

Roses in December

by *kellychambliss*

As teacher and student, Professor McGonagall and Mr Longbottom understand their relationship very well. But what happens when they are forced to become Minerva and Neville? Set during the DH year.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 9

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A/N – I wrote this fic for a friend who wanted "extreme cross-gen" and mentioned Minerva/Neville. I couldn't imagine how to write this pairing believably, so I thought it would be a fun challenge. I'm still not sure if I managed the "believable" part, but I had a good time writing this. Hope you enjoy it.

Many thanks to my excellent beta, The Real Snape.

* * *

"God gave us memory so that we may have roses in December." -- James M. Barrie

* * *

"Wait, oh, wait! Please!"

The girl's voice cut across the corridor, and though she neither sobbed nor shouted, Neville could tell that she was terrified.

They were only a few weeks into the first Hogwarts term since the fall of the Ministry, but he'd dealt with enough frightened children by now to know fear when he heard it. He wasn't surprised that this girl had called out to him. They'd been doing that a lot lately, the younger ones. . .looking to the older students to help them. To save them. To make things right.

Part of Neville wanted to run, to tell the girl to leave him alone, that he couldn't do anything, that he was almost still a kid himself. *And not a brave or competent one, either*, said his inner critic.

But a larger part of him knew that he was one of the few hopes these children had.

So he stopped and turned to face the little girl. He recognised her as a first-year Ravenclaw, a quiet child, as most of them were these days.

"What's the matter," he asked, "um. . .Essie, right?"

Essie nodded. "It's Professor McGonagall," she whispered. "She was trying to protect me from. . .from *Him*, and. . .and. . ." Her eyes, huge in her pale face, began to fill as she struggled to speak.

Neville had no need to ask who *He* was. There was only one *He* at Hogwarts, and it wasn't You-Know-Who or even Headmaster Snape. It was the new Death Eater professor, Amycus Carrow. He and his sister Alecto seemed to run a constant competition with each other for the title of Most Vicious Sadist.

"And?" Neville said encouragingly to Essie, though his heart was sinking fast. If a Carrow was involved, things couldn't be good.

"And so he *crucio'd* her instead of me," Essie said, her voice rising. "Over and over. And then *She* came and joined in, his sister, I mean. And Professor McGonagall was on the floor, but she looked at me and said, 'run,' and I did, and. . .and. . ."

The strain was too much, and she burst into tears at last.

"Shh, it's okay," said Neville, hugging her as he lied to her. "It's okay, I'll go help her, it's okay, it's okay. . ."

* * *

He found McGonagall in the deserted Charms corridor, a crumpled heap of green robes covered with some sort of tangled black twine that he only slowly realised was her hair. As far as he knew, no student had ever before seen it out of its tight bun.

Somehow the sight of her loosened hair was more disturbing to him than the livid burns of the curse on her face and arms or the sharp but unfortunately familiar smell of urine; when it came to its effect on muscles, the *Cruciatus* was no respecter of dignity or position.

Neville pulled his wand and muttered a quick cleaning charm without thinking; he was concentrating on sending Madam Pomfrey a patronus, a spell he still found extremely difficult. But finally his shining silver beagle leapt from his wand, and only then, with (he hoped) help on the way, could he nerve himself to see if Professor McGonagall still lived.

There was a diagnostic spell that could have told him her vital signs – he remembered Hermione talking about it – but he couldn't remember the incantation, so, after just a brief hesitation, he took hold of McGonagall's wrist to search for her pulse.

He found it just when he was beginning to despair, a thin but regular beat. He wasn't skilled enough to tell if it was strong or weak, too fast or too slow, but it was there. In his relief, Neville let his fingers thread through hers and sat there, holding Professor McGonagall's hand, until he heard the hurry of Madam Pomfrey's steps.

* * *

Now he knew how the younger children felt, Neville thought as he walked with Madam Pomfrey to the hospital wing, balancing McGonagall on a levitated stretcher between them. Someone else was in charge, an adult he could trust, and the wave of relief that washed over him was almost strong enough to knock him down.

But once they lowered the professor gently onto a bed, he found that he wasn't quite ready to leave everything in Madam Pomfrey's hands. He wanted to stay with his Head of House. . .he felt as responsible for her as she did for her students. He was just about to ask if he could do anything to help when Madam Pomfrey said,

"Longbottom, if you don't mind, go check on the Gryffindors and then report back here. It's the first thing she'll ask about when she comes to, and she won't rest until she knows they're all right. And she'll be glad to hear the news from one of her own." She broke off to look at him. "She thinks well of you, you know."

"She. . .she does?" Neville asked, surprised.

"Yes, she does. Just the other day she was saying how glad she was to have you and Miss Weasley to rely on this year."

"Really?"

"Of course, really," said Madam Pomfrey a bit sharply. "I'm not in the habit of saying things that aren't true, Longbottom. Well, not to anyone who isn't a Death Eater, anyway. Professor McGonagall said you used to lack confidence, but that you have really come into your own these last two years. And now that's all the ego-stroking I have time for; I have work to do, and so do you."

She turned back to Professor McGonagall's bed, and Neville headed to Gryffindor Tower, keeping to the shadows and marveling at the idea that Professor McGonagall might rely on him. Of course, it would only be because Harry and Hermione and Ron and some of the others weren't here, but still. . .

All was well at Gryffindor Tower, and Neville hustled back to the hospital wing to deliver the news. A screen had been set up around McGonagall's bed, and he could hear the voices of Madam Pomfrey and Professor Sprout behind it. He stopped, suddenly shy about the professors' privacy, and heard Madam Pomfrey say, "This should do it," followed by the muttered words of a spell.

"There, she's waking up!" said Professor Sprout.

"Minerva? Can you hear me? Don't try to sit up," said Madam Pomfrey. "Oh, all right then, sit up if you'd rather. Can you hear me?"

"Of course I can hear you," came Professor McGonagall's irritated voice, and Neville was so pleased that he stepped around the screen at once, just as McGonagall brushed away Professor Sprout's ministering hand and eyed them all sternly.

Neville had never been so glad to see that grim expression – she was all right! – and then she spoke again.

"Kindly tell me where I am and what I am doing here," she said. "And then tell me who you all are."

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 9

Neville, Madam Pomfrey, and Professors Sprout and Flitwick come up with a plan for helping Professor McGonagall.

Chapter 2

It was nearly two o'clock in the morning, and they were still debating in hushed whispers in Madam Pomfrey's office. Madam Pomfrey, Professor Sprout, and Professor Flitwick. No one had told Neville to leave, so he stayed, sitting silent and out of sight. He thought that if they noticed him, they'd probably try to send him to bed or

something, but he'd made up his mind that he wasn't going anywhere until he knew what was going to happen to Professor McGonagall.

It had become clear that she remembered nothing not her name, not her occupation, not Hogwarts, not the war, none of her colleagues. Her magic appeared to be intact, but it was instinct only; when they'd asked her to recite a spell or perform a specific transfiguration, she couldn't.

The professors and Madam Pomfrey had tried charms and spells and potions; nothing had worked. Finally they had given Professor McGonagall a Dreamless Sleep potion, and then the talk had turned to damage control.

"Yes, I can keep her sedated here," Madam Pomfrey was saying, "and we can think up some story to put off the Headmaster for a day or two. But sooner or later, he's going to demand to see her, and we can't risk that."

"No," Professor Flitwick agreed. "I fear Snape would use this as an excuse to send Minerva off to the Janus Thickey ward."

"As if he'd need an excuse," sniffed Madam Pomfrey. "But you're right, Filius. And we'd be lucky ever to see her again."

