

Discovery

by MMADfan

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Not Pottermore compliant. Please note that this story presumes an earlier birth year for Minerva (approximately 1924), making her a contemporary of Tom Riddle.
Written for Minerva Fest 2015.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The thickening clouds sank more deeply towards the earth, seemingly impaling themselves on the high crags of Ben Muc-Dubh, and then spreading languidly but inexorably to envelop the lower peaks and roll toward the already fog-enshrouded castle. The earth had taken on a strange purplish hue as the sunlight surrendered the hills to the thick cloak of clouds. A slash of lightning cut through one of the most distant clouds, though even Minerva's acute feline hearing caught no reverberating thunder. Soon, though, the thunder would come, and pounding rain with it.

Minerva raced along the narrow track, paw-sore and chest burning with exertion, but she dared not stop. The rain might not yet have reached her, but a damp wind, which earlier had only rustled the leaves and brushed the bracken, now bent grasses and ferns flat and wrestled treetops; the whitebeams, leaves pale-tossed, were twisted tree spirits against their darker but no less tortured cousins. Minerva heard a long, ear-splitting crack as one ancient tree, asked to flex one time too many, crashed to the earth.

She had never been so terrified in all her sixteen years. The wind threatened to carry her off, to smash her against the rock, to blow the life from her. She was too frightened to stop, too panicked to transform, only able to fly from the storm.

Had she been in the hills near her home, she knew a few good, safe nooks to shelter in. Rocky hollows and caves that had sheltered a small girl would have been havens to her Animagus-self. But she was in the hills near Hogwarts, where she had wandered against all sense and all school rules, and with which she was scarcely acquainted. There would be no sheltering womb of stone for her until she was safe within the castle.

She had not seemed so far from Hogwarts when the clouds had first begun to gather grey-blue in the west. And despite knowing that storms could sweep in with a sudden ferocity, Minerva had dawdled by a mountain spring, enjoying the cool breezes through her fur, fascinated by the water as it sprang and glittered over the rocks on its way, no doubt, to Black Lake and the Giant Squid. It was only when the sun had been completely swallowed by the banks of ever darkening clouds that she shivered and realised that she should have headed back to the castle much sooner.

It seemed an eternity before Minerva reached and crossed the rails that, for her, marked the border between Hogwarts and the rest of the world. But crossing them did not diminish the storm that followed her. She could no longer run, but only struggle towards the stone wall that was her final obstacle before reaching the grounds.

The rain began to pelt down upon her as she approached the wall. Disoriented and half-blind from the rain in her eyes, she couldn't find the low, broken spot in the wall that she had bounded just a few hours before. If she were in her human form, she would have wailed and wept, and she thought, with some asperity and self-recrimination, that

it was just as well she was not able to, and that it served her right, after all. Finally, she found another spot, not as low as the one she'd crossed that morning, but with a handy heap of rubble from which she could scramble to the top of the wall.

In fair weather, that might have worked fine. Minerva could have walked along the top of the wall and easily found a pleasant landing spot to jump down to. But with this gale, she could only crouch at the top of the wall, ears flat, claws digging almost uselessly into the wet broken rock, and wonder whether the wind would tumble her off into the grounds or back down into the mud she had just come from, and how many bones she might break in the process. She yowled then, piteous, frightened, and defiant all at once. She would simply leap, leap into the unknown. Someone would find her in the morning, alive or dead. She wondered whether she would transform back to her human form if she died.

Suddenly, large, rough hands grabbed her about the middle and pulled her down. Before she knew what was happening, she was ensconced in warmth. Rather a reekish warmth, especially to her cat nose, but warmth, nonetheless. Soaked to the skin, she leaned heavily into the rough woollen jumper of her rescuer. He...for her rescuer was most certainly male...still held one arm supporting her beneath an oilskin coat, patting her with one great hand through the stiff, slick cloth. Minerva trembled, with cold and the sudden relief of her panic, and the man held her more tightly to him, as if hoping to warm her more by smothering her in the heavy knit of his pullover. It had been made of raw, undyed wool, she realised, spun thick and knit thicker, and it still smelled vaguely of sheep under the gloss of cheap pipe tobacco and sweat.

