

A Slant-Told Tale

by Squibstress

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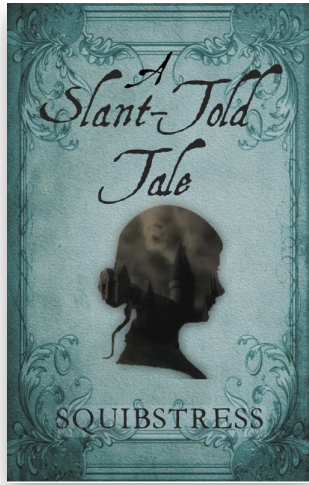
Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 48

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Tell all the truth, but tell it slant

Emily Dickinson ~ 1129

"The truth. . . It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution."

Albus Dumbledore (PS, Ch. 17)

"Moody, we never use Transfiguration as a punishment!"

Minerva McGonagall (GoF, Ch. 13)

Chapter One

14 April 1944

Minerva McGonagall clutched the parchment in her hand as if it were an amulet, which, in a way, it was.

The word most observers would have used to describe the girl was "icy". She accepted that, although she would have preferred "calm", which was the effect she always hoped to project. There was no sense, she thought, in appearing upset about things one couldn't change, whatever one actually felt about them. If people sensed your distress, they could use it against you.

So she was at pains to appear calm during the meeting, calm as she put her quill to the parchment, calm as she grasped her father's arm to Apparate back to their home, calm as she excused herself to finish revising.

Above all, Minerva Maighread McGonagall was calm. Or "icy" if one preferred, which some did.

When she reached the relative sanctity of her bedroom and unrolled the parchment, she silently cursed the hand that belied her calm appearance with its shaking. As much to stop it as to smooth the parchment, she ran her palms firmly over the magically copied document as she spread it out over her small desk. She re-read the words on the page, every single one of them, although they were already etched into her mind and had been since her father had read them aloud to her and her mother two days before.