Images of his parents' grey lives on the Janus Thickey Ward flashed through Neville's mind, and he clenched his teeth. No. McGonagall would go to the Thickey Ward over his dead body. He'd hide her in his dorm room if he had to; hell, she could use Harry's empty bed.

"Well, maybe she'll be herself again in a day or two," Professor Sprout said, with more hope than conviction.

"Maybe," said Madam Pomfrey, who clearly didn't believe it. "I'll have to do some further research."

"But. . ." said Professor Sprout, "it's only a matter of time, surely? She *will* be herself again, Poppy. Won't she?"

Neville had to strain to hear those last words, so softly did Professor Sprout say them. She seemed no more eager than Neville to voice what he was sure they all feared: that the Professor McGonagall they had known was gone for good. It was possible, Neville knew few understood the permanence of *Cruciatus* damage better than he did.

There was a silence before Madam Pomfrey answered. "She might," she said finally. "But usually, there's no telling with amnesia cases. Her memory could return all at once, or gradually. Or not at all. Only time will tell."

"We'll have to hide her," said Professor Sprout. "Until her memory comes back or we can find a cure. Horace and I can put our heads together about potions and ingredients, and Filius, you "

"Hide her where?" interrupted Madam Pomfrey. "You know Snape has the castle covered over with tracker charms; he'd be alerted the second she left the grounds. And we can hardly keep shifting her from one of our quarters to another. It would be like one of those French bedroom farces."

"And I wouldn't be able to charm her to stay invisible indefinitely," said Professor Flitwick.

"Where, then?" cried Professor Sprout, throwing out her hands in frustration.

"I know where," Neville heard himself say. "The Room of Requirement."

* * *

It took Neville nearly half an hour to get the professors to agree even to look for the Room. His unexpected announcement had been met with a babble of argument, surprise, and objection.

"Neville, dear," Professor Sprout had said gently, "I'm afraid the Room of Requirement is just a myth. You know, wishful thinking."

"No, it isn't," Neville had insisted. "I've been in it. A lot." He'd explained about Dumbledore's Army and Dobby, and finally Professors Flitwick and Sprout had accompanied him to the seventh floor. Once they'd been standing in front of the blank wall opposite the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, though, Neville's nerve had almost failed him.

"Please," he'd said to the wall, feeling foolish. "Please, we need a place for Professor McGonagall to stay for a while. She's in real danger. The Room is our only hope. Please."

The Room must have heard his desperation, for after a few seconds of (to Neville) painful suspense, the door had appeared. Behind it was what looked to be the interior of a small house a sitting room, a bedroom, a tiny bathroom and loo, and a narrow kitchen with an old-fashioned dresser and a well-scrubbed deal table. There were even windows that looked out onto a flat, grey expanse of moor.

"It's her cottage!" said Professor Sprout in surprise. "In Caithness. The one she inherited from her gran. You've been there, Filius. Of course, she doesn't spend much time there now. . ."

She chattered on, wandering through the little rooms, touching a book here, a chair there, and stopping in confusion in front of a hand-operated water pump over the kitchen sink. She moved the handle up and down experimentally, and water gushed forth.

"That's odd," Professor Sprout said. "This is the way the kitchen looked in her Muggle gran's day, but Minerva had all the magical mod cons put in. . ."

Neville suddenly understood. "It's the Room," he said. "Somehow it knows she can't make use of her magic right now. So it's given her Muggle tools."

"Fascinating," said Professor Flitwick, taking out his wand and murmuring complicated diagnostic spells, his eyes shining with the same light that Hermione's always had when she was immersed in research.

"Oh, stop it, Filius," said Professor Sprout. "There will be plenty of time for that later. We need to get Minerva safely installed before everyone starts waking up, and it can't be far from dawn now."

She shoed Professor Flitwick and Neville towards the door, but paused to give one last look around the little cottage, a broad smile on her face.

"I'll fetch her clothes and books from her quarters. And we should leave her wand on the mantel, don't you think, for when her magic starts to come back? Yes, I do think Minerva will be happy here."

* * *

Back in the hospital wing, they made their final plans.

"Obviously it's best if as few people know about this as possible," Madam Pomfrey said. "We can't risk Snape and his Legilimency, so I think just myself and one other person. The rest of you can leave your memories here in my pensieve, and I'll give them back to you on an as-needed basis. Pomona, you're Minerva's best friend on the staff, so probably you should know "

"No," said Professor Flitwick. "No offense, Pomona, but I think it should be young Longbottom here. We need someone who can easily get into the Room of Requirement, and Mr. Longbottom appears to be our resident expert. He and the Room clearly have a strong connection." He paused to beam at Neville. "In addition, he's probably the last person Snape will suspect of involvement."

Neville's stomach plummeted. "But. . ." he stammered. "If he tries. . . I mean, I'm pants at Occlumency. . ."

"We'll remove your memories if necessary, Neville, just temporarily, you know," said Professor Sprout. "Meanwhile, when Professor McGonagall turns up missing, you just keep your head down and act as baffled as everyone else." She patted him on the back and then suddenly looked distressed. "Oh, no, Filius! We'll probably have to Oblivate that little girl. . .your Ravenclaw who came to fetch Neville."

Professor Flitwick looked grim. "Yes, I think it's justified," he said, and Madam Pomfrey nodded. Then Flitwick's face softened. "Poor little thing, at least she'll have one fewer bad memory. . ."

"I'll wake Minerva and explain things to her," said Madam Pomfrey with a brisk change of subject. "Filius, you can charm her and Longbottom to be invisible for as long as it takes them to settle in. Longbottom, if I know your professor, she'll ask you a million questions and won't take 'no' for an answer. But try not to tell her too much, will you? Let her remember on her own."

"I'll get Minerva's things from her quarters right now," Professor Sprout said, heading for the door. "And we can shrink them for you to carry with you, Neville."

"I wait!" said Neville. It was all moving far too quickly for him.

Everyone stopped and looked at him expectantly.

"I " He swallowed and started again. "I don't think I can do this. I mean, I want to help, of course I do, but I'm. . .well, I'm practically a Squib, and "

"Neville Longbottom!" It was Professor Sprout, and she was livid. Eyes blazing, she advanced towards him and shook her wand in his face. "I never want to hear you say such a thing again. You're a good wizard and an excellent boy no, I lie, you're a man now and it's time you understood how impressive you are!"

She gazed up at him fiercely (when had he got taller than she was?) and then suddenly flung her arms around him. "I'm sorry, my dear," she whispered. "I know it's frightening, and we're asking a lot of you. More than we should. But you *can* do this. Minerva will be in good hands with you, I have no doubt of it."

"I'll try," Neville said, and Professor Sprout gave him a watery smile before heading to the door again.

Madam Pomfrey cleared her throat. "Right. Well. Let's get Professor McGonagall ready, shall we?"

She went behind the screen, and Neville could hear the murmur of voices. Professor Flitwick, meanwhile, Summoned a chair and sank into it gratefully. He sent another zipping towards Neville as he said, "She's right, you know. Professor Sprout, that is. About you. You've got the goods, young Longbottom." He nodded sagely. "Oh, yes. You've got the goods."

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 9

Neville helps Professor McGonagall and prepares to meet Headmaster Snape.

Chapter 3

By the time Neville's heartbeat had returned to normal, and his stomach had resumed its regular place in his middle, Professor Sprout was back to hand him several shrunken parcels, and Madam Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall had emerged from behind the screen.

Neville didn't know why he should be surprised that McGonagall looked more or less the way she always did, but he was, a little. Somehow she was already becoming a different person in his mind, and so it gave him a bit of a jolt to see the familiar sharp jaw and thin mouth and square spectacles. Only her hair was different — not long and wild as it had been right after the attack, but gathered into a loose knot at the base of her neck.