They walked for several minutes, and Minerva grew warmer and a bit sleepy, starting awake at the creak of a heavy door on old iron hinges. Not the great doors to the castle, she recognised, but shelter...possibly one of the tower doors, or the small back door that led down to the house-elves' realm of kitchen, larders, laundry, and secret places to which the house-elves forbade her entry. But there were no stairs, and a few moments later, gentle hands gloved in pig hide removed her from her cosy refuge.

The room was dim. Across the room, one lit oil lantern hung from a hook, its wick low, and a few dying embers smoked in a fireplace grate. Minerva couldn't think where they could be. It was like no place she'd seen in the castle.

The large hands laid her gently on the rag rug in front of the fire. Minerva had no will to do anything; her head drooped, her body relaxed, and she entered the half-sleep she'd learned to enjoy in her tabby form. She had no fear of the great boots that stepped around her to add kindling and a good-sized log to the fire, and she experienced only mild curiosity when her rescuer shoved a crumpled page from the *Daily Prophet* beneath the wood and used a bellows to encourage the embers to a flame, which quickly consumed the paper and caught the kindling.

Minerva was vaguely aware of the man shuffling about, removing his coat and boots, apparently changing clothes...his wet trousers, at any rate...and putting a kettle on for tea. She still didn't know who her rescuer was or where they could be ...

Minerva must have drifted into a full sleep, for she became aware of waking up to the pleasant aroma of warm milk, and her fur was dry on the side toward the fire. She stirred, stood, stretched, and sniffed the milk, then she looked up. More lamps were lit, including a large one in the centre of a round table. She was clearly in a very small stone house, probably no more than two or three rooms, and there, standing with his back to her as he beat eggs with a fork, stood Ogg.

Ogg? Silent old groundskeeper Ogg had rescued her? She felt as if she would flush with shame if she were in her human form. She had laughed at the jokes some of her peers made about the homely, ungainly, barrel-chested man...more out of desire to fit in than because she shared the joke. She was glad she wasn't one of the students who called him 'Ugg the Caveman' behind his back, sometimes within his hearing. But she'd never said anything about the unkindness, either. It hardly seemed worth it. The man was quite strange, after all. He probably hadn't any feelings about such things. That was a lie she would outgrow, Minerva decided immediately. He wasn't a Squib, but it was put about that he'd left Hogwarts after his fifth year after Trolling out of every single one of his exams. He was never seen to do magic, and he was always perceived as being quite apart from the rest of the staff. Professor Kettleburn spent time with him, as did Professor Merrythought, but he still seemed an outsider.

'Here tha go, chuckie, tuck in. Ah hope tha likes eggs.' His voice was warm with Yorkshire vowels, and he set a bowl of scrambled eggs down beside the saucer of milk.

Famished, Minerva practically inhaled the eggs, glad that she wasn't a girl who needed to mind her manners, then she licked the saucer of milk clean. She'd never tasted anything so good in her life, she thought, her tummy full and warm. In fact, it was the first time she'd eaten or drunk anything other than water while in her Animagus form. She must try other things sometime. She lay down and stretched out in front of the fire, warming her tummy and paws.

She flinched only slightly, from surprise, when Ogg knelt beside her and petted her.

'Ah've a towel now. Don' be flayt. Ah'm jus' gonna finish dryin' tha off.'

With gentle hands, Ogg rubbed the towel over Minerva's fur, ruffling it up and getting to her undercoat, then he took a small, damp cloth and washed her paws, carefully cleaning the mud from between each of her digits and toes. If she had been a real cat, Minerva thought, she would have bathed herself immediately...at least washed her front paws and her face after eating. But the towelling-down felt good, and Minerva found herself falling asleep again. She woke to the sensation of a rather foul-smelling greasy goo being applied to her paws. She wrinkled her nose in disgust and pulled away her foot.

'There, there now, lassie. This smells nasty, bu' 'twill put tha reet.'

Minerva slept, sparing only a little thought and no worry to the question of what she would do about gaining her dormitory room unseen and before curfew. It was hard to tell what time it was; the storm had darkened the skies early, and though now the rain had tapered off to a mild pitty-pat, the small cottage was not vested with many windows. Exhaustion overcame any concern she might have had for lost points, detentions, or other punishments. She felt she'd survived a veritable Armageddon; the worries of a schoolgirl seemed petty just then.

There was a dull thudding at the door. Minerva woke and stood, then scurried behind a large copper log hold when Ogg rose and shuffled to the door. A gust of chill air reached her.