MAGICAL MARRIAGE CONTRACT

~~~~~  
WHEREAS Gerald Findlach Macnair of Aberdeen, being of sound mind and lawful age, son of Kenneth Robert Macnair and Heloise Marie Rookwood Macnair, has promised to take in marriage Minerva Maighread McGonagall of Moray, of sound mind and lawful age, daughter of Magnus Malmuire McGonagall and Glenna Beathag Selwyn McGonagall,

AND

WHEREAS Gerald Findlach Macnair has pledged to provide home and financial support to Minerva Maighread McGonagall for the duration of her lifetime, and to any offspring of their marriage,

AND

WHEREAS Minerva Maighread McGonagall has pledged to remain faithful to Gerald Findlach Macnair and to provide at least one (1) male heir to the marriage, provided she is physically capable of conceiving and bearing children,

AND

WHEREAS Kenneth Robert Macnair has pledged to provide to Gerald Findlach Macnair the sum of ten thousand Galleons (G10,000),

AND

WHEREAS Kenneth Robert Macnair has pledged to provide Magnus Malmuire McGonagall with a bride-price of two thousand five hundred Galleons (G2,500) and the lease of one hundred (100) years' term on the property adjacent to that known as "McGonagall Manor", located near Upper Dallachy, Moray, for the sum of one Galleon (G1) per annum,

AND

WHEREAS Gerald Findlach Macnair has pledged to provide full tuition pursuant to the acquisition of a Mastery of Transfiguration by Minerva Maighread McGonagall,

AND

WHEREAS Gerald Findlach Macnair has pledged to permit Minerva Maighread McGonagall a period of two (2) years in which to pursue a Mastery of Transfiguration, during which time he shall not prohibit or otherwise prevent Minerva Maighread McGonagall from attending tutorials or completing coursework pursuant thereto, and

whereof the term shall be pro-rated to exclude time away from coursework due to confinement and childbirth,

AND

WHEREAS Gerald Findlach Macnair and Minerva Maighread McGonagall pledge that any offspring of the marriage shall be educated at an accredited school of magic (or equivalent Muggle institution, should any offspring of the marriage prove not to possess magical powers), regardless of gender,

AND

WHEREAS both parties to the marriage shall have the usual and customary duties of marriage including, but not limited to, the following:

Mutual society;

Mutual rearing of children;

Mutual sexual congress: each party to the marriage agrees to engage in sexual intercourse at any time upon the request of the other party, with the following exceptions:

1. During illness, or at any time during which sexual intercourse would be harmful to the health of one or both parties;
2. During menstruation;
3. During pregnancy, nursing, and for six weeks following childbirth;

AND

WHEREAS the following activities or behaviours shall be considered violations of the marriage contract:

Adultery: defined as sexual intercourse with any individual or individuals outside the marriage contract;

Abortion: defined as the deliberate termination by any means, magical or Muggle, of the life of a foetus after fertilisation;

Assault against a party or child of this marriage: defined to be injurious or potentially injurious physical contact;

Criminal behaviour;

AND

WHEREAS the violation of any of the terms of this contract shall be subject to adjudication and remedy by a panel of legal experts selected by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement,

AND

WHEREAS all terms of this contract shall take effect and shall become Magically Binding immediately upon the marriage between Gerald Findlach Macnair and Minerva Maighread McGonagall; should the marriage not be executed by the thirty-first day of July, nineteen forty-four (31 July 1944), all terms and conditions herein shall be rendered null and void, without prejudice to any party,

I, Reginald P. Menzies, notary and registrar of the Department of Wizengamot Administration Services, by the authority granted by the Ministry of Magic, do pronounce and declare Gerald Findlach Macnair and Minerva Maighread McGonagall Betrothed, notarised this day, the fourteenth of April, nineteen forty-four (14 April 1944), Edinburgh, Scotland.

Gerald Findlach Macnair

Minerva Maighread McGonagall

Witnessed by:

Kenneth Robert Macnair

Magnus Malmuire McGonagall

Reginald P. Menzies

Registrar

Minerva quelled the panic that threatened to rise in her breast by focusing on the eighty-eight words that would be her salvation...the words for which she had fought harder than she had ever fought in her eighteen years of life.

In three months' time, she would become an apprentice to one of the greatest mistresses of Transfiguration in Europe. In exchange, she would also become the wife of a man she barely knew but about whom she had heard quite enough to suspect just how high the price of her education would be.

**24 April 1944**

"You wanted to see me, Professor?"

"Ah, yes, Minerva. Please do come in," said Dumbledore, rising from his desk and walking around it toward the young woman standing in the doorway.

"Is there an issue with my coursework, sir?" she enquired as she stepped into his office.

"No, no, not at all. What I wanted to discuss with you was a more personal matter. In fact, I would be pleased if you would join me for a spot of tea in my sitting room," he replied, turning toward the large portrait of Hieronymus Gamp at the back of the office.

"Sloe gin fizz." When Dumbledore spoke the password, the painted Gamp nodded, and the portrait slid aside to reveal the door to the Transfiguration master's private quarters.

Minerva quirked a questioning eyebrow at him as she stepped through, and he said, "Muggle drink. Quite nice," as if that explained everything.

On his invitation, she sat by the fireplace as he prepared the tea. She was composed as always and didn't enquire further about the subject of Dumbledore's summons. It troubled her mentor and Head of House from time to time that she never seemed to betray much emotion, and this, he suspected, would be one such occasion.

While he poured the tea and doctored his with milk and three lumps of sugar, he watched her out of the corner of his eye. She sat sipping her tea...black...with no sign of curiosity as to what he wanted to discuss with her.

After taking a sip from his steaming cup, Albus broached the subject that was on his mind. "My dear, I read in the *Prophet* this week that you are betrothed."

"Yes." She didn't even blink.

"To Gerald Macnair."

"Yes."

He searched her face for a moment and saw nothing there to betray her feelings on the matter. For a fleeting moment, he considered using Legilimency to suss them out, but he immediately discarded the idea as an abuse of his power, and one for which he suspected she might never forgive him.

"Then I suppose congratulations are in order."

"Thank you, sir."

There was a pause during which he considered his next move.

*Careful, man. Start with the obvious. Don't frighten the girl unnecessarily.*

"Forgive me my dear, but it was my impression that you hoped to take up an apprenticeship with Madam Marchbanks after your graduation."

"Yes. I will begin working with her just after the honeymoon."

"I am very glad to hear it, but I must admit that it perplexes me a bit."

When she didn't speak, he continued. "Again, forgive me, but I am surprised your fiancé has agreed to such an arrangement. The Macnairs are known to be somewhat . . . old-fashioned in their outlook, particularly with regard to girls...women...and their education. I don't believe we've had a Macnair witch at Hogwarts in many decades; as I recall, most of them have been sent to magical finishing schools on the Continent."

"Yes, that is the case," she replied.

"So am I to take it that young Gerald is more enlightened in his opinions than is his family?"

He saw Minerva allow the ghost of a smile to cross her features.

She said, "No. However, he has no choice in this matter. My apprenticeship is part of the marriage contract."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"It's quite simple, Professor: I agreed to the marriage only with the stipulation that I be allowed to pursue my apprenticeship and that it be fully funded by my husband as part of my bride-price. He has also agreed that we will send our children to proper school, even if they have the misfortune to be girls."

"Well, that's . . ." began Dumbledore, flabbergasted.

For the first time since their meeting began, Minerva betrayed a glimmer of uncertainty. "What?"

"Astounding."

"Astounding that I managed the stipulations, or astounding that I agreed to the marriage?"

"Both. But why? Why did you agree, Minerva?" It pained him to know that the brightest student he had ever had was to be pawned off as a prize in what was most likely a business arrangement between two clans. And to that family! Aside from what Albus knew to be fact, there were troubling rumours about some of the family's more personal habits.

He regretted his judgemental tone when she spoke angrily.

"I had little choice, Professor," she said. "My father insists that I marry, and that I marry a pure-blood, otherwise he'll cut me off entirely. I could manage...find some kind of work after graduation, I suppose...but I could never pay for my apprenticeship on my own, at least not for some time. I don't want to lose the opportunity to work with Madam Marchbanks. Once I've attained my own mastery . . ." she stopped.

"What?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "As I'm sure you've surmised, the Macnairs insisted on a binding marriage. I suppose I'm hoping that after I've fulfilled my part of the bargain, Gerald won't care what I do as long as I don't dishonour him or the Macnair name."

"Your part of the bargain? What is 'your part' other than marrying a man you obviously do not love?" Dumbledore enquired, trying and failing to mask his growing anger at the situation in which his favourite student had been placed.

"Come now, Professor. Surely you can guess?" she said.

"Of course," he said, nodding. "And how many heirs are you required to produce?"

"Just one. As long as it's a boy," she said

Her flat demeanour was beginning to grate on him. Surely the girl had some feelings on the subject?

"Minerva, I cannot quite comprehend how you could agree to this. You must know what it means..." he started, but she interrupted.

"Yes, Professor, I am quite aware of what this agreement makes of me. But at least I get something out of it for myself. You see, my father was quite content to whore me out to the highest bidder, and as he's a piss-poor businessman, I had to look to my own opportunity. It was a difficult fight to get even this much, believe me."

"But surely, Minerva, you could have refused to marry at all."

"Oh, yes...Knutless girls with good pedigrees and no qualifications may not have much chance at decent positions in the Ministry or in respectable business, but I understand they're quite in demand in the brothels of Knockturn Alley. As it is, I've simply traded up: a bedroom in the Macnair family manse instead of a doxy-infested bedsit in the Alley."

He was glad of her outburst; it showed she allowed herself at least a little emotion about the topic.

They were both quiet for a minute. Then she asked softly, "Do you think less of me?"

"No. I think you are even more extraordinary than I ever knew."

She rewarded him with a small but genuine smile.

"Minerva, if you wished . . . I could provide you with some money . . . both for your apprenticeship and to live on. I would..."

She cut him off. "That's very kind, Professor, but no, thank you. I think I'd much rather be a whore than a debtor."

"Oh, Minerva. You are most certainly not a whore."

"A brood-mare, then."

"Not that, either."

"Well, whatever I am, I am not going to be destitute, nor am I going to be at the mercy of rich old men all my life. I'm going to finish my education, and then we'll see what I will become."

*'Rich old men'. Touché.*

Minerva may not show much feeling, but she certainly knew how to cut to the quick of others' emotions, he thought with grudging admiration. He had to admit it was a useful skill.

They sat in silence, finishing their tea, before Dumbledore turned the conversation to the thing that had been particularly troubling him since he had first read the banns with an increasing sense of alarm that Sunday.

"I vaguely remember Gerald from his time here, although I didn't know him well."

"No, you wouldn't have. He only did two N.E.W.T.s, and neither was in Transfiguration."

"Do you think he will make a decent husband?"

She stifled her laugh. "He's not a terrible sort, but he's a Macnair. I don't know him that well myself, but from what I've seen and heard, he's rather dull-witted, likes his Abraxans, and believes my name and his money will entitle him to the good opinion of all and sundry."

"His father is not a pleasant fellow, that much I do know," said Dumbledore, his brow furrowing. "He's known to be sympathetic to Grindelwald's cause. I hope Gerald doesn't take after him in that respect."

"I don't know as Gerald has any true political sympathies," she replied. "He's far more interested in who'll win the next Pegasus Cup than in who leads the wizarding world."

"I suppose that's just as well. But I'd hate to see you get pulled into those circles. Whatever else you may accuse your own father of, I've never heard a whisper that he supports the Dark forces."

"No. He doesn't support them, but he does sympathise with their philosophy. He just doesn't care much for their methods."

After another few moments of awkward silence, she said, "My father isn't a bad man, Professor Dumbledore. He's just . . . old-fashioned, as you put it, and terrified of poverty. Even of the genteel sort. I think he really thinks this marriage is what is best for me . . . that Gerald will take care of me, even if he can't. Our property and what little is left of the family money will go to my brother. My father just wants to see me settled and secure."

Then she added, without discernible bitterness, "Of course, it helps that he gets twenty-five hundred Galleons and some very favourable lease terms from the deal. That will be enough to settle his debts and remove the lien from our property."

Dumbledore heaved a deep sigh. "Well, my dear, it seems your mind is made up."

"It is."

"I suppose all I can do, then, is to offer you my support. You know you can come to me at any time...even after you leave school...after you're married...if you need anything. I hope you will consider me a friend."

He was surprised to see tears welling in her eyes. "I do, thank you, Professor." She hesitated a moment, then embraced him stiffly. He placed a brief kiss to the top of her head and released her.

"Thank you for the tea, Professor. And the talk," she said as she moved toward the door.

He gave a brief nod of his greying head, then she slipped out the door and was gone.

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**Author's Note:** I've uploaded an image of the marriage contract to the Harry Potter Fanon Wiki. Click [here](#) to see it. (Click image to enlarge it.)

## Chapter Two

*Chapter 2 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

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**29 April 1944**

The following weekend, Minerva found herself in her bedroom in Moray listening to her mother attempting to explain sex to her.

After several excruciating minutes, Minerva couldn't take any more. She interrupted Glenna's discourse on "the joys and sorrows of the wedding night", saying, "Mother, if you're trying to tell me that it's going to hurt the first time, it's all right. I know."

"Oh. Well . . . there it is, then."

"Quite." Minerva managed a weak smile at her mother. She was doing her best, Minerva knew, but Glenna McGonagall had what her daughter considered to be an untidy mind and what devotees of Muggle literature would have recognised as a Victorian sensibility about certain matters.

Suddenly, Glenna exclaimed, "Minerva, you don't mean you . . . you've . . . you've not . . . spoilt yourself?"

"No, Mother. Don't worry. It's just that, well . . . the other girls, they talk. And some of them have . . . you know . . ."

Glenna sniffed. She had not been terribly enthusiastic about sending her daughter back to school after her O.W.L.sHogwarts was altogether full of the *wrong sort*, she had argued...but Magnus had insisted, to Minerva's profound relief.

"Well, is there anything else you'd like to ask? That the other girls have not expounded upon . . ."

 Glenna asked.

"No, Mother. But thank you."

Actually, there was quite a bit Minerva would have liked to ask, but her mother was not her first choice of informant on the matter. In point of fact, her first choice of informant on many forbidden topics was Tom Riddle. He was one of the few students Minerva could have a real conversation with, and he was a veritable fount of information on select subjects extraneous to the Hogwarts curriculum. But of course, Minerva wasn't about to ask a boy anything about sex...even if she did have the suspicion that Tom Riddle would be as informative on that subject as on anything else...and anyway, he had become rather distant after the Chamber of Secrets affair the previous year.

When she thought about sex...specifically about having sex with Gerald...she felt a bit dizzy. He was attractive enough, she supposed, but she couldn't imagine herself lying beneath him while he puffed and sweated over her. She felt desire in the abstract way of many adolescents, but only recently had she considered the notion of thinking about a specific person when she touched herself. However, there was no one who ignited her fantasies or desires. And Gerald . . . well, she just didn't know him, and what she did know wasn't exactly arousing.