It made her look softer, younger, and suddenly he could see what his gran had meant when she'd insisted, not exactly approvingly, that Minerva McGonagall had been "quite the one" in her day.

"Now, that doesn't mean she wasn't a good girl," Gran would say, which was her term for a girl who "kept herself clean" and didn't have sex until marriage. But then Gran would always add the appropriate Augusta Longbottom touch: "as far as we knew, anyway."

And that little aside had made Neville wonder just how "good" Professor McGonagall might have been, until he became convinced by her prim pursed lips and her tightly-bunned hair and her intolerance of snogging couples that any wondering was laughable.

But now, just for a minute, he wondered again.

"This is Mr Longbottom," Madam Pomfrey was saying. "He'll be taking you to your quarters, and I repeat, it's essential to your safety that you *stay put*. You're in danger."

"Yes, so you've said," Professor McGonagall replied with a touch of impatience. "I think it would help me to know just what I'm supposed to be in danger *from*, but if it's so important, you can rely on me to be a good girl."

In spite of himself, Neville snorted half a laugh, and she turned to him. "Yes, Mr. . .?"

He sobered hastily and had opened his mouth to speak when he looked her in the eyes the first time and nearly cried out in shock.

She wasn't angry with him, or hostile; in fact, she was half-smiling, but. . .

She didn't know him.

He'd understood that, in theory, but the reality was something else again. And he didn't know her, either. The woman looking at him from Professor McGonagall's face was a stranger.

Something stable and permanent went out of his universe at that moment; he felt for a second as if he, too, had ceased to exist.

"It's me, Neville," he said loudly, as much to assert his own reality as to help her remember him. "Neville Longbottom. From Gryffindor."

But his name brought no recognition to her, just a brisk nod of acknowledgement.

"Neville's the one who found you," Professor Sprout said, in a slightly over-hearted tone of voice. "After . . . well, after —"

"After the 'accident,' yes," Professor McGonagall said, with a gesture towards Madam Pomfrey. "So Matron has told me. The accident you all so carefully refrain from describing." She smiled wryly. "If you think you are encouraging me to remember it on my own, I'm afraid the plan isn't working."

"Well, it's early days yet," said Madam Pomfrey. "And now you'd better get going. Filius, if you will. . .?"

Professor Flitwick stepped forward quickly and performed his Invisibility Charm. It was his own design, and an excellent one, Professor Sprout had said. Neville felt it wash over him, settling around him like a soft, warm cloak. The infirmary and the other professors suddenly were indistinct, and only Professor McGonagall looked real.

She turned to him, her eyes dancing with unexpected humour. "So, Neville Longbottom from the town of Gryffindor, you are to be my escort, is that right?"

"Er. . .yes?"

"Well, then," she said, tucking her hand into the crook of his arm. "Escort me, kind sir."

Without thinking, he covered her hand with his and led her into the corridor and towards the Room of Requirement.

* * *

She found the cottage charming, "if a little primitive," but it awoke no memories in her.

"At least there are books," she said, heading immediately to one of the bookcases.

"Oh, that reminds me," said Neville, fumbling in his robes for the shrunken parcels. He set them on the deal table and unshrunk them, not to be nosy, but because he didn't think she'd be able to control her magic sufficiently to do it herself. There were books and some food and a small suitcase, and a paper-wrapped package that was shaped suspiciously like a bottle of Ogden's Old. "Professor Sprout sent you these."

"Professor? We are in a school, then?" Professor McGonagall asked. "A university?"

"Er, no, not exactly a university," said Neville. "But a school, yes."

"Am I a teacher?"

Neville wasn't sure if this was one of the things he was supposed to let her remember for herself, but then he thought he'd better tell her. He was bound to call her "Professor McGonagall" sooner or later, and then the cat would be out of the bag anyway.

"Yes, you are," he said.

"And are you one of my students?"

"No. Not any more."

"Good," said Professor McGonagall, smiling at him.

And Neville found, suddenly, that he was glad, too.

"The others, they called me 'Minerva,'" she went on. "Is that actually my name, or just an indication of my warlike personality?"

Neville surprised himself by laughing. Truth be told, he'd always found her witty, but he'd usually been too nervous to appreciate it. Especially as the wit was occasionally at his expense. Or at least it had been when he was younger — it occurred to him now that it had been some time since Professor McGonagall had been sarcastic to him.

"It's your name," he told her. "And see? You remember some things. Like the fact that you're a goddess."

As soon as the words left his mouth, he realised what he'd said, and he blushed what he was sure was the most furious crimson of a life already filled with blushes.

Professor McGonagall threw back her head and laughed aloud, something Neville didn't think he'd ever heard before. "You're a treasure, Neville Longbottom," she said. "I think we are going to be great friends indeed. Will you visit me? I have promised that rather frightening Matron of yours that I will not try to leave this sanctuary, and I have a feeling it may get rather lonely."

"Yeah, sure, er, if I can," said Neville, pleased and flustered at the same time. "I'd like that, Professor."

She smiled again. "I'll like it, too," she said.

* * *

Professor McGonagall's apparent disappearance caused an uproar in Hogwarts. Students gossiped in whispers between classes; the most widely-believed rumour was that the Carrows had killed her and fed her body to the Squid. Unless it was that she had defected and joined the Death Eaters. Or had accidentally Transfigured herself into a pincushion. Or been bitten by a rabid dog while in her cat form. The theories were endless.

Neville did what he could to reassure the worried Gryffindors, telling them with all the confidence he could muster that Professor McGonagall could take care of herself and would never leave them for long. "She's just on a mission or something and will be back as soon as she can. Take my word for it," he said.

The Headmaster, it was said, was coldly furious, and word was that he had interrogated every single staff member as well as a number of students. The Carrows, of course, had reported their attack on McGonagall — "discipline," they'd called it, according to Madam Pomfrey, who also told Neville that Snape's questioning of little Essie Butterwort of Ravenclaw had yielded nothing more alarming than a case of nerves on Essie's part that had been fairly quickly cured with an ice cream. Beyond the fact that Professor McGonagall had intervened in Essie's "detention" and had sent her to the Ravenclaw common room, Essie had had nothing to tell.

Neville and Madam Pomfrey took some private pleasure in the fact that Snape, too, had heard the story that McGonagall had been murdered by the Carrows, and by all accounts had subjected them to a questioning as intense as any the rest of the staff had endured. In the end, their story must have satisfied him — "Veritaserum, no doubt," Madam Pomfrey had muttered darkly — for he turned them loose again. But they'd obviously had a miserable time of it, and whatever Snape had said to them seemed to have made an impression, because the number of hexes and detentions they meted out dropped dramatically. For a few days, anyway.

On the second day after McGonagall disappeared, Snape began to summon the Gryffindor students, and Madam Pomfrey had Neville place his memories temporarily in her safe-deposit pensieve.

"It's far safer this way," she said. "You don't even have to try Occlumency, and you won't have any tell-tale scars in your mind the way you might if you were Obliviated. It's not a permanent removal, either. As soon as you finish with the Headmaster, just come to me and get your memories back. Of course, it's not a long-term solution,

because you can only do this with fairly recent memories, and not very many, either. The older the memory, the more traces it leaves, even if you're just keeping it in the pensieve briefly. But these will be quite fresh enough; the Headmaster will have no idea anything has been removed. Are you ready?"

Neville nodded. He realised that she was being untypically chatty just as a way to put him at ease, but in truth, removing memories for a pensieve held no terrors for him — not when compared to the prospect of trying to use his meagre Occlumency skills against someone like Snape.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 9

Neville is summoned to the office of Headmaster Snape.