'Pr'fesser Dumbledore! Come in. 'Tis a wet night.'

'That it is, Adam, and the cause of my worry.'

'Worry, sir?'

'I'll come straight to the point. One of the Gryffindor girls is missing. A fifth-year, sensible young witch, normally, but no one's seen her since breakfast. None of the students. Sir Nicholas saw her leaving the castle just before lunch. He said she was headed down toward the lake.'

'She's not in t' library or owt?'

'Nowhere in the castle. We're organising a search. Galatea will be working with Sylvanus and Hazel to, eh, search near the lake. Galatea gets on well with the Merpeople, so we hope they will help.'

'Ah hope the lass ain't drowned herself. Give us a minute, Pr'fesser. Ah'll just fetch me mac and boots.'

'Thank you, Adam. I knew we could count on your assistance.'

Minerva listened to the conversation with growing anxiety. She couldn't let them lead a search for her in this weather...no doubt going into the Forbidden Forest, dragging the lake, knocking up the local Magical Law Enforcement in Hogsmeade...but she didn't know if she could make it back to the castle, unseen and unnoticed even in her Animagus form, and just 'turn up' somewhere, either. No, letting this go any further would only compound her transgression.

Tail low, Minerva stepped out from behind the wood hold and took a few gooeey paces toward Professor Dumbledore. Her head of house saw her before she'd passed her empty food bowls. His eyebrows rose.

'Adam?'

'She's not ourn, Pr'fesser. Found 'er lost in t' storm. Likely belongs t' somebody in Hogsmeade. She be well fed an' quite tame.'

Professor Dumbledore blinked. 'Ah, yes, in my concern for my delinquent student, I neglected to mention that there was also a cat missing from the castle. I'm glad that you found her, Adam. She was in my keeping, you see, and I believe her, eh, her guardians would have been most vexed had I lost her.'

'Right-o, Pr'fesser. Tha can take 'er, then.'

Dumbledore crouched and lifted the mortified Minerva into his arms. 'Thank you, Adam. I am grateful.'

Ogg rubbed her under the chin with one large finger. 'Happy t' share our dinner. Tha are good cumpny fer an old man, chuck.' He quickly picked up his boots and sat down, embarrassed, apparently, by his expression of feeling and uncommon loquacity.

'Just come up to the castle in fifteen minutes,' Dumbledore said. 'We'll have a plan in place for the search then.'

The air outside was noticeably cooler than the warmth of Ogg's cabin. Dumbledore said nothing to her, carrying her somewhat stiffly up the path towards the greenhouses.

'I would put you down, as you seem to have one of Horace's more pungent potions on your paws, but you might get yourself lost again.'

Minerva shook her head, frustrated for the first time since her ordeal began at being unable to speak. It had been nice with Ogg, not merely keeping up the pretence that she was an ordinary cat, but also because there had been no *need* to speak. Lovely and relaxing.

'Very well. I will set you down. But do not transform until we are in the castle and in private. You have caused quite a stir with your absence. Miss Augusta was quite beside herself. And you know that the Bloody Baron does not like to be roused on account of Gryffindor, so having the ghosts search the castle for you aggravated Horace. Not,' Dumbledore hastily added, 'that Professor Slughorn was aggravated with you. We were all rather worried.'

They neared the door to the North Tower.

'Now ... where shall we find you, hmm?'

Minerva sat on her haunches as Dumbledore paused and thought a moment. He nodded decisively, then picked Minerva up again, this time holding her a bit more cosily.

'The old chapel,' he whispered as they passed through the door to the North Tower. 'Closed for some good time...before I was a student...and difficult to enter, or to leave. You will be found there. I shall send Cyril to look for you.'

And so Minerva waited in a dank, dismal, somewhat unnerving old chapel that she had never known Hogwarts to possess, crouching on the remains of a prie-dieu, the only furniture left in the chapel aside from the altar, and she felt uncomfortable using that as a perch. Finally, after what felt an aeon, there was a loud scraping and creaking, accompanied by some grunts and a few muttered incantations to ease the ancient hinges, and young Professor Harbottle, her History of Magic teacher, stepped in. Minerva remembered just in time to transform back to her normal form, trying to make the transformation as quiet as possible.

As she heard him take a few steps on the hard stone floor, she called out, 'Hello! Who's that? Oh, do say something, I've been stuck in here ~~forever~~ and I'm all nerves!'