She thought she might have time to remedy that. She was to spend every weekend at home, preparing for her wedding and getting acquainted with her bridegroom-to-be (under the eye of her mother or father, of course) and, more importantly to Minerva, revising for her upcoming N.E.W.T.s. It was slightly surreal, she thought, to go from reading about the special considerations in trans-elemental Transfiguration one moment to listening to her mother drone on about Goblin silver patterns the next. She kept finding herself musing on how she might go about changing an asparagus fork into a goblet of Firewhisky and back again without spilling any of the liquor.

As it turned out, her meetings with Gerald Macnair did little to ignite Minerva's passions. Just as she had feared, he was dull as dishwater and could talk of little but his winged horses and gossip about the people he knew, most of whom she didn't. The few deeper conversations they had when they were left more or less to their own devices in the parlour or the library of the McGonagall home...no doubt to encourage the young people to "get acquainted" in the form of a bit of the traditional snogging and petting that could be interrupted should it grow too serious...didn't reassure Minerva of the wisdom of her decision to marry him.

Gerald had sheepishly confessed that he had not, at first, wanted to marry her. It was his father's idea, he said, and when his father decided something . . . well, it was decided. Gerald said he was happy it turned out that Minerva was the girl his father had settled on; she was, as he put it, "nice to look at" and "sweet-natured" to go with it. Minerva suppressed a snort at this assessment of her charms.

That was all well and good, but over the days and weeks, Gerald revealed more about his family than Minerva wanted to know. Kenneth Macnair, it turned out, was more than just a supporter of Gellert Grindelwald. Much more. He was, quite simply, a sadist, and probably mad to boot. Gerald matter-of-factly described beatings and punishments that made Minerva's flesh seem to shrink on her frame. The context of these discussions was Gerald's insistence that he didn't hold with his father's methods and intended to "do things differently" with his own family, a statement at which Minerva gave a deep sigh of relief. Still, it was troubling to Minerva that Gerald seemed to accept his father's brutality as a matter of course, even if he didn't intend to perpetrate it himself.

And there was more. Gerald's uncle, he confessed*sotto voce*, was in Azkaban...quietly tucked away there without a trial, thanks to the greasing of many a Ministry palm...for crimes Gerald only hinted at, and at which Minerva could only shudder to guess. And Gerald's grandfather had been killed by two of the volunteer Dark-wizard-eradication brigade that had predated the organisation of the official Auror department. Gerald didn't elaborate on why; he only said that it had been "a blessing to everyone" that the man had died at the age of forty-seven.

Minerva was slowly piecing together a horrifying portrait of madness that ran through the Macnair family like a cancer. It didn't seem to strike everyone in the family...Gerald's aunt and his older cousins seemed to be relatively upstanding members of society...but the presence of three demonstrated sadists on his recent family tree kept Minerva awake nights. Even if Gerald turned out to be all right...and he seemed sane enough at the moment...what of his children?

The more Minerva thought about it, the more certain she became that she did not want to bring more Macnairs into the world.

**2 June 1944**

"Time! Quills down, please."

Minerva gave a sigh of happy relief as she laid her quill neatly at the side of her desk. She thought she had acquitted herself fairly well in all her N.E.W.T.s. In any event, she was quite certain she had garnered an "Outstanding" in the one exam that really counted for her. At the end of her Transfiguration practical, Madam Marchbanks had smiled and said, "I'll look forward to seeing you in July, Miss McGonagall." Minerva rightly took this to mean that she had earned the top marks Marchbanks required of a potential apprentice.

Which left her free to focus on her next problem.

In two weeks, she would be Madam Minerva Macnair.

As she walked down the Transfiguration corridor, she went over again in her mind what she intended to say when she got to Professor Dumbledore's office. He would agree; he had to agree. And he had to do it in the next few days, or all would be for naught.

Minerva screwed her courage to the sticking place and knocked.

"Enter," he called as the door creaked open. "Ah, Minerva! I thought I might see you today. Finished with your exams, are you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, that calls for a bit of celebration, don't you think?"

"If you say so, sir . . ."

"Oh, I do, I do. What would you say to a small glass of champagne in my quarters?"

"I would say that sounds lovely."

They adjourned to his sitting room, and Albus Summoned a bottle of Salon 1937, which uncorked and poured itself into the two glasses that materialised, hovering just in front of the two celebrants.

"To the no-doubt successful completion of your N.E.W.T.s," he said, raising his glass.

They both took a sip, and Minerva said, "This is really lovely, Professor. We haven't had champagne at home since the Muggle war began."

"I've had this squirreled away for a special occasion," he replied.

"And you've chosen to waste it on a student?"

"I assure you, Minerva, it is not wasted. And you aren't just any student, you know. You are very special."

She felt the heat rise to stain her cheeks.

"Besides, my dear, the end of your school year also marks another important stage in your life."

"You mean my marriage."

"Actually, I was referring to your apprenticeship with Griselda. Oh, yes . . . she came to see me after your exam to let me know you had performed as brilliantly as we all knew you would."

Minerva gave him the first truly wide smile he'd seen from her in months. It faded all too quickly.

"Professor, when you said I could come to you for anything, did you mean it?"

"Yes, of course."

She hesitated, and he prodded her.

"Is there something on your mind, Minerva? Something I might be able to help you with?"

"There is. But it's hard to tell you."

"Well, perhaps another sip of this miraculous elixir, and we can have a seat, then maybe you can tell me *hmm*?"

She nodded.

They sipped and sat for a few minutes before she gathered her courage. "Professor, would you consider going to bed with me?"

Her nerves turned to dismay when he choked on his champagne for a few moments. When he caught his breath again, he said hoarsely, "Minerva, I'm not sure I've apprehended you correctly. I..."

"I asked if you would consider going to bed with me. Having relations with me, I mean. Sexual relations. Because I would very much appreciate it if you would consider it." It had come out in a bit of a jumble, and much too quickly, but he certainly understood her meaning this time.

However, he said, "I'm still not sure I understand." When she opened her mouth, he put a hand up and said, "I believe I understand the request; what I do not understand is why you are making it."

"Because I would rather not have my first experience be with Gerald Macnair."

Her professor didn't say anything for a few seconds. He just peered at her with an odd expression on his face.

"He will be your husband. You will be expected to have relations with him, Minerva."

"I'm aware of that. But we've already established that I don't love him. The fact of the matter is that neither do I find him attractive in that way. Maybe it's a foolish notion, but I had rather hoped that the first time I was with a man, it would be someone I actually liked and found . . . desirable."

"Minerva, I am your professor. And I am more than three times your age."

"Yes, but you're kind, and I know you, and I know you care about me . . . and you are attractive to me . . . physically. Probably because of those other things."

"That's most flattering, my dear, but I..."

"And you wouldn't hurt me."

Neither of them spoke for a few moments, then he asked, "Are you afraid Macnair will be rough with you?"

"I don't think he will try to hurt me, if that's what you mean," she answered. "But I doubt he'll be at pains to be gentle."

She felt a prick of guilt at this small falsehood; Gerald might be self-absorbed and dull, but she doubted he'd be completely insensitive to her physical pain on their wedding night. However, appealing to Dumbledore's sense of masculine honour and his protectiveness was, she thought, the swiftest way to victory in this.

Her feelings of guilt increased as she watched him struggle with this information and what to do with it. But she consciously set aside her feelings and concentrated on maintaining her air of calm.

"I just would rather not have to worry about that aspect of things," she continued. "I can bear whatever I must during the marriage, but it would be very nice to have some control over this one thing. To have it be my choice."

"I see," was his only comment.

"Of course, Professor, I'll understand if you don't want to. It's awkward, I realise, and I know I'm not the prettiest witch at Hogwarts . . ."

He shook his head, saying, "Please, Minerva. You know it has nothing to do with your attractiveness. You are a lovely young woman, and any man would have to be blind not to find you so . . ."

"Or if there's a physical reason you can't . . . you prefer not to . . . I understand . . ."

He surprised her by laughing suddenly. "Well, you certainly know which strings to pull to get what you want, I'll give you that. You were doing quite well until you impugned my manhood. That was a bit ham-fisted."

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean..."

"It's all right, Minerva. No offence taken . . . either at your implication or your methodology," he said. "But your other reasons for making your request...were those genuine?"

"Yes, sir," she answered. "I really would prefer to be with you than with Gerald my first time. It's that simple. If you don't want to, I will understand, but if you do, I'd have one more reason to be exceedingly grateful to you."

"You say that now, but you may think differently afterwards," he said softly. "It has been many years since I've been with a witch. And while I recall the basic procedure, I'm somewhat out of practice with the subtleties. You might find me a disappointment."

Her surprise dumbfounded her for a moment. "You mean you'll do it?" she asked finally.

"If it is what you truly wish."

"Yes, I do."

"Very well. Did you have a particular timeframe in mind?"

"Um . . . the sooner the better, I should think. Tomorrow?" she asked hopefully. Right now would be fine with her...she was a girl who liked to get difficult things over with...but she had a potion to take, and it needed time to work.

"Tomorrow, then. Why don't you come to my office after dinner. Then we can adjourn to my private quarters. All right?"

"Yes, fine, thank you, sir." She hesitated a moment, then asked, "Is there anything you'd like me to do? I mean, should I wear something special?"

She saw the smile he suppressed as he said, "No, my dear. As you are will be just fine. Except . . . leave your school robes behind, if you would."

"Of course."

"And I needn't mention, of course, that you can tell no one about this."

"No, of course not. Besides, I've no one to tell," she said.

He looked at her for a few moments, then said, "Until tomorrow, then."

"Yes, Professor. Thank you, sir."

As soon as she got back to her dormitory, which was blessedly empty...all the others were out, presumably celebrating the end of N.E.W.T.s...Minerva retrieved the phial she had hidden in her trunk. She hurried down to the dungeons and gave the password to the Potions classroom. It was lucky, she thought, that Professor Slughorn was too lazy to supervise private brewing hours for his N.E.W.T. students. He just gave them the password to the classroom and storeroom and let them come and go as they pleased.

Even so, Minerva hadn't used the classroom to brew this particular potion. She didn't want anyone to see the book she was using and make inconvenient enquiries.

She slipped into the storeroom and searched among the untidy stacks of boxes and jars until she found the final ingredient she needed for her potion.

The girls' lavatory on the second floor was deserted, as it had been since the terrible events of the previous June. Minerva slipped in and conjured a small fire.

"Hello, Minerva."

*Almost deserted.*

"Hello, Myrtle. How have you been keeping?" Minerva didn't particularly want to engage the ghost in conversation, but previous visits had taught her that it was just as well to keep Myrtle happy. Or as happy as Myrtle ever was, at any rate.

"Dreadfully, thank you. Nobody ever comes to see me," Myrtle sniffed. "Except you. You always were one of the only people who was nice to me, Minerva."

Minerva didn't think she had ever been especially "nice" to the living Myrtle, but given the viciousness with which many of the other students had treated the admittedly annoying Ravenclaw, Minerva supposed indifference might have seemed pleasant enough by comparison.

"I'm sorry people were unkind to you," said Minerva.

"They're sorry now, though," Myrtle said, giggling. "Last week, I gave Olive such a fright that she ran out of the girls' dormitory wearing only her knickers."

"I'm sure Olive regrets the way she treated you," said Minerva.

"I'd never do anything like that to you, though, Minerva," said Myrtle earnestly.

"I'm glad to hear it, Myrtle," Minerva said, crossing to a cabinet and withdrawing a small rack and beaker she had stored there.

"What are you working on? The same thing as the other times?" asked Myrtle, floating over to hover above where Minerva was crouched over her flames.

"Yes. It's just a potion."

"Why aren't you in the Potions lab, then?" asked Myrtle with a knowing smirk. "Is it something forbidden?"

"No, not forbidden, exactly. Just something . . . personal." Minerva was beginning to worry that Myrtle might tell someone about her clandestine visits to the second-floor bathroom and what she had been doing there for the past several nights.

She decided to try to enlist Myrtle as an ally. If the lonely ghost felt she was part of the secret, she would be unlikely to reveal it to anyone.

"Would you like to help me, Myrtle?" Minerva asked.

"Depends. Will you tell me what it is?"

"Of course. But it will have to be our secret. Just between us friends."

Myrtle's grey eyes seemed almost to sparkle at that.

"Between us friends, yes."

"Well, it's sort of like a love potion," Minerva lied. "But not one of the ones from the regular books. It's from the Restricted Section," she added conspiratorially. "It's supposed to be stronger than the regular ones."

"Ooooh, Minerva," squealed Myrtle, "who do you want to give it to?"

"Um . . . Tom Riddle," said Minerva, giving the first name that came into her head.

"Oh, he's dreamy," said Myrtle. "I wish . . . oh, well," she sighed.

Minerva almost felt sorry for Myrtle. She would be caught in an eternal state of stasis, never growing, never changing. Ghostly Myrtle would never have the chance to fall in love, experience being loved in return . . .

*Like me*, thought Minerva fleetingly, but threw off the feeling. It was of no use to her.

"Will you be my lookout? Make sure nobody comes in?" Minerva asked.

"All right," Myrtle replied and floated over toward the door. "I'll let you know if I see anyone. I can scare them and chase them away for you," she added happily.

"That would be very helpful, thank you, Myrtle."

Minerva opened the moth-eaten copy of *Moste Potente Potions* to the page she wanted and unstoppered the phial, adding the nearly finished potion to the beaker, which she placed over the low flames. Peering at the instructions for a moment, she next took a small silver spoon from her pocket and made three clockwise stirs. She then took the small envelope of chasteberry extract she had taken from Professor Slughorn's stores and added it in four tiny pinches. Following the instructions, Minerva waited until the potion had taken on a purplish hue and stirred it clockwise the seventeen prescribed rotations. She then performed a Tempus Charm, setting the ethereal timer for seven minutes. When the time had elapsed, Minerva gave the potion three more clockwise stirs, then put out the flames.

She waited a few minutes for the potion to cool and stabilise, then used her wand to carefully siphon the liquid back into the phial. She stoppered it and Vanished the remaining equipment.

"All done!" she called to Myrtle, who floated back over to inspect her newfound friend's work.

"Is it supposed to be that colour?" said Myrtle, wrinkling her misty nose.

"Yes, I think so."

"Oh. Well, that's all right then."

"Thank you for your help, Myrtle," said Minerva, slipping the phial in her pocket.

"That's what friends are for." Myrtle was actually smiling.

Just as Minerva was about to open the door to leave, Myrtle called to her, "Minerva?"

"Yes, Myrtle?" she said, turning.

"Will you come visit me again?"

"Of course," said Minerva, intending to keep that promise. "But you know I'm leaving soon."

"Oh, right," said the ghost sadly.

"I'm not sure when I'll have the chance to visit Hogwarts again," said Minerva. "But when I do, I'll make sure to stop in to see you."

