable demeanour very efficiently, until she folded the parchment that she was holding, put it away, and began to tremble slightly, then sob wordlessly again, hiding her face on her knees.

She did not protest when Dumbledore picked her up and carried her to her private room. She gave the password. She did not object to either the cheering charm or the hot chocolate that she was now holding in her hands. Nor to expanding her armchair into a comfortable settee. All in all, Minerva McGonagall was rendered uncharacteristically cooperative by emotion. Albus Dumbledore had half a mind of mocking her on the subject, already.

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Minerva had finally stopped crying and felt embarrassed. The silence was becoming awkward, she knew. But she was aware of nothing that she could say in that instant and that would not make it worse.

Somehow, Minerva McGonagall had a feeling that hearing an apprentice cry her heart out over lost love was not a registered part of Transfiguration's mastership. And as to those tingling, strangely comforting impressions newly coursing through her, there was no way she was going to express them to one Albus Dumbledore. Maybe she could just transform, and...

It had to be just sorrow fogging her brains, anyway -yes, *brains*, a small voice answered in her, *because this is definitely what it is about, brains*. She was not going to fall in love with Albus Dumbledore on top of everything else. Now, really. With that reassurance in mind, she was able to sit up and open her eyes.

She took a sip of her hot chocolate.

"I am sorry, Professor Dumbledore," she said.

"Not at all, my dear, not at all."

This was really like him. She stole a glance and was surprised to see that, apart from charming, so much younger than his age, powerful but gentle, and the kind of nonsense that you could still hear from some older students, he also did look at ease. Well, he may have gathered from her earlier mumbling about being silly and overeffusive that nothing life-threatening was going on.

"Although," he completed, "I must admit to being curious as to what caused such a distress."

Fair enough. But still highly embarrassing.

Come to think of it, he may be well into his seventies, and she was pretty sure that some wizards were showing signs of age by then. Granted, her father was a Muggle, so she wouldn't know, but at not even sixty, he already harboured his share of white hair. Dumbledore simply didn't. He looked like an eccentric contemporary of her father on the old wedding photograph at her parents' home. Maybe just a tad bit older around the eyes...

"Not that you have to tell me, of course. But you never know, old men are sometimes able to help."

"I don't think so, Professor, but thank you for the kind offer."

She was going to tell him that she had already abused his time. But she felt like she needed the companyYes, *company*, the voice snorted. This was becoming very annoying.

Albus Dumbledore was still looking at her questioningly.

Unexpectedly, and though still puffy eyed, she did grin and spoke, "I am sorry, Professor, this is just, somehow, really so undignified..."

"Don't worry, Minerva, we shall mark tonight as an exception, and come tomorrow morning, I will still be suitably afraid of my terrible apprentice's wrath. So, care to tell me whom that letter was from?"

"Which letter?" she asked automatically, but of course he had seen her mother's letter in her hand.

He looked at her pointedly. And she felt a few years younger. "That was a letter from my mother....," she said, "just giving me usual news from home."

She could see that he expected more. She just searched for words.

"Am I to understand that letters from your mother usually leave you crying on the stone floor of the castle?"

"I suppose that was an unusual side effect."

They stared at the fire for a minute.

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"Professor?"

"Yes, Minerva."

"Three years ago, when I came back home, after Hogwarts, I fell in love with a Muggle boy. His name was Dougal."

She could still remember how it had felt. So different from the vague attraction that she had sometimes fleetingly felt for another student at Hogwarts. So different from the ghost of a crush that she had carried hidden and repressed inside her for a certain professor. It had felt whole and allowed and possible, too large and too good to be true, more true, though, than anything else she had ever thought she knew, including her own existence. Colours were brighter and life felt more... just more. But no.

If Dumbledore was surprised or curious, he was not letting it show.

"I did not marry him."

After a moment, he asked, "Why not?"

"It would have been another life. As the wife of a farmer. I wanted this life."

"Your position at the Ministry?"

"Or here."

Professor Dumbledore looked grave and took a deep breath. "I am glad that you chose this life Minerva. You do very well with the children. And do not mistake me: having you here is one of the best opportunities that life in this castle has offered me in a very long time."

Minerva found herself blushing again.

"But," he went on, and her heart shivered, "do you regret it?"

"Of course not!" she said, as though scandalized, then realised that her display of that evening might reasonably have suggested just that, "I mean *no*, Professor. I don't. But somehow, the... finality of it."

Dumbledore looked at her.

"My mother writes that he just married another woman," she explained. And her voice shook.

"Oh."