'Miss McGonagall! It is you, that is, you are here! The castle's in a bloody uproar, er, that is, everyone's in an awful state. We were all about to go out and search the grounds for you, when Dumbledore, that is, Professor Dumbledore has a quick word with the headmaster, and next I know, Dippet, that is, the headmaster, sends me off on a fool's errand to find a *chapel* of all things! But I say, this is all rather marvellous, ain't it?' He looked about him, and Minerva for the first time noticed the many carvings, arches, and stained glass windows of the chapel. 'Fourteenth century, I'd say, wouldn't you? Oh, and look at this! This is Merlin if it's anybody,' he cried with delight. 'Right next to John, Saint John, you know. My, there aren't many examples of wizarding chapels left in England. Er, well, that is, Britain.' He gave her a crooked, boyish grin. 'No offence to the Scots.'

'None taken,' Minerva replied, bemused.

'But here I am waffling on like my grandfather's parrot and you're drowned! Well, that is, you're *not* drowned, which is more to the point. And a very good thing too! Must get you back to hearth and home, or your dormitory, as the case may be and actually is.'

Minerva laughed despite her anxiety.

Harbottle didn't return her directly to her dormitory, but brought her down to the Great Hall, where an assembly of staff and prefects had gathered to search. Her best friend, Augusta Brightwood, had shown an unusual, one might say uncharacteristic, degree of emotion, even going so far as to hug her. Briefly, and hands on the arms only, but still, it was an embrace of a sort. Poor Gussie. Minerva didn't know whether to tell her the truth or not, she felt so guilty about upsetting her and all her other friends. In the end, though, she did, and Gussie not only forgave her immediately, but had been transfixed, eager, horrified, delighted, and amused by Minerva's 'escapade', as she called it. She was particularly interested in Minerva's description of Ogg.

'Odd,' Gussie mused. 'I'd never have taken him for an animal lover. He sounds rather ... sweet.' She said the last word dubiously, as if unfamiliar with it.

'He is. And I'm going to make sure that nobody, no Gryffindors anyhow, call him Ugg the Caveman again!'

Minerva went one better than that, though. Once she had finished with her long detentions with Professor Dumbledore, which, after the first couple, were actually rather fun and very interesting, Minerva began visiting Ogg. At first, lest it seem too strange to him, she would just greet him with a smile each time she saw him, or cross over to speak to him briefly, but then one bright April morning, she wandered down to his stone cottage at the edge of the Forbidden Forest and knocked on his door. Ogg was dumbstruck, but managed a nod and to ask her what she needed.

'Well, Mr Ogg, it's a little difficult to explain. Would you mind awfully if I invited myself in?'

Baffled, Ogg stepped aside as Minerva squeezed in past his bulk.

'I need to thank you.'

Ogg's eyebrows rose.

'You see, I've had a special project. Professor Dumbledore has asked that I not talk about it with anybody, because, well, he has his reasons. But you almost already know, so I'd like to tell you about it. Or show you.'

Now Ogg's brow was furrowed. He really didn't want to have anyone see some young witch in his cottage. Impropriety was frowned upon, and Headmaster Dippet had impressed upon him the importance of not behaving in any unseemly fashion, though Ogg wasn't entirely sure what that meant.

'Well, here goes!'

Ogg had expected the girl to draw her wand or recite incantations, but she simply popped and vanished. Or didn't vanish. In her place was a lovely tabby cat. Ogg's jaw dropped.

'The lost girl! The lost cat!' Ogg said hoarsely.

Minerva popped back, transforming fluidly into her normal form. 'So you see, I really do need to thank you. And I hope that I might visit sometimes. As an Animagus. If you wouldn't mind terribly.'

Ogg, bemused, shook his head, mumbled something about the young lady being welcome any time, and Minerva let herself out.

So when, not very long after that, her fellow Gryffindor Rubeus Hagrid was sentenced to have his wand broken, denied magic, and allowed, through Dumbledore's intercession, to take up the post of assistant groundskeeper and live in one of the unused outbuildings, Minerva was sure that Hagrid would be all right in Groundskeeper Ogg's care. And she had one more person to visit as a tabby.

For the rest of her life, Minerva remembered the lesson learned that stormy autumn day shortly after her sixteenth birthday, and though she seldom thought of how it began, she often visited people she was curious about, taking care to be seen only as a stray tabby cat.

The End