"I'll be here," Myrtle replied.

*Yes, I know.*

As soon as the bathroom door had closed behind Minerva, she gave a furtive look down the corridor. Seeing nobody, she took the phial from her pocket, unstoppered it, and downed the vile liquid in a single gulp.

*That's that, then.*

*Please, sweet Nimue, let this work*, she thought, placing her palms against her lower abdomen.

*Please.*

## Chapter Three

*Chapter 3 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**3 June 1944**

Minerva's preternatural calm was unnerving.

If Albus hadn't known better, he would have sworn he was more anxious than she was about what they were about to do.

She had arrived precisely one half-hour after he had left the Great Hall after dinner, and she had knocked as briskly as ever on his office door.

Her "Good evening, Professor" was as normal and businesslike as it had always been.

When he showed her into his quarters, she took in the crackling fire, the bottle of wine, and the dim lighting without comment.

"I thought a bit of wine wouldn't go amiss," he said.

"That's very thoughtful, Professor, thank you," she replied.

"I think, Minerva, that just for this evening, I'd like you to call me by my given name."

"All right, Albus."

He poured the wine and handed her a glass. They raised no toast, neither one being certain of what they should be celebrating.

They sat in front of the fire, drinking the wine and chatting amiably about everything but the topic that was foremost in his mind.

When Minerva had finished her wine, Albus carefully took the glass from her hand and banished it. He clasped her hands and remarked, "Your hands are like ice." Bringing them up to his face, he gently blew on them.

"Was that a charm?" she asked.

"Yes, a Warming Charm."

"You did that with just your breath?"

"Yes."

"You'll have to teach me that trick someday, Pro...Albus."

"If you like," he replied, still holding her hands in his. He drew her closer, wrapped his arms around her, and leant in to press his mouth to hers. It took a few moments before she began to respond to his kiss by moving her own lips along with his.

He drew his head back and asked, "Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

"Yes."

So he continued kissing her and eased her back until she was half-lying on the settee, beginning to stroke her cheek and neck as they kissed. Kissing her like this was pleasant enough, but he had the feeling that she was far away; her responses seemed more rote than anything else, and it disturbed him.

He harboured no illusions that she was aching with want of him, or that he was a lover to induce swoons in young women...or young men, for that matter...but he wanted to give her pleasure. If it turned out that Gerald Macnair was a dud in bed...or worse...Albus hoped that at least this time, she could experience the kind of delight that an attentive lover could bring. He wanted to show her what it could be like, and to perhaps help her to understand what kinds of things gave her pleasure, in the hope that she might be able to lead Macnair to provide it for her.

He moved his lips to her neck and placed a hand deliberately on her chest, just above the gentle swell of her bosom. He was encouraged when her hands gripped his shoulders a bit tighter, so he moved his hand to cup her breast and was rewarded with her slight intake of breath.

The first stirring of his arousal announced itself as he gently squeezed her breast and played his fingers over her nipple, now hardened under the thin cloth of her blouse. Her barely audible gasp...the first real sign of enjoyment she had given...made him want to explore what other kinds of touches might elicit another.

He played with her nipple for another minute, and when she brought her leg up to wrap around him, he allowed his body to press against hers for the first time. She didn't react, although he was certain she could feel his erection pressing into her thigh. He interrupted his ministrations to her neck and breasts to ask, "Shall we adjourn to the bedroom?"

He didn't want to rush, but he thought he should move things forward while he was still aroused. If he waited too long or thought too much about it, the evening was quite likely to end in disappointment for Minerva and embarrassment for him.

"Yes, let's," she said, sounding slightly out of breath, he was pleased to note.

When the bedroom door was closed behind them, he asked, "Have you ever seen a man, Minerva?"

"You mean naked? No. Not in the flesh," she answered. "I . . . I'd like to see you."

"Your wish is my command, my dear," he said as he began to unbutton his outer robe.

When he had removed his robes and undershorts, it took a few moments before Minerva allowed her gaze to wander south of his face. He saw her blink a few times, so he asked, "Would you prefer I cover up again?"

"No . . . it's just . . ." she dropped her head, and he was alarmed for a moment, until he realised the shaking of her shoulders was caused by laughter.

"Well, I must say, it's never garnered quite that response before."

She looked up, eyes tearing, and said, "Oh, no, Prof...Albus . . . it's not that . . . it's just . . . the oddness of all this."

He laughed a little too, then. "It is rather surreal, isn't it?"

"That's a good word for it." After a few moments, she said, "I am sorry. I didn't mean to laugh, and certainly not at you."

"It's quite all right, my dear. I'm glad we can find some humour in this," he said. "Seriously, though; would you prefer we forget about this? We can stop now and say no more about it, if you wish."

"No, I want to go through with it." She smiled and added, "And it looks as though you do, too," nodding at his erection.

"I have no defence," he said, grinning back at her.

Turning serious, she said, "Will you kiss me again? I rather enjoyed that."

He stepped toward her and drew her into his arms, kissing her gently as she ran her hands up and down his now-bare back. It felt very good, and his cock gave an appreciative twitch when her fingers brushed over his arse.

*Not too fast, man*, he reminded himself as his arousal grew. *The point is to give her pleasure.*

He broke the kiss and asked, "May I undress you, Minerva?"

She nodded, and he set to work on the buttons of her blouse. When it and her skirt and shoes were gone, leaving her in her slip, he took her hand and led her to sit at the edge of his bed. Kneeling in front of her, he slid his hands up her leg to find the top of her stocking and ran his finger under the edge to release the charm that held it up. She gave a soft sigh and wriggled ever so slightly, as if to move her centre closer to his fingers. He smiled and began to roll the stocking slowly down her leg, covering each newly revealed inch of flesh with a kiss, ending with her great toe.

He repeated the procedure on the other side, and when he stood again, he noticed that she was flushed and breathing slightly harder than before.

"Stand up for a moment," he instructed. She did, and he kissed her again, this time sliding his hand from her waist to her breast, lingering there, kneading gently as he moved his lips from her mouth to kiss and suck at the side of her neck. When he had worked his way to her shoulder, he let his hands gather the skirt of the slip and begin to draw it upward. She raised her arms to allow him to pull it entirely off her, which he did, dropping it on the floor between them. He began to kiss her mouth again and brought one hand back up to play with a now-bare breast as the other twined around her back and pulled her close up against him, bringing her into direct contact with his hard cock for the first time.

He felt one of her hands slide tentatively around to his waist as she moved slightly backwards; then the hand moved between them to touch his penis with her fingertips. She broke the kiss to look at his face, asking, "Is this all right?"

"*Mmm*. More than all right, Minerva," he whispered as her hand closed more firmly around him. "More than all right."

She wasn't applying much pressure, but he thought he had better move things along if he wanted to last long enough to accomplish the evening's goal. It had been a very long time since anyone else had touched him there. He stilled her hand with his own and said, "Let's lie down."

She moved to the bed and reclined on it, knees demurely together and turned to one side. He sat beside where she lay and ran his hands down her torso, stopping at the waistband to her knickers. He asked, "Do you need me to cast a contraceptive charm?"

"No. I took a potion," she replied.

He nodded his approval, and then drew her knickers down and off. "I'd like to do some things now . . . to give you pleasure. Would that be all right?"

"Yes," came her quiet response.

He began to tease her thighs with his fingers as he bent his head to take a nipple in his mouth. As he licked and sucked, he felt her legs fall open slightly, and he moved his fingers to brush against the folds of her sex. She gasped, and he unbent his head to ask, "Is this all right?"

"Yes," she breathed. "Please . . . touch me . . ." she whispered and opened her legs wider in invitation.

He slid his fingers between her folds to find her clitoris. As he began to rub it, she started to moan softly. Very shortly, her moans became mewls of delight, and when he felt her thighs begin to tremble, he introduced an index finger into her opening, gently pressing it against the walls of her vagina. He felt her begin to pulse and spasm around his probing finger as she cried out her pleasure. When her orgasm had faded and her breathing slowed, he withdrew his fingers and moved his lips to light small kisses on her forehead, eyelids, cheeks, and finally, her lips.

When she opened her eyes to look at him, she murmured, "I . . . um . . ."

He knew she was embarrassed, and he reassured her, saying, "I'm glad you enjoyed that, my dear."

"But you didn't . . . I mean, we didn't . . ."

"No. But there's plenty of time for that yet."

"I want to give you pleasure," she said. "I'd like you enjoy this, if you can . . ."

"I will. For the moment, though, it gives me pleasure to make you feel good. Which I'd like to continue, if you'll let me."

She gave him a shy smile, which he took as assent. He said, "Just lie back and let me take care of you, Minerva. If I do anything you don't like, just tell me and I'll stop."

She relaxed back into the pillow, and he continued to kiss her mouth, pleased at her now-enthusiastic response to his lips and tongue. After a minute or two, he broke the kiss and began to travel down her body, stopping to kiss and gently suck at key points along the way: the base of her throat, between and on each breast, her belly button, and finally, the inside of each thigh.

He slid his arms under her knees and drew her closer to him, allowing his warm breath to tease her sex. He pressed a feather-light kiss to her nether lips before parting them with his tongue. When it touched her clitoris, she gasped; he took it as a positive sign and began to lick and stroke it, turning her gasps to moans, and then to high-pitched cries. He moved one arm out from under her leg and slid a finger back into her, a little farther this time, adding a second one when she didn't seem to flinch or object in any other way to the intrusion.

He stopped licking her when her second orgasm took her, but he didn't withdraw his fingers, simply shifting his hand so that the heel of it pressed against her mound as she pulsed and shuddered.

He waited for her spasms to abate, taking the opportunity to stroke his semi-hard cock back to firm attention. The time had clearly come to do what she had originally asked of him. Withdrawing his fingers from her, he moved up to cover her body with his own, letting his cock settle between her legs.

Her eyes were open and clear, although she was still breathing heavily.

"I'm going to enter you now, if you're still sure that's what you want."

"Yes," she said.

He used a hand to guide his penis to her entrance and pushed in with a single smooth stroke. It was better that way, he had heard, than moving too slowly, although he had no idea if it was true. When she gave a slight cry, he chastised himself momentarily for not having asked one of his witch friends for advice. But then again, such an inquiry would have been met with a great deal of curiosity from anyone he knew well enough to ask.

After allowing her a moment to get used to him, he started to move, studying her face for any sign of discomfort. When she made a slight grimace, he stopped, asking, "Are you all right?"

"Yes, just . . . slowly, please," she whispered, so he slowed his strokes and began to kiss her jawline and neck. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and shortly, he began to feel very good indeed. After a few minutes, he had to concentrate solely on not driving into her too hard or too fast.

When he felt his orgasm coming on, he started to gasp and threw his head back in ecstasy. "Gods . . . oh, Minerva . . . so good . . . ohhhh," he moaned as he began to come. As he shuddered the final moments of his climax, he couldn't help bucking his hips into her spasmodically a few times.

When his euphoria faded, he kissed her lips briefly before rolling carefully off of her. He shifted so he was facing her and lifted his hand to stroke her cheek. "I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"No. Well, a little . . . but it couldn't be helped. It wasn't nearly as terrible as some of the girls say," she replied. "Thank you."

"No thanks necessary, my dear Minerva. I just hope we've achieved what you hoped for."

"Oh, yes. That, and more. I didn't expect . . . what you did before."

"Did you enjoy it?" he enquired.

"Yes," she said with a laugh. "Couldn't you tell?"

"Well, I hoped," he said.

They lay there in silence for a while, and then she said, "I think I'd best be going before it gets too late and someone misses me."

It came as a relief to him that she was eager to leave. "Yes, you're probably right. Do you want to use my bath to freshen up?"

"Yes, please."

When she emerged ten minutes later and came into the sitting room where he was reading last week's *Transfiguration Today*, he stood, and she said, "I cannot thank you enough, Professor."

"There is no need to thank me, Minerva," he answered.

"I don't suppose you would want to repeat this tomorrow evening, or the next? I wouldn't mind a bit more experience before . . . well, before turning myself over to Gerald."

*Oh, dear.*

"No, Minerva, as tempting as it is, I don't think it would be wise. But if you will wait a moment, I will jot down a spell that you might find useful."

He went to his desk, took up a quill, and wrote a few lines on a piece of parchment, which he handed to Minerva.

"You'll see it's quite a simple charm, but you may wish to practice it before your wedding night, if you believe you will not be . . . anxious for intimate activity. It is helpful to be able to do it wandlessly and wordlessly."

Looking up from the parchment, Minerva said, "Thank you, Professor. This was . . . it was more enjoyable than I anticipated. You were very kind, and I appreciate it."

"Oh, Minerva. It is easy to be kind to you, and it was easy to make love to you. You are lovely and astonishing," he said, reaching out to brush a strand of hair from her cheek.

"Thank you, sir," she said again, folding the parchment he had given her and putting it in the pocket of her cardigan. "Goodnight, then."

"Goodnight, my dear. Sleep well."

Well, that had gone a bit better than he had anticipated. He had agreed to her proposal out of a genuine desire to help Minerva; he knew there were many who wouldn't believe that, but no one who knew him well could have accused him of having had sexual designs on the girl. He knew she had been manipulating him when she was trying to persuade him to agree...*and one old manipulator should recognise another*, he thought with a chuckle...but her reasoning had been sound enough.

Albus honestly didn't really recall Gerald Macnair very clearly, but if what he knew of the elder Macnairs was any indication, Minerva was right to be concerned about his behaviour in the bedroom. She had said she didn't believe he would deliberately hurt her, and Albus thought her judgment was probably sound, but then again, she didn't have much experience in the peculiarities of men's sexual proclivities.

And "peculiar" didn't begin to describe the Macnair men.

Albus had objected to putting Finn Macnair away without benefit of trial, but the nature of the man's crimes had made him heave a sigh of relief on behalf of Knockturn Alley's prostitutes when the lunatic had been shut away for good. And although it had been before Albus' time, the rumours he had heard of the late Kenneth Walden Macnair gave Albus a suspicion about where Finn had acquired the skills for his bloody hobby. He knew for a fact that the elder Macnair had been targeted for "removal" in late 1888 after the Muggle prime minister had called an almost unheard-of emergency meeting with his wizarding counterpart.

Moreover, the current Kenneth Macnair had once been called on the carpet by the Department for Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures for his treatment of his house-elves...a thing that was notable for its rarity; usually everyone turned a conveniently blind eye to house-elf abuse, so Macnair's behaviour must have been especially impressive. Albus had discovered this when he made a quick investigation of Minerva's husband-to-be after reading of the betrothal. His queries had turned up nothing on Gerald Macnair himself, fortunately.