Chapter 4

When a scared house-elf popped into the Gryffindor common room to tell Neville he was wanted in the Headmaster's office, his heart started hammering immediately, even though he was as clueless about Professor McGonagall's disappearance as everyone else seemed to be.

"Good luck, mate," said Seamus, though he couldn't quite conceal his relief that it was Neville, not he, who had been called. Ginny's eyes flashed dangerously, and it was all Neville could do to convince her not to try to come with him.

"I'll be fine," he said, hoping it was true. And it probably was. However verbally vicious Snape might be, he was not the Carrows — physical punishment had never been his way. Even if he used Legilimency, it wouldn't matter, since Neville honestly didn't know anything. Nothing to hide, nothing to worry about.

Thus he comforted himself on the long (but not long enough) walk to the headmaster's office. When he arrived, the moving staircase opened to him at once, and he climbed slowly up.

"Ah, Longbottom." Snape's drawl contained all of his usual disdain as he sat behind his desk, watching Neville's approach through narrowed eyes. On his face was his familiar sneer.

Neville never would have thought he'd find that sneer comforting, but he did now. Since Snape had become Headmaster, the sneer had been mostly absent; instead, as he stalked the castle, his face was usually a mask of a forbidding, icy blankness, as if the children and teachers in his sight were no more than gnats to be batted away or squashed.

Today, at least, he looked as if he saw Neville as an actual fellow human — a hated and annoying one, perhaps, but a human all the same. Neville hoped this was a good sign.

He reached the large desk and stood in front of it quietly, determined not to fidget or show fear. He expected Snape to try some sort of mindgame — make him wait in silence, or offer some kind of taunt, but instead, the Headmaster got right to business.

"I need to know where Professor McGonagall is, and I am going to search your mind to find out."

Despite his plan to remain inscrutable, Neville must have showed his surprise at this directness, for Snape's face twisted in a sort of macabre version of smile. "What, you were expecting some sort of detailed interrogation? Torture, perhaps? Believe me, I have no interest in such cloak-and-dagger silliness. I need information, and you will provide it. Do not waste my time with any pitiful attempts at Occlumency; you are no match for me."

Almost at once, Neville could feel Snape inside his head, probing, searching. . .

He'd heard that Legilimency often manifested itself in the victim's mind as an image, and that's what happened now: he suddenly saw, in vivid detail, Snape's desk in the potions classroom. It was covered with some sort of writhing, slimy mass that Snape, his face pale and intense, was probing with long, skeletal fingers.

Soon memories began to flash in front of Neville's eyes — Ginny saying passionately, "We've got to start the DA again, Nev! We can run it, you and me. . ." Gran talking about his father. . . his sad mother in St Mungo's, handing him a gum wrapper. . . the Gryffindor common room, and his own voice saying, "She's just on a mission or something and will be back as soon as she can. Take my word for it."

Soon the images and sounds all blended together and became a shrieking whirl that made him feel sick and then swept him off his feet, his mind felt flung and buffeted, and then. . .blackness.

When he came to himself, Neville was lying on the floor of the headmaster's office, and Snape was standing over him, frustration clear on his features.

"Get up, Longbottom," he snarled, and Neville found himself being Levitated to a small sofa that Snape had apparently just conjured.

"Now tell me," Snape said. "If, as seems to be the case, you really don't know where McGonagall is, why did you tell your housemates that she was on a mission?"

Neville pushed himself to sitting position, his arms shaking. He was too unnerved to do anything other than answer straightforwardly. "I just. . ." he said, and swallowed. Meriin, but his mouth was dry. "I just wanted to make them feel better, that's all. They're all so worried, and they're just kids."

Snape stared at him, his face impassive. After a moment, he said, "Stay there until you've pulled yourself together, Longbottom. And then get out of my sight."

He strode back to his desk and did not look up when, a few minutes later, Neville was able to stand and head for the door.

Once in the corridor, Neville hurried back towards the Gryffindor common room. He no longer felt sick, and he wasn't in pain, but . . . damn, that had been one seriously unsettling experience. He just wanted to get to a place where he could feel safe, however illusory he knew that safety to be.

Still, at least his meeting with Snape was over, and there would be no reason to repeat it. He was glad he didn't know anything that could help the DEs or maybe endanger Professor McGonagall, wherever she was.

Yet even as he had this thought, it felt wrong, somehow. Despite his desire to get back to the common room, Neville slowed his steps. There was something in his mind. .

.like a bruise, or a . . .he didn't know how to describe it, a sort of soft place. . . there was something he should know, something he needed to remember. . .

He stopped and closed his eyes, concentrating. There is was again, a mushy spot in his memory, and when he nudged at it, he could *almost* see, *almost* hear, *almost* remember. . . .

What? Remember what? He almost groaned aloud in his frustration. This was infuriating, even scary. . . Dammit, he was almost there. . .

He waited, but the moment passed, and soon he felt like himself again. Oh, well, he thought as he started down the Gryffindor corridor. He'd just sleep on it, and in the morning, the memory would probably be there. That's what Gran always said would happen, when her own memory occasionally failed her. It was when you weren't actively trying to remember things that they came floating to the surface.

Once in the common room, Neville made a beeline for the boys' staircase and the lure of his bed, but before he could put his foot on the first step, Ginny hailed him.

"Neville! You're back. Are you okay? What did he do to you?"

"Um, I'm fine, but later, Gin, all right? I just want to get some sleep."

"You can't, you have to go see Madam Pomfrey right away!" a clear voice piped from the direction of the fire. It was Colin Creevey, who was just about the only person in Hogwarts these days who still seemed excited about life.

"He's right," said Ginny. "She came here in person to tell us."

"It's very important, she said!" Colin added. "Are you going to go, Neville? Do you want me to come with you? I can walk with you, if you want?"

"Thanks, Colin, but I'll go myself," Neville said. He wasn't sure why, but suddenly the need to see Madam Pomfrey felt urgent.

"See you later," he said, and headed wearily back into the corridor.

* * *

When he returned after an hour or so, the common room was empty, for which he was grateful. His memories were restored, the bruise in his mind was gone, and his head felt too full to handle even one more word from anyone.

He got into bed quickly and closed the curtains tight, needing to be as completely alone as possible.

Sleep was a long time in coming, though. The encounter with Snape kept returning to him, and he felt far shakier now than he had while it had been happening — what a dangerous game he'd been playing, and he hadn't even known it.

But soon his thoughts turned to Professor McGonagall, who'd been alone in the Room of Requirement for the better part of two days now. His own painful moment in the corridor, groping fruitlessly after memories that were almost, but not quite, within his reach — it had given him a better understanding of what she must be going through.

He'd promised to visit her. He'd go tomorrow, as soon as his last class was over. He'd get one of the house-elves to pack some food, and he'd offer to have dinner with the professor, if she wanted. He didn't want her to be lonely. Or scared.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 9

Neville visits Professor McGonagall and finds Minerva instead.

Chapter 5

When he entered the Room of Requirement the next afternoon (the door appeared for him at once), the cottage was just as he'd left it — except that Professor McGonagall didn't seem to be there.

Panic washed over him. "Professor!" he shouted, racing to peer into every corner of the little house. "Professor McGonagall!"

"Out here, Neville!" came her voice from behind the kitchen, and he felt almost boneless with relief.

Sure enough, there was a door at the back of the kitchen that had not been there before, and it opened onto a small stone terrace that looked out over the bleak but beautiful moors. There, seated at a wrought-iron table with a cup of tea in front of her, was the professor.

She was wearing a fitted robe of pale blue, completely unlike her teaching clothes, and her hair lay in loose plait over her shoulder. She smiled a greeting, and as Neville approached, another chair materialised. He sat down, his heart still pounding.

"How. . . ?" he began, gesturing towards the table and the terrace.