He looked at her again, and she felt unsure of her own opacity. "Only the finality of it, then," he said.

"Yes."

He seemed to expect something else.

"I am glad that you chose this life, Minerva," he finally said.

And then, later, when she thought he would excuse himself, "And you should not be ashamed of still loving him. Nobody expects you to be devoid of feelings."

Minerva McGonagall could not remember having such an improper conversation with anyone before. Or so she told herself to justify the awkwardness that she felt.

"I don't... I am not trying to suppress feelings, Professor. Just to get over them."

"I am glad to hear that."

He hesitated.

"May I tell you a story of my own, Minerva?"

"Of course."

"Good. A difficult story, it is. But you may recognise some elements. For when I graduated from Hogwarts, I fell in love, too."

Minerva's heart fluttered without an apparent reason.

"Unfortunately, the similarities stop here. For where you probably made the right choice, I made the wrong one, although it was infinitely worse than any choice you could have made."

She looked at him questioningly.

"But we need a bit of context, here. Suffice to say that at that point, my family was seriously damaged already. My sister was to die that summer. But her life had in fact been torn apart years before, bringing the whole family with her."

He sighed and Minerva listened.

"My sister, Ariana, was attacked, as a child. It was, of course, a traumatic experience. But it also left her in a very unstable state, unable to control her magic. In fact, she was dangerous for herself and for people around, if she was not properly cared for. My father did what he thought he had to do and retaliated, which landed him in Azkaban. This happened one year before I entered Hogwarts. We were left without a father, and our sister took most of the energy that our mother was still able to give. My years here were a relief in many ways. And I believe they were also such a thing, in a way, for my brother, although he always felt somewhat at odds with the preposterous demands of studies..."

It seemed that Dumbledore wanted to stop there, but willed himself to carry on.

"On that summer of 1899, a second event touched our family. In an explosion of Ariana's magic, my mother died."

"Your mother..."

"Yes," he interrupted. "My brother wanted to quit school. I strongly opposed his decision and resolved to take my responsibilities as Ariana's guardian. But it was against my own heart and my youthful ambitions to see the world..."

Minerva thought again that he was going to fall silent.

"That was a conflicted situation. And then came someone else, and the situation deteriorated even further. For I had fallen in love..."

Minerva could not see what was the problem.

"... with a young man..."

Ah, said the small voice in her head, *so much for finding him charming*... Minerva tried to ignore the voice and the pang in her heart. That did explain why he never seemed interested in the numerous women who had eyed him for the past decade, though... Or did it? Minerva was so caught up in that train of thoughts that she nearly missed his broken voice...

"... named Gellert Grindewald."

And then she suddenly thought that this needed more explanations.

"Now, keep in mind that you might have heard of him,"...she snorted..."but at that point, I had not."

Well, that made sense.

"He was, nonetheless, dangerous. And I was a fool not to see it. My brother could sense it. And he thought that Gellert... that Grindewald was dangerous for our sister."

Dumbledore sighed.

"Mind you, he was probably right, for sooner or later she would have stood in his plans of having me help him in his dark design..."

Minerva paled at the idea.

"And you refused?" she heard herself asking,

"Oh no, I didn't. It had to come to a catastrophe to shake me out of my blindness."

"Did it?"

"Yes, and Ariana died in it, thus completing the circle of destruction that had befallen our family. And letting each of us alone, for I have not made peace with my brother ever since."

There was a long silence again. Minerva felt a very old, very cold sadness settle on them. So much for girly, giggling thoughts of light attraction to the man...

It seemed that love was bound to mean only destruction, renouncement, or tragedy.

She tried to shake those ideas away. And was befallen by stupid questions again.

"So you are... attracted to men." She made it sound rather like a statement, but it still rang out of place, and she regretted it immediately.

"So it appears....," he smiled, "from the meagre data that is available."

"Did you ever fall in love again?" she asked.

"I never did. Nor do I plan to. It had been quite a traumatic experience."

She wondered if that was a warning, and which one.

"Do you think... I wonder... I sometimes feel as if I will also stay forever... like..."

"Stay at Hogwarts and never allow yourself to fall in love again, like your old professor?"

"Mmm..."

"Minerva, don't you dare convince yourself of such nonsense," he said in a very intense voice, and then, much lighter, "As much as I like having you here all for myself," and her heart leapt again at that, which was making a habit of something preposterous, that had not even been there a few hours before, really - *really?* - yes, really... "as much as I appreciate your companionship, I am sure that some day, someone will come that will have much more to give to you."

She did not dare to lean on him again. Normality had settled back. And a sense of finality to youthful passions, too.