He didn't know if, or how much, Minerva knew of the Macnair family history, but he thought it was prudent of her in any case to want to deal with her virginity before Gerald Macnair got his hands on her. Even if he wasn't as perverted as his father, uncle, and grandfather, the young man was probably as inexperienced as Minerva, and it was highly unlikely his father had given him any advice on making a virgin more comfortable on her wedding night.

And their tryst had been more pleasant than he had expected. He had thought he might need the aid of a few discreet charms to accomplish their goal, but in the end, he had been aroused enough.

*Will wonders never cease?*

He wasn't worried that Minerva would tell anyone about what they had done, but he was concerned about fostering any romantic feelings in the girl...feelings he could not reciprocate and that would only make things harder for her once she was married. That, as much as anything else, was why he had demurred when she suggested a second go.

Still, all things considered, he was glad to have been able to help her, even if only in this small way.

# Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 48

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**Author's Note:** Just a warning: the end of this chapter contains non-explicit references to house-elf abuse.

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**1 July 1944**

Gerald Findlach Macnair was feeling just fine.

The anti-hangover potion he had taken after the previous night's revels had worked well enough, and now he was about to marry a girl quite as pretty and well bred as he could have hoped. "A good catch," his father had said, but Gerald tended to think of her as "a fine filly". Anyway, she was far better than that Yaxley girl his father had approached the previous year. That girl actually looked like a horse.

The match was a good one, he thought. Good for the family and good for him. An association with the pedigreed but land-poor McGonagall clan would improve the Macnairs' standing in their social circles...circles in which bloodlines and pedigrees took on almost mythical importance...and the practical and intelligent Minerva McGonagall would be a grounding influence on the eldest Macnair son. Gerald tended to be a bit dissipated...he knew it about himself... and thought his father's selection of bride for him a good choice. He hoped she could help keep his mind directed, and maybe she could help keep his more troubling thoughts at bay too.

The only drawback, Gerald thought, was her insistence on this apprenticeship. Why any young woman would want to spend two years studying, and studying something as boring and as difficult as Transfiguration, was quite beyond him. "Let it be," his father had said when they discussed her absolute refusal to consider the match without the apprenticeship stipulation. "She'll forget about it soon enough when you fill her belly with sons to worry over."

The thought of filling Minerva's belly and the steps he'd need to take to do so made it hard to button the trousers he would wear beneath the traditional red-and-black dress robes he would don for the wedding. Yes, she was lovely. He would enjoy her, but he would treat her with respect on their wedding night and beyond, introducing her to her conjugal duties without exercising the special, secret desires he discharged in Knockturn Alley's whorehouses. He promised himself that.

His father had assured him that the binding magic of the marriage contract did not extend to the husband's extra-curricular activities. The anti-adultery clause applied only to the woman...a secret-but-traditional benefit secured by the equally traditional Galleons slipped, with a wink and a nudge, into the pocket of the MLE Charms master in charge of the Trace. Gerald was relieved. He had his needs, but his wife-to-be was a lady, and there were certain things a lady shouldn't have to do, even for her husband.

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At the wedding, everyone remarked on how calm Minerva McGonagall...then Minerva Macnair...seemed.

She spoke her vows clearly and submitted to her newly minted husband's kiss without hesitation. Her hand, as it signed the magical marriage register, was steady. With a pleasant smile cemented on her features, she endured kisses on the cheek from well-wishers and dances with distant relatives who trod on her toes.

When the last guest had finally been ushered through the Floo with the assistance of the Macnair house-elves...few people were foolish enough to attempt Apparition after all the toasts that had been drunk to the young couple's happiness...and the bride and bridegroom were left alone in their new suite, Minerva betrayed no nerves or shyness. She was, however, exhausted and irritable, and the prospect of enduring Gerald's efforts to consummate their marriage was more than she wanted to think about.

Yet there he was, grinning shyly at her.

Her husband.

Just standing there.

*We'll be standing here all night unless I take the Bicorn by the horns.*

She almost giggled at the aptness of her own metaphor, but she stifled it just in time. She was sure it wouldn't help if her new husband thought she was laughing at him.

"Shall I change now?" she asked a somewhat surprised Gerald.

"Yes," he replied. "Why don't you use the dressing room? I'll just change out here."

She nodded and disappeared into the dressing room, emerging five minutes later in the ecru-silk *Point d'Angleterre*-lace nightdress and matching dressing gown her mother had given her for her wedding night.

Gerald, who was now wearing a set of light-blue silk pyjamas, seemed at a loss for words for a few moments.

When he found his tongue, he said, "Merlin, Minerva, you look beautiful!"

"Thank you."

He approached her, took her gently by the upper arms, and kissed her. When he thrust his tongue into her mouth, she couldn't help making a quick mental comparison with the way Professor Dumbledore had kissed her; his lips and tongue had been gentle and teasing rather than randomly probing.

She tentatively brought her hands up to rest on Gerald's waist as he continued his foray into her mouth. When he broke the kiss, he took one of her hands and moved it to his crotch where she could feel his erection under the thin silk of his pyjama bottoms.

"Do you know what that is, Minerva?" he asked softly.

She said nothing, for fear of laughing, but left her hand where he had put it.

"It's how I feel about you," he said.

*Oh, for Merlin's sake.*

She began to rub his erection and was gratified by the look of surprise in his eyes.

"Do you like the way it feels?" he asked her.

Her nanny's words rang in her head: *"Begin as you mean to go on."*

"Yes," she lied. She didn't care one way or the other about his stupid cock, but it was just as well to start things off on as pleasant a note as possible.

"Let's lie down," he said hoarsely.

He went to the bed and turned down the heavy brocade bedclothes, grinning at her like a little boy at Christmas, which quelled her annoyance a bit. He could be rather sweet, she thought.

She removed her dressing gown and got in, Gerald sliding in next to her.

"Would you like the candles out?" he asked.

"Whichever you prefer, Gerald," she answered.

"Lit, then."

He turned to her and began to move his hands over her body, murmuring, "So beautiful, Minerva . . ." She resisted the strong urge to bat his hands away and do it herself when he began to tug at her nightdress.

Once he had worked it up above her waist, he rolled over on top of her, whispering, "Open your legs, darling," and kissing her neck.

She did so, and felt him reach down to wrestle with the drawstring to his pyjama bottoms. When he had freed his member, he looked into her eyes and said, "Just relax, Minerva. I'll be gentle."

She couldn't help wincing as he prodded around with his penis, trying to find the right spot. Gerald noticed her discomfort, repeating, "Just relax." When he found his purchase and thrust into her, she gasped. She had deliberately neglected to use the charm Professor Dumbledore had given her...Gerald might have noticed and thought it odd if she were too wet during her "deflowering"...and his penetration was painful.

"Sorry, darling," he grunted as he started to pump into her. "It will only hurt for a minute."

*And how would you know?* thought Minerva. As a matter of fact, it hurt quite a bit, and she decided she would try to slow him down a little, both to allow her some relief from his wild thrusting and in the hope that it might inform their future encounters.

"Gerald, just wait a minute . . ."

"Just relax . . . be done in a minute," he panted.

"No, it's just..."

"*Shhh*," he said. "Relax."

So she gave up and just gritted her teeth, hoping he would be as quick as promised.

When tears threatened to breach her composure, she exercised her rudimentary Occlumency skills to keep them at bay. As Gerald puffed heavily above and inside her, she focused her mind on reciting to herself verbatim the five principal exceptions to Gamp's Law. This exercise would prove quite useful over the nights and years to come.

When he finally finished two minutes later, he rolled off her, kissed her cheek, and sighed happily. "Now you're really mine," he said, pulling her stiff form close to him and kissing her ear.

A few minutes later, she heard his breathing become heavy and regular, so she gently disengaged herself from his arm. Silently Summoning her wand, she used a lancing spell to employ one of the oldest tricks on record, Muggle or magical: she opened a small cut on her thumb and allowed a few drops of blood to stain the white sheets between her legs. She then sealed the wound, doused the candles, placed her wand on the nightstand, and tried to sleep.

## 2 July 1944

Stirling had just Apparated to the laundry from Young Master Gerald and the New Young Mistress's suite when he felt a violent tug on his ear that sent him and the sheets he had been carrying flying through the air to land in a heap on the stone floor.

He looked up to see Master advancing on him, and he had to work hard to prevent the trembling he knew would earn him even worse than whatever Master had planned for him at the moment.

Relief washed over him when, instead of kicking him, Master simply whipped the sheets off the floor where they were tangled around the elf, upending and depositing him once again on the floor with a hard crack to his head.

"Oaf," Master said. Then he delivered the expected kick, though not as hard as Stirling would have expected, thanks be to Völundr.

Master wrestled with the large sheets, looking for something, and when he found it, the look on his face rendered all Stirling's efforts to prevent trembling moot.

Looking at his prize for a few moments, Master then raised the dirty sheet to his nose and inhaled deeply. When Master's hand found its way to his fly and began to unbutton it, Stirling knew it was time to go. It was disloyal, and he would devise some punishment for himself later, he thought, but just now, he would be happy to let another luckless elf happen across the scene in the laundry. Stirling had done his service on enough occasions; let someone else spend his morning gagging on the taste of the Master for a change.

Once he was safely back in the kitchens, Stirling headed to the storage cupboard to find some healing herbs. He would ask Pixar to mix up some of her special tinctures that was so soothing for bumps and bruises. If experience was any guide, Stirling thought, poor Mistress would be needing them today.

# Chapter Five

*Chapter 5 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**17 July 1944**

"Well, Miss McGonagall...I mean Madam Macnair...did you manage to resist the attractions of Paris, or wherever it was you went, long enough get through the books I gave you?"

"Yes, Madam Marchbanks. And just 'Minerva' will be fine, if you please."

Griselda gave her new apprentice a brisk nod. She thought she'd probably be inviting the child to call her by her given name eventually, but for the moment, it wouldn't do to get too familiar. Not until she knew the McGonagall girl was going to stick it out.

*Macnair. She's Macnair now, Zel. Best not to forget that.*

"Good. As I'm sure you know, I expect you to complete every assignment I give you, on time, no questions. Understood?"

"Yes, Madam Marchbanks."

"So, 'just Minerva', you have an impressive record in school, and I'm here to tell you your N.E.W.T. results were as good as any I've seen, but from this point on, you know nothing. Got it?"

"Yes, I think so."

Griselda narrowed her eyes at Minerva. "You 'think so'?"

"No, Madam Marchbanks. I know that I know nothing."

"Right. That's what I'm here for: to remedy the situation. You are here to learn what I teach, and to help me with my research once I've decided you've the brains to do it properly."

Griselda didn't fail to notice the gleam in Minerva's eye at that last.

"That appeals to you, does it? Helping me?" Griselda asked.

"Yes, Madam Marchbanks. It would be an honour."

"You bet your arse it would."

She watched Minerva carefully for any sign the girl was bothered by her language, and saw none.

*Good. Pure-blood or not, Minerva McGonagall isn't a delicate flower. Macnair. Damn.*

The two witches were nearly finished going over timetables and other details of the apprenticeship when Griselda noticed that the girl was perspiring heavily.

"Well, what is it?" she asked Minerva.

"I'm sorry?"

"You look like you're about to pass out.

"Oh, no . . . I just..." Minerva suddenly clapped a hand over her mouth, rose, and dashed out of the room.

*Merlin's balls.*

When Minerva returned, red-faced, to the lab, Griselda had a tall glass of water waiting for her.

"Here. Drink this."

Minerva followed instructions, and Griselda took the empty glass from her, Banishing it back to the dirty kitchen whence it had come.

"Better now?" Griselda asked.

"Yes, thank you. I'm sorry. I think my breakfast disagreed with me."

Griselda just gave a grunt

"Now we've covered the basics, you can tell me: Is there any field within Transfiguration that especially interests you? I do like to make sure my apprentices get to study the things they find most intriguing. They give the best results that way, I find."

"Well, I have given some thought to Animagus transformation," Minerva said.

*Not too ambitious now, are we, Madam Macnair?*

"It's a fascinating field," Griselda said. "And one of the most difficult to master."

Minerva's eyes darted around a bit, then she said, "Is it something you believe I might be suited for?"

"You might at that. And I've taught one or two who went on to become full Animagi. But I think we'd best table that until after your baby is born."

*Good. Let's get all our cards on the table straight off.*

"I . . . excuse me?" said a paler Minerva.

Griselda gave a gruff chuckle. "Come now, my girl. I may be a wizened old dyke, but I think I can put two and two together as well as any school matron."

*Let's see what she does with that.*

Minerva's eyes dropped to her lap. "I'm sorry, Madam Marchbanks."

She sounded miserable.

"Come now, Minerva, it's nothing to be upset about. Don't think I didn't think of this when I agreed to take you on despite your marriage. And don't tell me you didn't think of it, either."

"No. I just . . . this apprenticeship means the world to me, Madam Marchbanks." said Minerva. "I promise I won't let this"...she gestured in the direction of her belly..."get in the way of my work."

The girl was obviously distressed. Griselda felt her heart soften and took herself in hand to stop it.

"I know you won't. I won't let you."

## 5 January 1945

Griselda glanced over to where her apprentice was working at the microscope. Minerva was so still that Griselda witch wondered for a few moments if the girl had gone to sleep. It had happened to Griselda more than once, and there was no question that Minerva looked exhausted of late.

But no; the black head looked up from the 'scope to jot something in a notebook, then bent down again.

Griselda had to admit that the child...*young woman*, she corrected herself...was turning out to be an excellent apprentice, pregnant or not. Work always complete and well-done, never a complaint, even at the most odious of tasks, eager to learn and to talk about what she was learning, but never one to make small-talk . . . Minerva Macnair had become a fine lab companion, there was no denying it. And despite her best intentions, Griselda had grown fond of her apprentice.

Minerva never talked about her home life or her marriage, but Griselda had been able to fill in the blanks herself well enough. She'd seen the story play out with several of her Slytherin friends from school...girls who were from pure-blood families and were expected to marry well. Sometimes it worked out well, and other times . . . well . . . Griselda was happy for more than one reason that her family name wasn't so grand nor their Gringotts vault so full that anyone cared one way or t'other about her marrying. She had known from an early age that she would be making her own way in the world, and a lucky thing it was that it suited her just fine.

And a lucky thing it had turned out to be too, that she had had no money to speak of after leaving Hogwarts. Otherwise, she would have gone straight into her apprenticeship and would never have had to hire herself out as a copyist and research assistant, an omission that would have changed the course of her life, and not for the better.