"Isn't it amazing?" she asked, looking pleased. "I confess, I was getting a little stir-crazy here in the cottage, and rather worried at not seeing anyone. This morning, I finally decided I was going to go in search of you or Matron, danger or no danger, but. . . I couldn't find a way to get back into your school. I was so frustrated that I spoke aloud — I think I said something like, 'I must get out of here,' and suddenly this door appeared. When I came out, here was the table, with a note on it saying that you would be visiting soon. It turned to flame as soon as I'd read it, but. . .now here you are! What does it all mean?"

Neville leant back in his chair, finally able to relax. "It's the Room," he said. "The Room of Requirement. That's how it works. It gives you the things you most need. But you have to ask it right," he added. He wasn't sure how he knew this, but he did.

"Amazing," she said again. "Well, I'm glad *you* understand it, because I certainly don't. Thank you for explaining." She looked at him consideringly. "You're quite good at all of this. You must be a top student here."

"Well, not exactly," Neville mumbled, looking away.

"Oh, come now." It was the brisk voice Professor McGonagall used when timid students tried to insist they couldn't do the day's Transfiguration lesson. "You're just being modest. I saw how Matron and the others treated you; they clearly put a great deal of trust in you. And so do I."

"But. . ." She seemed really to mean it, yet Neville felt uncomfortable. He just knew his face was reddening.

The professor looked a little perturbed and leant over to touch his hand lightly. "There now, I've embarrassed you; I'm sorry. Let's talk of something else, shall we?" She looked out around the moors while Neville collected himself, and when she turned back, the atmosphere was easy again. The sun had even come out.

"It's a miraculous thing, Neville, your Room of Requirement," she said, waving her hand at their surroundings, "and so far, it has made me very welcome. Shall we try to walk a little on the moor? I see there's a path."

"All right, professor," said Neville, curious to see how far the Room could stretch to let them ramble. He rose, but surprisingly, McGonagall did not. Instead, she gazed at him, her head slightly tilted.

"Could I ask you a favour, Neville?" she said.

"Okay."

"Could you stop calling me 'professor'? You're not my student any longer, you said so yourself, and when you say 'professor'. . .well, I have no memory of being one, you see, and so it makes me feel like even more of a stranger to myself than I already am."

That made sense, he thought.

"So," she went on, "if you could just call me 'Minerva'. . ."

Neville caught his breath. If this had been that other Professor McGonagall, the one in the high-collared teaching robes and the hat and the tight bun, he doubted that he would have been able to even to look her in the eye.

But this woman, sitting bare-armed in the afternoon sun, with tendrils of dark hair curling round her neck in the damp air. . .well, she was different. She was looking at him so appealingly that Neville thought he would probably have agreed to anything she asked.

"I'll try. . .Minerva," he said, and the word wasn't nearly as hard to say as he'd thought it would be.

She cocked an amused eyebrow at him, just as her other self would have done. But somehow that look wasn't as scary as it used to be.

"Good," she said. "Because if you hadn't been able to manage 'Minerva,' I was going to insist on 'Goddess.'"

Neville burst out laughing. Professor McGonagall might be terrifying, but Minerva was turning out to be good fun.

"Come on," he said to her, just as he would have to Luna or Ginny. "Weren't we going to take a walk?" He turned and headed towards the stone stairs at the edge of the terrace.

"Wait!" said Minerva, now rising, too, and catching hold of his sleeve. "Be sure to stay on the path. Moors are treacherous places, and you shouldn't wander into them without a testing spell —"

She broke off, looking puzzled. "Now, how do I know that, I wonder?"

"I think you grew up in a place like this," Neville said, before he remembered that he was not supposed to tell her such things.

"I see. . ." she replied vaguely, her eyes still troubled.

Neville thought he knew how she must feel, being brushed by the edges of memories that she could not catch.

"The memories are in there," he said on impulse. "In your head. I'm sure of it. They'll come back. Any time now."

"Thank you," she said, and he thought she meant it, even if they both feared he was probably wrong.

They walked on for a time, the moor plants blowing in shifting colours before them. The air was cool, but not unpleasantly so, and the silence was so companionable that when Minerva took his arm, as she had done that night in the infirmary, Neville again covered her hand with his.

He was beginning to enjoy this closeness with her, his professor-who-was-no-longer-his-professor, who seemed to take as much pleasure in his company as he was coming to take in hers and who was content to walk arm-in-arm with him, so close that he could smell the light, flowery scent she wore. Neville thought of himself as someone who knew his plants, but he couldn't place this one. . .was it flitterbloom blossoms, overlaid with midnight orchid? No. . .

Well, he liked it, whatever it was.

Eventually the path ended (the end of the Room's magical space? Neville wondered), and they turned back. They hadn't gone as far as he had thought, for the cottage looked quite close, and they were climbing the terrace steps in what seemed like no time.

Only then did Neville remember the food he'd brought with him. In his initial panic at not finding the professor, he'd dropped the parcel on the kitchen table and then had forgotten all about it.

"I brought you some dinner," he said to her now. "Chicken and roasted potatoes. I know Professor Sprout gave you supplies, but I thought you might be running low."

"Not at the moment," Minerva said. "But a chicken dinner sounds delicious. You'll stay to share it with me?"

Neville shook his head. "I need to get back now," he said, and it was true. He'd already stayed longer than he'd intended, and he didn't think he should have too many unexplained disappearances.

"Next time, perhaps," she said. "You'll come again?"

"Yes, tomorrow," he agreed, and took his leave, feeling both relieved and disappointed about not staying for dinner.

He was relieved, because part of him still wasn't sure how to handle this new, softer Professor McGonagall. . .except that he had hardly thought of her as "Professor McGonagall" during this entire visit. She was Minerva, a woman who laughed and smiled easily, who had unbraided her long hair to let it blow in the moor winds, and who had leant warmly against him as they'd walked.

And he was disappointed, because another part of him very much wanted to spend more time with her.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 9

Neville gets to spend more time with Professor McGon -- no, with Minerva.

Chapter 6

The next afternoon, Madam Pomfrey accompanied him to the Room of Requirement.

"I'll check in every couple of days," she said. "I want to see how she's doing; she's had serious physical and mental trauma, you know."

"Have you learnt anything to help her?" Neville asked.

"Not yet. The other professors are taking their memories back periodically and are working with me to find some sort of cure, so I'll need to test a few things on Miner — on the professor." She frowned. "If she'll let me. Professor McGonagall is not the most patient of patients, as I'm sure you can imagine."

"She's different now, though," Neville said. "I mean, it's still her, pretty much, but she's. . . I don't know, more at ease or something."

"Well, she's been under a hideous amount of strain these last few years," Madam Pomfrey said. "And that Stunner attack two years ago didn't do her any good. Maybe this amnesia is a bit of a blessing in disguise. She could use a good rest, poor thing."

"Poor thing" was never a term that Neville would have associated with the sharp-tongued and self-sufficient Professor McGonagall, but Madam Pomfrey was right: these last years couldn't have been any easier on the Hogwarts staff than they had been on the students, and he was rather surprised that he had never thought of this before.

"I hope she gets one," he said. "A rest, I mean."

Madam Pomfrey took Minerva into the bedroom for her physical examination while Neville waited on the stone terrace. There was some sunshine again today, and the air seemed a bit warmer. "Thank you," Neville said to the Room, and he could have sworn that the sun got a little brighter.

He had almost dozed off when he heard a step behind him.

"Lovely day," said Minerva, sitting down at the table with him. "When the heather blooms, this moor will be all over purple, all the way to the village. . . oh, dear!"

Neville was getting used to her flashes of memory, but he could tell that they still unsettled her.