There wasn't a worse curse for a girl, thought Griselda as she looked at her apprentice, than to have a grand name and only a little money. A girl with a name and no husband on the horizon *might* find work as a nanny or governess for another pure-blood family, but beyond that, pickings were slim for respectable employment. Folks just didn't seem to trust a pure-blood who didn't marry. Far easier to be of a less lofty pedigree, like Griselda. People didn't wonder why no one wanted a girl with no money and no name, especially if she wasn't pretty, which Griselda wasn't.

Of course, Bathilda hadn't seemed to care much about Griselda's background or her lack of comeliness, but the Bathilda Bagshots of the world were few and far between in Griselda's experience, and more's the pity, in her opinion.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Minerva stand, stretch, then put a hand to the small of her back. Over the months, Minerva had grown from a skinny twig of a girl into a skinny twig of a girl with an enormous belly in front of her. That, thought Griselda, had to be hard on the lumbar region.

When she heard the girl try to stifle a yawn, it was decided.

"Minerva."

"Yes, Madam Marchbanks?"

"I'm beat all to hell. What say we knock off a little early, have a cuppa upstairs?"

She could see that Minerva was taken aback. Griselda had never invited her into the house proper before.

*High time, Zel.*

"Come on," Griselda urged. "It'll do you some good, too. You look ready to drop."

"All right. Thank you, Madam Marchbanks."

"And I think you may call me 'Griselda' at this point, Minerva."

Minerva looked startled. "Thank you, Griselda."

"Come on, then. You think you can manage to haul that load up the stairs, or do I need to Levitate you?"

Minerva gave a small smile and said, "No, thank you. I can manage. Getting me to fit through the door may be a problem, though."

"Was that humour? From my serious apprentice? Whatever is the world coming to?" said Griselda, clapping a hand on Minerva's shoulder. "If we're lucky, Bathilda's already arrived and organised some biscuits."

When the two witches arrived in the main house, they could hear bustling activity from the kitchen.

"You just sit down before you drop," Griselda admonished Minerva, who promptly followed instructions. Griselda went to the kitchen door and called through, "Bathilda? I've brought Minerva up to join us for some tea. Warm an extra cup, would you?"

A few minutes later, Bathilda came bustling out of the kitchen, bearing the tea service.

"Well, you're off early today," she said, putting the tea down and bussing Griselda on the cheek.

"*Mmm*. Thought Minerva looked like she could use a break."

Bathilda took the seat between the other two women. "Yes, you do look a bit peaky, dear," she said to Minerva, pouring out three cups of tea and putting a lump of sugar in one and two lumps and a dollop of milk in the other, then handing the first to Griselda.

Griselda smiled at her companion. How typical of Bathilda to start in mothering the girl before they had even been introduced.

*Where are your manners, Zel?*

"Minerva Macnair, meet Bathilda Bagshot."

Minerva looked dumbfounded for a moment, then she recovered her wits and her own manners simultaneously. When she started to stand...a procedure that was easier said than done, apparently...Griselda waved her down again. "Oh, we don't stand on ceremony here, Minerva, as you'll see if you take tea with us often enough."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Madam Bagshot," said Minerva. "I very much enjoyed your book on the Goblin rebellions, and of course, the one on the Inquisition and the wizarding world."

"Thank you, my dear. Are you much interested in history?" Bathilda enquired.

"Oh, yes. Both Muggle and wizarding history are fascinating."

"*Hmpf*. I'm surprised you still feel that way after seven years of Binns boring you all to death," remarked Griselda.

"Come now, Zel," remonstrated Bathilda, "Cuthbert isn't that bad."

"You only say that because he's contracted to use your next edition as his textbook," said Griselda.

"Just shows the man has good taste," said Bathilda.

"No, Bathilda, he has *no* taste. He's a bloody ghost. The students would get much more out of the class with a good teacher to go with the good text. If only you would consider teaching . . ."

"You, my dearest, are biased," said Bathilda. "I would be a disaster as a teacher, and well you know it."

"At least you're corporeal. And that's enough about that," Griselda said, cutting off any argument.

She was watching to see how Minerva would react to meeting Bathilda. Griselda wasn't interested in hiding her relationship with the older witch, and she had never been especially circumspect about the fact that she liked witches, but she had thought it best up to now not to rub Minerva's face in it, either. She was a pure-blood, and goodness knows they had some strange notions about what was and wasn't acceptable in polite society.

*Not that we qualify as 'polite society', thank Merlin.*

Griselda gave an inward chuckle. Minerva was shocked at meeting Bathilda, all right. But her shock was obviously at meeting the great historian rather than the fact that the old witch was clearly right at home in Griselda's house.

The three women chatted about history, education, and Transfiguration for more than an hour before Griselda said, "Well, ladies, this has been grand, but I, at least, have work to do and it's going on six o'clock."

She saw Minerva blanch, and when the young woman struggled to stand, Griselda gave her an arm to help her up.

"Thank you, Mad...Griselda, Madam Bagshot..."

"Please, I'm Bathilda."

"Thank you, Bathilda. I hate to rush off like this, but I'm expected at home."

"Of course, dear," said Bathilda. "It was a great pleasure to meet you at last. Zel has told me she expects great things of you."

Griselda slapped her lover's arm in mock annoyance. "Don't be telling her that; we don't want her head swelling as big as her belly."

Minerva gave a slight smile, saying, "The pleasure was mine, Bathilda." Turning to her teacher, she said, "Griselda, would you mind letting me back into the lab? I'll need to use the Floo to get home."

"Ah, of course; I had forgotten." Of course Minerva couldn't Apparate in her condition, so they had had a Floo connection set up between Griselda's lab and the Macnair home.

When Griselda returned from seeing Minerva safely off, Bathilda was clearing up the tea things.

"Remarkable young woman," said Bathilda as she carried the tray into the small kitchen. "I was surprised you finally brought her up here, though."

"It was time."

"You introduced me to some of the others sooner."

"Yes, but frankly, I wasn't sure at first she would stick it out with me, especially under the circumstances. But she's bloody-minded enough, that's clear now."

The two women worked side-by-side washing and drying the things in the Muggle way for a few moments before Bathilda spoke again.

"Have you ever met her family?"

"Gods, no. Wouldn't care to, either."

"Macnairs?"

"She was born a McGonagall, but she just married one of the Macnairs last year."

"Shame. I wonder how a girl like that got mixed up with the likes of them."

"Oh, it's not hard to imagine," said Griselda. "The McGonagalls are, from what I hear, almost destitute after that last slide on the Magical Exchange. The Macnairs must've made a good offer for Minerva."

Bathilda gave a grimace and shook her head. "It's high time high society stopped treating girls as financial assets rather than human beings."

"Lucky some of us weren't such an asset," said Griselda, prompting an affectionate smile from Bathilda.

"What is she going to do after the baby comes?" Bathilda enquired.

"She's said she intends to take a month to recover from the birth and then come right back to work."

"*Hmm.* She may find that harder than she imagines."

"Could be," was all Griselda would commit to saying.

She knew little of babies and their needs, but she thought that if anyone could manage an apprenticeship with a newborn babe, it would be Minerva McGonagall.

*Macnair.*

*Damn.*

## Chapter Six

*Chapter 6 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

### 13 February 1945

It had been weeks since Bridie McLeod had been startled by the arrival of a house-elf in the middle of the night. As a midwife, though, she had learnt to become a light sleeper, ready to snap fully awake at a moment's notice.

A moment like this one, if the excited state of the Macnair-family elf was any indication.

"Please, Madam McLeod . . . my mistress is telling me to fetch you. The young mistress, her time is come, she says."

*I doubt that,* thought Bridie. *They always call me too early with the first ones. And young Madam Macnair is still..*she made a quick mental calculation...*six weeks before her time.*

*Still,* Bridie thought, *best to go now.* You never knew when a babe would decide to make an early appearance, and those eager ones often needed a bit of help in the hours and days after being born. Besides, the Macnair family paid well for her services and expected her to jump when they called, which she was happy enough to do at these prices, even in the middle of the night for what was most likely a false alarm.

"All right," she told the elf, moving with long-practised speed to put on her work robes. "Tell your mistress I'll be along in a tick."

The elf nodded gratefully and popped away.

When Bridie arrived at the Macnair manse, she was surprised to find Minerva hanging heavily on her mother's shoulders, her concentration apparently focused deep within herself.

*It's the real thing, then, early or no.*

When the contraction had passed, Bridie approached the young woman, asking, "So, it looks like your babe is anxious to make an appearance. When did the pains start?"

"About four hours ago," said Minerva. "We waited to call you, as you instructed, but they're getting closer together and stronger."

Bridie nodded her approval. "How close?"

Minerva looked at her mother and said, "About six or seven minutes apart now, I think." Madam McGonagall nodded her agreement of the estimate.

"Good. Why don't I have a look to see how far along you've come?"

Minerva assented and lay down at the edge of the huge, overly ornate bed that dominated the room.

When she had finished her exam, Bridie helped Minerva sit up, telling her, "You're about four-tenths of the way along."

Seeing her young patient give a look of dismay, she added reassuringly, "Now, that's good progress. We'll see this babe before the next sundown, I'll wager."

Just then, Minerva was gripped by another pain and groaned aloud. Bridie quickly helped her to stand, and encouraged her to lean over against the bed while she rubbed the girl's lower back with a strength that would have surprised anyone but another midwife. "Steady breaths now, Minerva...don't hold it," she said soothingly. "Let the pain take you with it, don't fight it."

Bridie McLeod's long experience did not fail her: Gerald and Minerva Macnair's fine son was born just after four o'clock on the afternoon of the feast of St Valentine, weighing in at just over half a stone and healthy as you please. Not at all what one would expect of a babe born more than a month before time.

That wasn't what surprised Bridie, however. She'd attended many a "premature" birth not seven or eight months after a young mum had first walked down the aisle, and that went for pure-bloods as much as it did for halfies and Muggle-borns.

No, what the midwife found most interesting was the fact that in the throes of hard labour, young Madam Macnair had called out not for her husband, or even her mother, as most of the younger ones did, but for someone named "Albus". That, and the fact that the infant had neither his mother's pitch-black hair, nor his nominal father's dirty blonde, but sported a perfectly formed head covered with a fine dusting of reddish down. Very unusual, in Bridie's experience.

It pointed to the inescapable conclusion that the babe's father was not Gerald Macnair. A conclusion that had not, it seemed, escaped the child's maternal grandmother, who had stayed with her daughter throughout the fifteen hours it had taken to see the newest heir to the Macnair fortune safely and noisily into the world, and had heard the girl crying out for a man whose name wasn't her husband's.

Once she had finished ensuring her daughter was tucked up contentedly with her baby, Glenna McGonagall drew Bridie aside, speaking in a whisper.

"Madam McLeod, I would appreciate it...my daughter and I would appreciate it...if you said nothing about anything you might have heard Minerva say during her pains. As I'm sure you know, women are sometimes a little out of their heads in childbed and will say the oddest things. I trust we may rely on your discretion?" She held out a small pouch that contained, Bridie was certain, a Galleon or two to help her remember to keep her mouth shut.

Bridie was offended, as she always was when offered a "gratuity" to keep quiet about something that might prove embarrassing to one of the families she served. She would never betray the privacy of a woman under her care. Never. She had dedicated her life to nursing women through the various joys and trials of being female, and it insulted her sense of professional integrity to suggest she needed a financial incentive to keep a confidence.

"Please, Madam McGonagall," she said, keeping her temper well in check. "There's no need for that. I never repeat anything a woman says during her labour. As you say, it means nothing. Only a fool would repeat it, and only a greater fool would credit it."

Glenna McGonagall appeared relieved, and Bridie added, "And I don't think you need worry about young Master Macnair drawing any mistaken conclusions about the boy's appearance. He doesn't strike me as the conclusion-drawing type."

The two women smiled in mutual understanding.

"Now, for anyone else, you just tell them the midwife says hair colour and the like are unpredictable in young babies. It'll change as he grows, like enough. And if it doesn't, by that time, everyone will be so used to him the way he is, they'll forget about how he should have been."

Madam McGonagall looked as if she'd like to kiss the midwife, who simply gave a small bow of her head and went back to see that her patients were fine and getting to know one another comfortably.

### 19 March 1945

*Well! What have we here?* thought Reggie Crabtree when he saw what had come through the door to his shop.

*Business is looking up.*

Business along Knockturn Alley had been miserable for the past week, thanks to those Ministry blokes that had been poking around and asking too many questions; even the whores who made up the bulk of his regular customers had stayed away this week.

But the woman who had just entered his apothecary was clearly no whore. Or at least, not one of the ones from the Alley's several brothels. She was dressed expensively, if conservatively, and held herself with an upright carriage that Reggie had seen in some of the younger girls but that he rarely observed in them after they had been at their trade for a few months. This woman was older and had clearly never had the life nearly beaten out of her for some frivolous infraction of house rules.

"How may I help you, madam?" Reggie asked when she approached the counter.

"I understand you are a purveyor of rare potions, is that true?"

Reggie was surprised by her accent; the rolling Highland brogue was curiously incongruent with the woman's deep-brown skin and dark eyes. Before hearing her speak, he would have pegged her for an Indian.

*Of course, it could be a glamour,* he thought, *but if it is, it's a very good one.* Eyes and hair were easy enough to do, but changing one's skin colour was a feat beyond the Transfiguration skills of most of the witches he knew, even the ones who worked in the speciality rooms and had to change their looks regularly to suit their clients.

"Yes, madam," he replied to her query, "I flatter myself that I am known for my skill in brewing some of the more . . . *esoteric* potions."

For a moment, he was concerned that she might be a member of the Auror corps, but his instincts...which had served him well up to this point...suggested otherwise. Besides, Reggie was very careful not to trade in potions that were out-and-out illegal; his core business was in those brews that prostitutes needed regularly and that other people were too embarrassed to ask their fancy Diagon Alley apothecaries or Healers for. He reserved his skills with Darkish potions for a carefully selected and well-paying clientele.

He would let the woman make the next move, he decided, and if she wanted a Dark potion, he would send her away. The ones who were serious always came back, and the initial rebuff often served to sweeten the price they were willing to pay.

"I am looking for this potion," the woman said, passing a small slip of parchment across the counter.

Reg took it with a small bow of his head and looked it over.

*Interesting. Not too difficult, but not in regular demand, and definitely considered not quite on the up-and-up in polite society. But not necessarily Dark.*

"I would be able to brew this, I believe," Reg said, careful to use the conditional mood. "But I would need some assurances first."

It was a good sign that she didn't blink.

"What assurances, Mr Crabtree?"

"First, that the potion is intended only for consensual use. To give it to someone against her will or without her knowledge would be a serious breach of law and ethics."

"The potion is for me," she said blankly.

*Oh, ho, a whore after all!*

Now it began to make sense.

She was a whore, all right, but not from one of the Alley's houses. She was someone's private courtesan, pampered and well cared-for, by the look of her, but not free. Here at someone's insistence.

He almost felt sorry for her, then he reminded himself that we all have our curses to bear, and she was luckier than many if hers came with fine clothes and a warm place to sleep.

"Very well, madam. Next, I would need to be certain that you are fully acquainted with the effects of this potion."

"I am. It renders the user barren."

*You'd think she was talking about a headache potion for all she seems to care.*

*Interesting.*

"Very good," he said. "Then I would need an assurance of discretion." He hastened to add, "There is nothing illegal in brewing this potion, but you understand that my business is dependent upon my reputation, and there are people in certain quarters who would look askance at my purveying it, even for the most innocent of reasons."

"I shall tell no one," she answered.

He gave another bow of his head. "Then there is the question of price . . ." He allowed the phrase to dangle in the air for a few moments. "The ingredients are not cheap . . ."

"I understand. Do you have an estimate?"

What to charge? That was always a delicate question when dealing with an unusual potion, especially for an unusual customer. He looked her up and down without appearing to, sizing up her ability to pay. She gave no indication of desperation, but the request itself suggested a certain urgency. He decided to set the price high; she looked as if she could afford it, and if she couldn't, well . . .

Reg wasn't averse to taking out the difference in trade. It was a service he provided for some of his regular customers when they were too cash-poor to afford what they needed when they needed it.

Nobody could blame him, he often told himself. He never forced anyone, and besides, it was the only way the likes of him was ever apt to enjoy the comforts of female attention. He wasn't wealthy or connected enough...not by far...to make up for the ugly scarring that marred his face and shoulders. No woman had ever looked twice at Reggie Crabtree since the accident in the Hogwarts potions lab that had cost him both his left eye and his place at the school. When he thought about the lifelong loss of companionship his youthful mistake had cost him, he sometimes wondered if he hadn't already paid enough for the death of the other boy that dark night in the school dungeons.

"I will need eight Galleons. Four in advance," he told the woman, allowing himself to switch to the indicative to convey good faith.

"In advance?"

"Yes, madam. It will take me several days to brew the potion, and I will first need to procure those ingredients I don't currently have in stock."

"I see," she said, opening her bag and withdrawing a leather pouch. "When do you estimate it will be ready?"

"If I am able to procure the ingredients within the next day or two...which I fully expect...the potion should be ready for delivery by Friday."

In truth, he had all the ingredients on hand, but a deposit was always a good idea, and he had found that it paid to exceed a client's expectations. He would have the potion ready for her on Thursday.

"Very well," she said, holding out four gold Galleons to him. "I shall return Friday . . . say, late afternoon?"

"That would be fine, madam. Unless you would care to let me know where I might contact you...in case I am able to finish the potion sooner?"

"No, thank you," she replied. "Friday will be fine, Mr Crabtree."

He bowed his head again, and she left his shop.

Watching her go, Reggie had a feeling he would have his full payment on Friday and that the comfortable sacks of black-beetle eyes in his shop storeroom would lie sadly uncrushed that afternoon. He also had a suspicion it would be the last he ever saw of his mysterious customer.

## Chapter Seven

*Chapter 7 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**10 May 1945**

"Now let your mind go blank; concentrate only on your senses," Griselda said.

Minerva dutifully tried to empty her mind of conscious thought. After a few moments, she found herself drifting along on a sea of sensation: smells she resisted putting a name to, sounds she refused to identify . . .

They had been practising this exercise in preparation for her Animagus work on a daily basis since Minerva had returned to her apprenticeship.

After a few minutes, Griselda's voice cut through Minerva's reverie. "So? How was it this time?"

"Good, I think. I was able to maintain it fairly easily," answered Minerva.

"Good. Once you can do it for five minutes straight, we'll move on to the next set of exercises.

There was a sudden noise from the stairwell, and a moment later, a very excited and out-of-breath Bathilda appeared, hurrying down the steps.

"Bathilda! What the hell...?"

"Hush, Zel," said Bathilda, bending over to catch her breath.

Minerva was concerned about the old witch for a few moments, but Bathilda straightened up, an emotional flush staining the skin of her face.

"I've just heard over the Wizarding Wireless . . . he's done it, Zel!" exclaimed Bathilda, throwing her arms around a confused and astonished Griselda.

"Slow down, old girl . . . who's done what?" asked Griselda.

"Dumbledore! He's gone and captured Gellert!"

It was the first time Minerva had ever seen Griselda at a loss for words; her mouth just opened and closed a few times, no sound escaping it.

"It's true, Zel. I checked it with the Minister the minute I heard," said Bathilda softly, taking her by the upper arms and giving her a slight shake. "He's sitting in a cell in Nurmengard, locked up in his own bloody tower even as we speak."

It took Minerva a second to work out that Bathilda was talking about Gellert Grindelwald, and that the Minister of Magic was not, in fact, sitting in a prison cell in the Bothnian Sea. And what had she said about "Dumbledore"? Did she mean Albus?

Bathilda was looking intently into Griselda's eyes, and it appeared to Minerva that Bathilda was trying to persuade her beloved of the truth of her words through force of will.

"It's over?" whispered Griselda, and the fear in her voice made Minerva tremble inwardly. She would never have imagined her strong, stalwart teacher to be afraid of anything.

"Well, Gellert's still got supporters to be dealt with, but with their *Volkssklavenmeister* out of the picture, they'll go to ground like as not."

To Minerva's utter astonishment, Griselda threw her arms around Bathilda and began to sob into her shoulder. Bathilda rubbed soothing circles on Griselda's back and stroked her hair, murmuring, "There now . . . there now . . . let it out . . ."

Minerva automatically backed away a few paces, suddenly feeling as if she were intruding on something incredibly intimate. She caught Bathilda's eye and cocked her head toward the stairway to indicate that she would be in the main house, and Bathilda give a slight nod.

Disappearing up the staircase and out the door that led to the tiny garden, Minerva then used the password to let herself into the main house. She wondered if she should begin to prepare the tea...that had always been Bathilda's province...but decided to wait. Minerva had no idea where the tea things were, and she had an inkling that Griselda would not appreciate her apprentice poking about in her kitchen; it would have felt like an intrusion into the intimate territory Griselda and Bathilda shared.

She contented herself with taking a look around the parlour. It had become a tradition...well, habit; tradition was too grand a word for it...for Minerva to take tea with Griselda and Bathilda of a Friday evening before returning home. She had come to look forward to these occasions as a parched man looks forward to a sip of water. The two older women were the only people with whom Minerva had been able to hold a real conversation about anything she was interested in since leaving Hogwarts.

Conversations with Gerald were . . . well, not conversations. Their interactions generally consisted of her nodding at appropriate intervals and interjecting a bored, "Oh?" into his nattering discourses on this or that horse's chances in the next race, or some bit of lurid gossip about one or another of Scotland's small, pure-blood wizarding community. And of course, there were the endearments he slobbered into her ear several nights a week as he took his pleasure, always on top of her, and lately, always in the dark.

And there was certainly no conversation to be had with any other member of the Macnair household. Her mother-in-law only spoke to her when necessary, and then only of household matters. In truth, Minerva thought that Heloise was not all there...or perhaps she pretended to be so, for which Minerva would hardly blame her. As for Kenneth Macnair, Minerva steered well clear of the man as much as possible. She heard quite enough from him over the dinner table, in any event, and most of what she heard put her off her food. She longed to argue with him about some of his more outrageous statements...in fact, she often suspected he was trying to goad her into an argument, but she was wise enough not to take the bait set out by a man she considered very dangerous. Minerva tried hard to be invisible whenever Kenneth Macnair was afoot, with limited success. She often had the sense that he was watching her, and it made her blood run cold.

Walden, Gerald's younger brother, was far too young to be much of a conversationalist, and Minerva didn't hold out high hopes that the four-year-old would turn out to be an engaging playmate for Malcolm.

Malcolm.

Aside from her apprenticeship, the baby was the one bright spot in Minerva's life. At a little over a year old, he was a happy, active child, fascinated by the world around him as he tottered about on his chubby, peg-like legs. To Minerva's relief...a relief tinged with regret...his reddish fuzz had fallen out a few weeks after his birth to grow in as dark-brown ringlets over the ensuing months. On occasion, as she had watched him grow from an infant into something resembling a little boy, she felt a pang that she would never again hold a baby of her own, nor be able to give Malcolm a brother or sister to be his playmate and later, his ally in this difficult family.

Minerva sometimes found herself talking to her baby son as she would to another adult, telling him about something she had read, or answering questions about a point of Transfiguration theory as if he were asking the questions, while he gurgled happily and wetly up at her.

If Malcolm was her greatest joy, he was also her biggest worry. Minerva knew she would not always be able to protect him. Fortunately, for the moment, Gerald seemed indifferent to the child and left his rearing largely to Minerva, stopping in only to kiss the boy absently on the head after his bath before the adults sat down to sup. And the two senior Macnairs seemed to subscribe to the belief that children were best neither seen nor heard, for which Minerva was profoundly thankful. Still, she didn't harbour any hopes that Malcolm would escape their notice forever.

Minerva hoped that the Macnairs' indifference to her son would last long enough for her to finish her apprenticeship. Once she held her mastery, she would have options. She could not divorce Gerald, thanks to the binding marriage contract, but they could separate, or perhaps he would come with her when she purchased a small home in which she could offer lessons and, she hoped, do a bit of research. She probably could not prevent him from coming if he wanted to, and she recognised it as the price she might have to pay to secure his agreement to allow her to make the purchase. She was certain she could persuade him, though. The prospect of an income would be enticing. Despite the sum settled on him by his father at their marriage, Minerva knew Gerald was always looking for a source of extra cash. Abraxans were an expensive hobby, as was losing wagers. And Minerva suspected Gerald had other expensive hobbies...ones he didn't chatter to her about. Yes, when she thought about it, she thought she might be able to goad Gerald into agreeing to a separation, leaving him free to pursue his interests much as she pursued her own.

The apprenticeship was her lifeline, of that she was certain. As she stood in her teacher's house, she silently thanked the gods and Albus Dumbledore for her prowess at Transfiguration.

During their teas, Minerva had never had much opportunity to look around Griselda's parlour. As she paced about the room now, she was drawn to the mantel, which held several photographs in silver and ceramic frames. There was a still daguerreotype of much younger Griselda with an even younger girl who bore a certain resemblance to her...Griselda's sister, Minerva guessed...and another in which the two girls were flanked by two boys. Brothers?

Another photo, this one an animated wizarding image, showed Griselda, her hand being forcefully shaken by an elderly wizard as he hung a medallion around her neck,

Griselda grinning wider than Minerva had ever seen her do in life. But the majority of photos were of Griselda and Bathilda in various locations...in Muggle clothes with ridiculously large hats beneath the Eiffel Tower, in heavy fur robes on a snow-covered slope, and a surprising snapshot of the two in long woollen bathing costumes on a beach...but the thing that struck Minerva was that the two women were always touching in the photos: a hand on a shoulder, an arm around a waist, and in one, a quick peck on the lips followed by a furtive darting of the eyes as if to ensure they hadn't been caught out.

For the second time that afternoon, Minerva almost staggered backward, so profound was the emotion that washed over her. In a moment, she recognised it as envy, deep and painful as the pangs that had accompanied the destruction of her ova after she had taken that terrible potion. No one in her adult life had ever touched her in love, or even affection.

Correction: one person had. But he was out of her reach, and it was quite possible she would never see him again, or at least, not alone. And even if by some miracle they were to be thrown together again, there was now a barrier between them, even if he was unaware of it. But Minerva would always know it and feel it, and the weight of the secret would eventually crush anything else that might grow between them.

Albus.

Bathilda had said that he had captured Grindelwald. How? Was he all right? And why had Griselda reacted so strongly to the news?

Her questions were only partially answered when the two elder witches appeared in the parlour, a red-eyed Griselda excusing herself upstairs to "freshen up," and Bathilda to make the tea.

When Bathilda had deposited the tea tray on the table and settled herself into the chair opposite Minerva's, she said, "I expect you're wondering what all that was about."

"It isn't my place, but I will admit to being curious," answered Minerva.

"I'll tell you part of it, but not the details. We'll save those for a more settled time, if you're still interested. It's history, and I'll tell it eventually, but Gellert's supporters are still lurking about, and it isn't wise to have too much information you don't need about the thing."

Well, *that* certainly piqued Minerva's curiosity.

"In a nutshell, Zel is relieved that Gellert's locked up because he threatened me."

Minerva's astonishment must have been evident, because Bathilda gave a rough laugh, saying, "Oh, yes. I can see you're thinking: 'Why would the world's most powerful Dark wizard have it in for an old lady who mucks about in dusty libraries for a living?'"

"No . . . well, yes, but I wouldn't have put it quite that way," said Minerva.

"No, I know you wouldn't," said Bathilda with a smile. "Anyway, Gellert Grindelwald is my nephew. Well . . . great-nephew."

Minerva's mouth fell open.

"Even lunatics have family," said Bathilda, which effectively reminded Minerva to shut her mouth. "He came to stay with me after he got himself tossed out of school. His mother begged me to take him in because it turned out that he was in more than a little trouble with the authorities once the school copped to the full extent of what he had been doing there.

"The short version is that while he stayed with me, something else happened that made it necessary for him to leave the country in a hurry. When he did, he ended up in the hands of the Swiss authorities and spent five years in the wizarding prison outside Regensburg. He blames me for that."

"But why?"

"That's part of the detail I won't go into. But the outcome was that Gellert has a grudge against me, and he tried several times to exercise it. I'm minus one spleen thanks to a couple of his British supporters, and they nearly killed me another time."

"That's why Griselda is so . . ." Minerva searched for the right word.

"Emotional?" finished Bathilda. "Yes. She doesn't talk about it...hell, she rarely talks about her feelings...but she's developed kind of a phobia about it . . . about something happening to me. That's why I moved out of Godric's Hollow. Frankly, I don't think I'm any safer here in London, but it keeps Zel calmer. She likes to think she can protect me. Has a point, I suppose: I was never much at defensive spells, and Zel . . . well, you've seen her wand work."

"Yes. I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of any hex she might throw," agreed Minerva. "Bathilda, thank you for telling me." Bathilda just nodded.

Minerva added anxiously, "Do you think you're safe now?"