"It's okay, it's good!" he said encouragingly. "It means you're starting to remember." He forbore mentioning that all her memories so far had been of Caithness — nothing of her life at Hogwarts.

"I suppose so," she said, and then shook off her pensive mood to smile at him. "I hope you've brought dinner again," she said. "Though I promised Madam Pomfrey I wouldn't keep you too long from your studies."

"Oh, that's all right, Prof — " began Neville, out of habit.

She wagged her finger at him. "Minerva, don't forget," she said, and then looked at him archly. "Unless you'd prefer 'Goddess,' of course."

Neville pretended to think it over. "I could do 'Goddess,'" he agreed, and then waited a beat before adding, "but then you'd have to call me 'your highness.'"

Minerva's laugh was spontaneous and delighted, and Neville grinned in return. These days, he didn't get laughed *at* the way he often had as a kid, but he didn't have all that much experience of people laughing *with* him, either.

He thought maybe he could get used to it.

Still chuckling, Minerva gave his shoulder a light squeeze, and Neville thought that the Highland sun had never felt so warm.

* * *

Their walks on the moor became routine. It wasn't long before they were the highlight of Neville's day — not only because they provided a welcome escape from the increasing stress of life at Hogwarts under Snape and the Carrows, but because of how Minerva's face would light up when he appeared. She seemed genuinely to enjoy his company and to want to talk with him, and while such things were not unknown in Neville's life, they weren't so commonplace that he had come to take even a second of them for granted.

But there was more. Things were different when he was with Minerva. *He* was different — or at least, he could be a Neville who didn't have the weight of seventeen years of loser-hood behind him. To Minerva, he wasn't Longbottom, the pathetic near-Squib with the sad, mad parents, the one who lost his passwords and forgot his Remembrall and who was "poor Neville" even to his friends. He wasn't even the Longbottom who had shown such unexpected heroism at the Ministry (so unexpected that virtually everyone who mentioned it to him had to express their incredulity along with their praise).

No, to Minerva, he was just Neville, someone who made her laugh and who knew more about plants than she did and whose arm she liked to hold as they wandered the quiet moor paths. He'd begun to feel a little thrill when she did that, and to arrange more opportunities to touch her, too — to take her hand or to lean closer to her as they walked. A little human contact went a long way towards making life more bearable, he thought.

One afternoon, when he was a little late in arriving at the Room of Requirement, he entered the cottage to find it empty. This wasn't unusual; Minerva always sat outdoors when the Room gave her nice weather, which it quite frequently did.

But she wasn't on the terrace, either, and just as Neville began to get nervous, he heard her shout from the moors: "Neville! Over here! Hurry!"

She didn't sound anxious, only pleased, but nevertheless, Neville jumped down the stone steps and took the path at a run. Minerva was smiling broadly when he reached her, her hair blowing loose in the wind. "Neville!" she said, grabbing his hand and pulling him along. "Watch this!"

She stopped next to a bush of *vaccinium myrtillus* that was loaded with berries, and Neville saw that she was holding her wand — the first time, so far as he knew, that she'd touched it since coming to the cottage.

"Watch!" she said again, and pointed it at the blueberries. Her hair fell across her face as she concentrated, and Neville had to resist an unexpected urge to smooth it back. She did it herself, though, brushing a lock over her shoulder impatiently as she waved her wand — and the dark blueberries turned into pink roses.

Neville stared open-mouthed. "You. . . you can control your magic again?"

Minerva shook her head. "No, I don't think so, not fully. But in the cottage this morning, I wanted my tea, and without thinking, I said, '*accio* tea,' and the cup came to me! I haven't been able to do that again, but I've been practicing with the wand, and sometimes things happen. . . well, like that!" And she gestured to the blueberry bush, where the roses were slowly fading.

"Wow, that's great!" he said, and was not at all unhappy when she took his arm and wrapped both hers around it, squeezing him hard.

"Yes," she said. "Madam Pomfrey said this might happen, a little bit of magic returning at a time, but I didn't expect. . . Neville, I didn't expect how *good* it would feel. Is this the way you feel all the time — in control, and powerful?"

Neville covered her hand with his and squeezed back. "Sometimes," he said, "I feel just exactly like that."

* * *

After he returned to the castle, he thought about Minerva for the rest of the evening — her smile, her scent, the warmth of her hand on his arm. Why had he and Harry and the rest of them ever thought she was old and ugly and beady-eyed? Her eyes were lovely and laughing behind her spectacles, and she wasn't *that* old. No, she was. . .

Neville stopped dead in the corridor, earning an annoyed, "hey, watch where you're going, Gryffindork" from someone behind him.

But he paid no attention; he was too shocked by the thought that had just occurred to him.

He was attracted to Minerva.

She was his Head of House, and she was older, and injured, and he was supposed to be looking out for her — and instead he was standing in a corridor thinking about the curve of her jaw and the fit of her bodice and. . .

Merlin on a Cleansweep! What the hell was wrong with him?

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 9

Neville takes Minerva some ginger newts. Neither expects what happens next.

Chapter 7

He almost couldn't bring himself to visit Minerva the next day (especially since he hadn't been able to fall asleep until he'd indulged in a furtive wank), but of course he had to. She was depending on him. He didn't stay long this time; told her he was revising to do.

But it was less awkward to see her than he'd expected, and within a day or so, he was awaiting his visits as eagerly as ever.

He didn't always go at dinnertime, though; his continued absence from meals would have been too noticeable. Nor did he have to coordinate his visits with Madam Pomfrey. The door to the Room had begun to appear for her, and she no longer came at the same time as he did.

So now it was always just the two of them, Neville and Minerva, and he was almost sorry every time any of her magic manifested itself; he knew it was wrong of him, but he didn't want her to recover just yet. He didn't want their visits to end.

One day, after she'd been there a little over a fortnight, he said, "I've brought you something," and placed a tartan-patterned tin on the kitchen table. "Go on, open it."

Inside were ginger newts, of course, and when Minerva looked up at him, it was with Professor McGonagall's awareness in her eyes. "I like these, don't I?" she said. "In my school life."

"Yes. I wondered if you'd remember." It had been Madam Pomfrey's idea — to start surrounding Minerva with more of her personal things.

The professor's gaze faded, and she was Minerva again. "I did remember," she said, taking up a newt and biting off its tail absently. "Just for a moment. I could see the tin — on a desk. A rather cluttered desk, I'm afraid," she added, frowning.

"You're usually very neat," Neville told her. "But I guess teaching can be a messy business sometimes. You're not angry?"

"About what?"

"That I sprang the newts on you without warning. Like a trick."

"Would I do that? I mean, would she, would Professor McGonagall, do that? Get angry at a trifle?"

"Well," said Neville, beginning to get a little nervous about revealing so much. "You do have quite a temper."

"Tell me something, Neville," she said, dropping her unfinished newt and pushing the tin away abruptly. "Are you afraid of me? I mean, were you?"

"You've been under a lot of strain," he said evasively, echoing Madam Pomfrey's words.

"In other words, yes, you were afraid of me," Minerva said, getting up and beginning to stride around the kitchen, very much like her professorial self. "Are you afraid of me now?"

"No. Not at all. I. . . I like you."

"Oh, Neville." She sat down suddenly and put her head into her hands, and he thought she might be crying.

After a moment, he got up to massage her shoulders, smoothing his thumbs over the linen of her robe (tartan today), letting the tips of his fingers brush her neck, the way he had done to Hannah Abbott last spring, when they had taken a picnic to the lake.

It had been a great day, back then. . .back when Dumbledore hadn't yet died, back when the Ministry hadn't yet fallen, back when he'd been foolish enough to think that he and Hannah might come to mean something more to each other. . .back then, before the world had exploded into war, and he'd been close to happy.

Some of that happiness returned now as he touched Minerva, and then he found himself leaning down to her, and she was turning her head towards him, and suddenly they were both on their knees, kissing, her arms around him as he wound one hand into her hair and let the other stroke the skin of her cheek, skin as soft and beautifully lined as the velvet petals of a *holoserica bellituda* flower. She tasted of ginger and tea, and he pulled her tightly against him. . .

The sensation of her breasts against his chest finally brought home to him just exactly what he was doing: he was taking advantage of a sick woman. . .an amnesiac. . .his own professor. . .his — Merlin, his *seventy-year-old* sick professor. . .

Neville dropped his hands at once and scuttled backwards, away from Minerva. "Oh, god," he babbled, scarcely able to breathe, "oh, god, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean, I never meant. . ."

Minerva was still on her knees, clutching the kitchen chair as if it were the only thing keeping her upright. She was staring at him in what he was sure was horror, one slender hand pressed to her chest. Yet Neville thought he must be some sort of depraved sicko, because even after what he'd just done, he still noticed how attractively her hair spilled over her breasts, still thought about how soft her lips had been against his.

He hung his head in shame, and only then did he realise that she was speaking.

"Can you ever forgive me, Neville? No, I'm sorry, I shouldn't even ask you to. There's no excuse, none. You'd best go report me now to Madam Pomfrey, I'm sure she'll have official forms to file, there will be charges to make, I understand that —"

"What. . .what are you talking about?" Neville finally managed to ask. He watched as she slowly stood and then lowered herself onto the chair; he himself wasn't capable of anything except collapsing back against the wall.

"About my unconscionable sexual assault upon you," she said. "It was criminal —"

"An assault? Criminal? You? No!" Neville was aware that he was being incoherent, but he couldn't believe that she seemed to think that she had been the one at fault.

"No," he said again. "I'm the one to blame, I'm the one who assaulted *you*. I took advantage of you in your weakened state —"

"Took advantage of me? Nonsense! Make no mistake about it, I was doing exactly what I've been wanting to do, which makes it worse. I had no right. You told me yourself, I was once your teacher —"

"But not any more!" Neville interrupted hotly. "I haven't been in your classroom for almost two years, and what's more, I'm of age. So please, Minerva, don't say anything more about sexual assaults. I knew what I was doing, and I really wanted to."

And, his shocked brain reminded him, she'd just said it was *whatshe* had been wanting to do, too. She'd been wanting to kiss him. *Him*, Neville. . .

He staggered to his feet and crossed to stand before her at the table, careful not to touch her.

"Minerva?" he said. "I really mean it. I wanted to. I wanted to kiss you, and I wanted —" He stopped, flushing painfully. "I'm sorry."

She looked up at last. "Perhaps we both should just stop apologising, Neville. We each appear to have given into an unexpected temptation; you may blame all that 'strain' we've apparently been under, or anything else you like, although" — she paused to give him a small, wry smile — "I'd prefer not to hear any more waffle about my supposed 'weakened state.' Let us chalk it up to a momentary aberration and say no more about it. Agreed?"

"I —" Neville felt something tighten inside him; it was a feeling he'd grown accustomed to during his Dumbledore's Army training, but even as a child, he'd felt it. His grandmother had called it "mulishness," but he thought it was more like determination. "No. No, I don't agree."

He sat down in the chair opposite Minerva, and this time he did touch her, reaching out to take her hands in his own, part of him still amazed at his own boldness. "Please hear me out, and then if you still want to drop this, I promise I won't say another word about it."

"Very well." Minerva looked expectant, her face wearing the expression of the professor when she was waiting for a student to answer a question during Transfiguration class. But she didn't withdraw her hands, which Neville took as a good sign. He ploughed ahead.

"Our world is at war, and both of us could be dead by this time next year. This time next week, even. We have something here, something special — this cottage, this time away. It won't last, but it's ours for now. I don't want to waste it. I want to keep coming here as long as I can, and seeing you, and holding your hand if I want to."

He wasn't sure if he should say the next thing on his mind, but then again, what did he have to lose? "And I want to kiss you again. Kiss you and then. . ."

He knew he was blushing, but he didn't look away.

She raised an eyebrow slightly. "And then?"

"I don't know. Whatever you want." But despite himself, his eyes slid towards the bedroom, and he was sure she noticed.

If she did, though, she didn't indicate it. She merely said, "But you know this *will* end, Neville. At some point, it will end, and we will have to go back to our other lives. Whether my memory returns or not, we'll have to live with whatever happens here."

"I can do that."

"Perhaps. But it may still be a mistake. I like you, Neville; you're funny and smart and kind. But you are. . .what? Twenty years old?"

He couldn't bring himself to correct her.

"And I must be three times that, if not more," she went on. "The world may judge us — judge me — harshly. I may judge *myself* harshly, if I ever recover myself, that is."

"I don't care about our ages!" Neville said. "They don't matter. We're both grown-ups."

Minerva shook her head. "It's not that simple," she said. "You don't want to live with regrets, Neville. And I. . .well, in my usual mind, I might be the sort of person who would refuse to forgive myself for exploiting you."

"Yes, that's possible," honesty compelled Neville to say. "But you won't need to blame yourself. You won't be exploiting me. I know what I'm doing, and I won't regret it. I'm not a child. I don't need to be protected."

She seemed suddenly near tears. "Oh, my dear, we all of us need to be protected," she said, squeezing his hands. Then she touched his face gently. "I think you should leave now, Neville."

"But —" He knew he'd said that he would shut up if she asked him to, but now he thought he couldn't bear it if she did.

"Leave, and think carefully about this," Minerva said. "You say you're not a child, and you're right. So please go and think about what you're suggesting, about the consequences and implications. Think about it like the man you are. I'll think about it, too."

At least she hadn't said no.

Neville stood. "I'll think about it," he said. "And then I'll come back."

"I'll be here."

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 9

Neville and Minerva make their decisions.

Chapter 8

He did think about what she'd said, or he tried to, but the truth was, he'd already made up his mind. He didn't care what might happen next week or next month. It was as he had told Minerva: no one in wizarding Britain these days, in Hogwarts or out, had any guarantee of making it to tomorrow, let alone any more distant future.

Carpe diem.

So instead of thinking about consequences, Neville spent a large part of the night alternating between thinking of further arguments to persuade her and being a nervous wreck about the fact that he might be about to have sex with his Head of House.

And not just that, but she was an older woman. She'd have had sex before, she'd know what to do and what she liked, and she would see at once that he was. . . well, not very experienced, that he was. . .

Oh, all right — she'd see that he was still a virgin.

He had moral qualms, too — was it wrong of him to encourage Minerva to do something that he was 100% certain she would never consider doing if she were Professor McGonagall? He was sure the professor would never sleep with a student, whether they were actually in her classes or not.

But then again, Minerva had said she wanted to kiss him, she hadn't laughed at him when he'd suggested more, she herself had scoffed at the notion that she was weak or ill or needed someone to make her decisions for her. . .

And he wanted her.

Now if only she'd continue to want *him*.

In the end, none of it turned out to be necessary — not his fears that she might change her mind, not his carefully-planned arguments, not the sexual worries of his early-morning insomnia (*What if he couldn't figure out how to do it? What if he was clumsy and hurt her? What if his, um, bits refused to work? What if he couldn't. . . oh god, would she expect him to know how to. . . ah, satisfy her?*).

When he got to the Room of Requirement the following night (long after curfew and any possibility of a visit from Madam Pomfrey), the weather was as warm as summer, the moon was high, and starlight showered everything with a silvery glitter.

Minerva was on the darkened terrace, her feet bare, her hair long and free down her back. Neither of them said a word as Neville put his hands on her shoulders and gathered her into his arms, and when he finally stopped for breath after a long and satisfying kiss, she took his hand to lead him into the bedroom.

He'd thought he might be embarrassed when they got naked, but it felt totally natural to shed his clothes and to watch her remove hers, to press their bare bodies together and to feel her hands move slowly down his back.

Neville usually liked sturdy girls with a little meat on their bones, like Hannah, but he found Minerva's pale slenderness appealing, too. It was with a sense of wonder that he cupped her breast in his palm and touched the smooth curve of her stomach.

He wanted to tell her that she was beautiful, but felt it might be too much of a cliché, and besides, he didn't want to stop kissing her. When her fingers found his cock for the first time, he thought he might expire with shock and pleasure. . . and also with the fear that he would come right there in her hand.

"Please," he muttered. "I don't want . . ."

Minerva seemed to understand, for the next thing he knew, they were on the bed, and there was more kissing and stroking, and then she was guiding him gently, and he was inside her, and . . . oh. Oh.

Afterward, they lay together in the starlight. He had finished too quickly, Neville knew, and there had been several moments of awkwardness and readjusted positions, but she hadn't seemed to mind, and as for Neville himself. . . well, no wonder poets wrote so much about this. No wonder.

He raised himself on his elbow to look down at her, all silver and shadow in the moonlight. "I'm afraid I was too fast," he said.

She reached up to run her fingers through his hair. "Next time, you can be slower if you like."

Next time. There was going to be a next time.

There were six next times, in fact: five evenings in the bedroom, and one glorious afternoon on a charmed blanket in the heather. Neville had never imagined himself lying naked and relaxed in the open air, but now, with the Room of Requirement guarding their privacy, and Minerva warm in his arms, he thought he'd like to stay like this forever.

But the very next day, Madam Pomfrey appeared while he was helping Professor Sprout repot Bouncing Bulbs.

"If you both wouldn't mind stopping at the infirmary this evening," she said. "I think we ought to talk about winter strengthening potions for some of the younger students."

"Well," said Professor Sprout after Madam Pomfrey had left. "I'm not generally in favour of dosing children with too many potions, but there have already been quite a few colds this season, so perhaps it's for the best. And we've got to keep their strength up, poor dears. This year is hard enough as it is, what with those Carrows" — and here her voice conveyed more hatred than Neville would have thought her capable of — "and Professor McGonagall's disappearance. Oh, dear, Neville, it's been over a month. What on earth could have happened to her?"

"It could be anything, I guess," Neville answered, not liking to lie too directly to Professor Sprout. Not that he didn't think she was soon to get her memories back anyway, for surely that's what Madam Pomfrey really wanted to talk about: Professor McGonagall.

Maybe Madam Pomfrey and the others had found a cure for the amnesia.

That idea didn't please Neville as much as he knew it should.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 9

And so it ends.

Chapter 9

But that was, in fact, what had happened: that evening, after Professors Flitwick and Sprout had got their memories out of the pensieve, Madam Pomfrey explained that their most recent experiments had seemed to succeed and that they should try the resulting potion-and-charm combination on Professor McGonagall as soon as they could.

"I'll go now," she said. "If it works, the results should be almost immediate. We could have Minerva back with us for breakfast. If she feels up to it."

"Oh, I think she'll be fine; she'll want to check on her students as soon as she can," said Professor Sprout. "And Neville has been taking such good care of her." She beamed at him, and Neville hoped he didn't blush too badly.

"But how will she ever explain things to the headmaster?" Professor Sprout went on.

"I have a few thoughts along those lines," said Professor Flitwick. "I'll go with you now, Poppy; Minerva and I will cook up something."

"Neville, you'd better go back to your common room," Madam Pomfrey told him. "Be conspicuous in your presence. Just in case you need an alibi. You, too, Pomona. Snape should find as many people accounted for as possible."

Neville wandered back to the common room slowly, wishing he'd had a chance to tell Minerva goodbye before she took the cure.

Of course, maybe it wouldn't work.

But it did. To the buzzing amazement of the entire school, Professor McGonagall was in her accustomed place at breakfast. Neville professed to be as astounded as anyone else and told Ginny that his lack of appetite was the result of his being so excited that the professor was back.

She was in her usual teaching robes, complete with high hat and spectacles. Her hair was in the tightest of buns, and she never looked Neville's way.

At the conclusion of the meal, Headmaster Snape stood up to address them, and the room immediately fell silent.

"As you can see," Snape said. "Professor McGonagall has returned, safe and" — here he glanced at her sharply — "as sound as she ever is. She has told me the story of where she has been, and I have found it satisfactory. There is nothing further you need to know. As of this morning, she will be resuming her teaching duties as normal." He glared at them all. "And if I hear any gossip or rumour-mongering, the transgressors will be dealt with severely. That is all."

The students all filed silently out of the Great Hall. Neville knew that the curious talk would start as soon as they were out of Snape's and the Carrows' earshot, but for now, he was glad of the quiet.

He spent the day in a kind of haze of jumbled feelings, and was both relieved and a little anxious when a house-elf came to the common room in the evening, saying that Professor McGonagall had asked to see him in her office.

She was behind her desk when he came in, but she offered him tea and ginger newts, something she'd never done before.

"Mr Longbottom," she said, "Madam Pomfrey tells me that you have been very kind in looking after me during my recent difficulties, and I wanted to let you know how much I appreciate it."

"Oh, that's all right, Professor," Neville said. Her title slipped out without thought; he would never dream of calling her "Minerva" now.

"I know things haven't been easy this year, and it was good of you to add so much more responsibility to all the other claims on your time. It couldn't have been much fun for you, babysitting me."

"Oh, it was nothing like that," Neville said, hiding a smile. "I was glad to do it. Really glad." He watched her fingers curl around her teacup and tried not to think about the last thing he'd seen them curled around. She had been a different person then.

"Do you, ah, remember anything about your time in the Room of Requirement?" he asked.

She shook her head, and he caught the scent of her achingly-familiar perfume. "No, and Madam Pomfrey says I am not likely to. It's disconcerting to have lost a month of my life, but I expect I'll adjust. And at least no permanent harm seems to have been done."

"No," Neville agreed, his voice as neutral as he could make it. "Nothing permanent."

It was for the best, he thought, firmly tamping down his sense of loss. She — Minerva — had been right. How could they have faced their real lives with the knowledge of their affair lying between both of them? He realised with certainty now that she never *would* forgive herself if she knew.

"Would you prefer to have your memories of this business removed, Mr Longbottom?" the professor asked. "It's irregular, to say the least, but Professor Flitwick can Obliviate you without leaving scars. You might be safer."

"No, that's okay," Neville hastened to say. "I'll be fine. No one suspects me or anything."

He'd face a platoon of Snapes and Carrows before he'd give up a single second of those memories. He wanted to remember every moment of his time with her, when they had been just "Neville" and "Minerva" and nothing else.

"All right, then. If you're sure. But if the headmaster or anyone begins to hound you, I want to hear about it. They'll have to answer to me, Death Eaters or no Death Eaters. Do you understand?" She fixed him with her trademark glare, and Neville almost smiled. McGonagall the Fierce was back.

"I understand." He finished his tea and stood, setting his cup on the desk. "Well, I should get going. Thank you, Professor."

To his surprise, she got up, too, and came around the desk to put her hand on his shoulder. "Thank *you*, Neville."

Before he could talk himself out of it, he leant over and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"You're welcome," he said.

--End

A/N — Thank you for reading! I know the ending is inconclusive and swift, but I hope it doesn't disappoint you too much. The tale could go on, of course: to future psychological effects, to possible future events, to a look at Minerva's pov, but this felt like a natural stopping-point for Neville's story.