"Safe enough. Gellert's supporters weren't especially active here...my little contretemps with them notwithstanding...and they'll probably scurry back into their holes to avoid any repercussions. They're not going to risk being noticed by the Ministry just to exercise one of Gellert's old grudges."

"No, I imagine not," agreed Minerva.

Just then, they heard Griselda coming down the stairs.

The three were unusually quiet as they had their tea. Finally, Minerva could not help asking, "Bathilda, you said Dumbledore captured Grindelwald?"

"*Mmm*. Went looking for him last month, so I heard from the Minister. It was all very hush-hush, but I'm guessing the International Confederation put pressure on the Minister to send him. He's the only one I know of whose power would be a match for Gellert's. And, of course . . . ah, never mind."

"Is Albus all right?" Griselda quickly asked, posing the question that had been on the tip of Minerva's tongue.

"Yes, more or less. Apparently, he's in hospital in Vienna. The Minister said his leg's pretty badly mangled, and there's a chance he could lose it, but he's going to be all right."

Both older witches turned at Minerva's exclaimed, "Oh!"

"Don't worry, Minerva," said Griselda. "I'm sure his leg will mend. Albus wouldn't have it any other way," she said with a sly smile at Bathilda. "Albus was Minerva's mentor at school," she added. "He was the one told me I'd be a fool to pass her up as an apprentice, marriage or not."

"You owe him, then, I'd say," said Bathilda.

"I certainly do," said Minerva.

"Looks like we all owe him now," remarked Griselda.

The other two nodded in agreement.

# Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 48

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**2 May 1946**

"Will you shut that brat up?" Kenneth Macnair roared. He slammed the door to his study and stalked back to his desk.

Walden's mewling was adding to the throbbing in his temples, and images of himself throttling the boy *and* his sorry house-elf excuse for a nursemaid were beginning to tramp ominously through his head.

*Everything's going pear-shaped. Why is everything going pear-shaped?* he thought, looking at his papers and charting the steady decline of his investment income.

Ever since that meddling, half-blood bastard had sent Grindelwald to prison, the special, select markets into which Kenneth had poured much of his ready cash had been skittish at best. And the Swiss and Austrian Magical Exchanges had nearly collapsed, taking a good part of his portfolio with them.

Things weren't dire...not yet. Kenneth hadn't been so foolish as to sink all his liquid assets into vehicles that disappeared when Grindelwald fell, as some of his acquaintances had done. But the reduction in his assets was a definite worry.

Gods! His head was aching. Maybe after lunch he would pop down to London for a short spree. The exercise always did him good, and he usually felt more settled in his head after a session at Pluto's Lair.

It would cost him, though. He frowned to himself. Probably extra after that last time. They always jacked up the price after you'd put someone in St Mungo's. If his investments didn't turn around, he'd have to find a cheaper house in which to indulge his fantasies. It might even be more economical to buy whores right off the street, but then again, there was no guarantee they'd be any good, and eventually someone might notice if too many went missing.

There were always Muggle brothels; it was easy enough to charm some worthless paper into Muggle pound notes, and by the time the charm wore off, he'd be long gone. And if he slipped and killed one . . . well, it would be harder for the Muggle authorities to trace it back to him. Of course, that hadn't helped his father, but really, the man was hardly careful, was he? Absolutely no control of himself, he'd had, Kenneth thought with a sneer. It had been good riddance to bad rubbish, as far as Kenneth-the-Younger was concerned, and the same went for his worthless brother. Arranging things for Finn had cost him dearly, and *there* was money he'd never see again.

Kenneth's father and older brother hadn't understood the importance of self-discipline, although they were quick enough to apply it to others, Kenneth thought.

*Lazy. Stupid.*

Unfortunately, his oldest son seemed to take after his grandfather and uncle rather than his father in that. The boy was worthless. At least his taste in whores and their wares ran to the more pedestrian, and therefore less expensive, pleasures.

Kenneth Banished his paperwork to a drawer and locked his study.

Luncheon was a quiet affair that afternoon, the blessed silence broken only by Gerald's occasional comment on the gossip of the day or how one of his Abraxans was coming along.

Kenneth amused himself, as he often did, with watching his daughter-in-law. Normally, he liked to play a little game with her during meals: see how many pointed comments about Muggles or half-breeds or women it would take before she would set down her knife and fork, obviously too upset or angry to eat any more.

Today, though, his head ached too much, so he contented himself with staring at Minerva as she ate, quietly and oh-so-daintily moving her fork to her mouth and back to her capon. He managed to catch her eye once, and he made a point of licking his lips, winning him the contest she didn't even know she was engaged in, as she carefully placed her utensils at the side of her plate in silent resignation.

The woman his son had married often preyed on Kenneth's mind. When he had contracted with McGonagall for her, he had expected her to be quiet...subtle enquiry had assured him that Minerva McGonagall was not one of those noisy, impudent girls...and to know her place as a proper pure-blood witch. Outwardly, everything pointed to that soothing conclusion, but she didn't fool Kenneth for long. The first inkling had, of course, been her insistence on this apprenticeship of hers. Kenneth had thought he could get around it, but the girl had apparently beguiled her father into backing her on it, and there was no getting around Magnus McGonagall when he had his mind made up to something.

Kenneth had considered carefully, weighing his options. Minerva McGonagall was a brilliant catch for the Macnair family, that much was clear. Her family name went back to before the Norman Conquest, and the magical bloodline was as unblemished as any in Britain. If a Macnair were to marry into that clan, he thought, it would go a long way toward restoring the family name from the ravages that had beset it in the past few decades. There were Kenneth's father and brother and their ignominy...not widely known, but wide enough when the right questions were asked...and the associations his aunt and several cousins had formed with Muggle-borns to contend with. And his great-grandfather had irrevocably sullied the family pedigree by marrying that Muggle whore, which, when Kenneth thought of it, was probably where the stupidity so evident in his close relatives had come from. Thank Baal it didn't touch every member of the family.

In retrospect, it had been a good thing, Kenneth had thought, that negotiations with the Yaxley family had fallen through the previous year. The Yaxleys, though pure-blood, were not nearly as well regarded as the McGonagalls, and besides, their too-open allegiance to Gellert Grindelwald might have had unpleasant repercussions for some of Kenneth's business holdings. He didn't keep all his investments in pure-blood circles, after all. Whatever his personal values, diversity of one's portfolio was important, as recent events had shown.

There was no whiff of Darkness about the McGonagall clan, although Kenneth had been careful to sound out Magnus on his beliefs and had found that the man was, if not totally in line with right-thinking political philosophy, at least leant in the correct direction. And of course, he was hungry for cash, a predicament that, in Kenneth's experience, generally superseded any moral or political philosophy, no matter how dearly held.

So Kenneth had overlooked the apprenticeship clause. Besides, he had believed Minerva would abandon it as soon as she had a child or two to manage. Of course, the girl was turning out to be a disappointment on that score as well. Since Malcolm's birth, there had been no sign of any further pregnancies. By the time Gerald had been a year old, Heloise had already had the first two of her many miscarriages. Gerald had assured his father that he was doing his best to impregnate Minerva, whatever his "best" was. Maybe the problem was Gerald's. Too bad Kenneth couldn't stand in for his son there, he thought. It might be a great deal of fun to show the girl what a man could do.

*Of course*, he thought as he looked at her across the table, *there are other ways*

Gerald was obviously falling down on his duty in more ways than one. The fact that his wife was still spending four days a week in London, doing Circe knew what with that Marchbanks hag, was proof of it. The boy had not taken his wife properly in hand.

*I'd be doing him a favour if I took her down a peg or two.*

When luncheon was finished, Gerald hurriedly stood and excused himself. Off to preen over one of his horses, thought his father. Or maybe to place a few more ill-considered wagers. Heloise said she had some shopping to do in London and took to her rooms to freshen up and to fortify herself for the purpose with a potion or two, no doubt. Minerva said nothing, but silently pushed her chair back and left the dining room.

She was obviously taken aback when Kenneth entered the nursery; he almost never came near the place, and with good reason. It smelt of powder and pap.

He walked over and briefly kissed his grandson on his curly head, then patted little Walden absently. "It's a fair day," he said to the elf-nanny. "These boys should be out in the sunshine, enjoying it."

The elf needed no more prodding; she quickly gathered the children's outdoor things and bustled out of the nursery with her charges.

When she had gone, Kenneth turned to Minerva. "Well, young Mistress Macnair, we find ourselves entirely alone, I see."

Minerva said nothing and went to gather her cloak from the peg near the door.

*Too haughty by half.*

When she moved toward the door, Kenneth placed himself in front of it.

"What's your hurry, madam?"

"Let me pass, please."

"I don't think so. We so rarely have the opportunity to talk, you and I. I can hardly pass up this chance."

She just stood there, staring at him insolently.

He reached out to take hold of her, and she swiftly stepped back. As she tried again to pass him, he grabbed her by the hair, pulling her back into the room.

"Gerald will be back within the hour," she gasped as she tore at his hands.

He moved her swiftly against the large table, sweeping the toys and books off its surface with his wand, which he slipped quickly into his pocket once again. "Plenty of time for what I have in mind, mistress. Plenty."

As he clawed at her bodice, he saw her go for her wand, but he immediately grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her, deftly drawing her wand out of her pocket and tossing it across the room. "None of that, now."

His hands were at her skirts, and she pushed against his shoulders, but he took her by the hips to hold her firmly in place.

"You can't," she said. "The Trace...everyone will know . . ."

"Ah, but my dear daughter, the Trace only tracks the most mundane point of ingress. You have two more orifices I can fill with no one the wiser. And who knows? You might find you enjoy it. I know I will, and I won't tell a soul. You are a secretive little thing; this could be our secret . . ."

With that, he spun her around and pushed her shoulders down toward the table's surface, holding her in place by the back of the neck. His heart was thrumming in his ears and he could feel the blood racing through his body as the woman struggled against him. By the Gods, he felt alive! He barely felt her nails clawing at the hand he held her with.

His other hand began fumbling at the fastenings to her skirt.

*Where is the damned hook? Or maybe it's charmed. Ah, to hell with it!*

He began to gather her skirt up above her waist, and then he felt her shift under his hands. The silk of her skirt was whipping through his hands as if it was being reeled in, and her neck was disappearing under his other palm, and just like that, she was gone. In her place was only a scrawny, grey cat scrabbling at the table with its paws. The beast found its purchase, leaving deep grooves in the table's polished surface, and leapt down to streak across the room.

*Impossible! The girl is only twenty!*

A slight *whooshing* sound made Kenneth turn his head, and he saw Minerva again, staggering slightly with a hand to her head, obviously slightly dazed. He heard her whisper an *Accio*.

Kenneth pulled his wand and advanced on her. She must have had lightning-fast reflexes, because before he got more than two paces, he was staring at the point of her wand.

He had time only to think, *The bitch pulled her wand on me!* before his own wand was whisked out of his hand to go flying across the floor. He heard rather than felt the sickening crunch as he was hurled backwards, his nose the point of contact for the forceful spell she had hit him with.

He found himself bunched up against the wall, hands covering his nose, which was dripping bright red blood all over his yellow silk robes.

"You'll pay for that, you cunt," he growled as he struggled to rise, but she was faster.

*"Petrificus Totalus!"*

And suddenly, he couldn't move, couldn't even blink, and before more than a few seconds had elapsed, he felt the sting of the air drying his corneas. He watched, powerless, as the girl turned and fled the room.

*Fuck!*

He tried ending the charm, but he had never mastered the wandless, wordless magic that might have allowed him to escape his predicament with none the wiser.

*One of those bloody elves had better show up damned quick,* he thought, *or I'll need a Healer to fix my eyes.*

But for the moment, all Kenneth Macnair could do was sit there and think about how he was going to make that little bitch pay for what she'd done.

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Minerva's mind was awlirl as she raced down the hallway to the front door of the manse.

What exactly had happened? How had she done it?

*Never mind that now,* she told herself sternly. *Just find Malcolm and get as far away as you can manage.*

She made a fast circuit of the garden and found the elf and her two charges on the east lawn, Walden hovering a few feet in the air on his toy broom, and Malcolm grinning, goggle-eyed, at his uncle's antics.

"Thank you, Maisie, I'll take Malcolm now."

The elf handed the toddler over to his mother, and he squealed happily. Minerva kissed his woolly head as she hurried down the path to the front gates.

"How would you like to go for a ride, Malcolm, my love?" she asked. "A visit to Gran and Granddad, maybe?"

As she said the words, however, Minerva realised with dismay that she had no way to get to Moray. She couldn't Apparate with a child that young, and she didn't dare risk going back to the manse to use the Floo.

She stopped mid-step and swung around, heading back across the grounds until she reached a small shed off the side of the stables. A quick *Alohomora!* opened the door, and Minerva peered into the darkness.

"*Lumos!*"

With the light from her wand she was able to find her old broom quickly and took it from the shed.

She hadn't been on a broom since her Hogwarts days; how was she going to fly with Malcolm in her arms?

She thought for a minute, and then put the child down on the grass, saying, "Mama needs to do a few things, then we'll take a nice broom ride, would you like that?"

Malcolm didn't answer, but he watched his mother with interest as she withdrew her wand, ripped a section of her full skirt away, and Transfigured the remainder into a pair of tight-fitting breeches. Next, she Transfigured the scrap into a long woollen wrap and fashioned it around her body into a sort of sling.

Scooping Malcolm up, she placed him in the sling and used her wand to tighten it around him, then placed a Sticking Charm on the boy for good measure. When Malcolm screeched his objection, she said, "Now, now . . . you want to stay warm and safe for our ride, don't you? There's a good laddie. Off we go!"

She pushed off, and moments later, they were soaring over the Macnair grounds, Malcolm whimpering at first, then laughing as he got used to the wind in his chubby face.

"There's my braw lad," Minerva murmured as Malcolm clapped his hands delightedly.

It was around fifty miles to the McGonagall family home, and Minerva was concerned that Malcolm might get too cold or begin to fidget so badly that she couldn't control the broom if the trip lasted too long, and she didn't want to risk flying too much faster with Malcolm at her breast, so after nearly an hour, she lit in a small field just over the Morayshire border and unwrapped Malcolm.

"We'll just have a wee stretch, and then we'll get back on the broom to go to Gran's," she told him.

"Mama, miwk."

"I haven't any milk, darling, but would you like some water?"

Malcolm nodded, so Minerva conjured a cup and filled it with an *Aguamenti*. When Malcolm had drunk his fill, Minerva also drank a cupful.

"How would you like a fresh nappy?" Minerva realised her error immediately as Malcolm began to toddle away from her as fast as his chubby legs could carry him, saying, "Nooooo . . . no nappy! No nappy!"

As she chased down her son, Minerva wondered for the hundredth time why, at fifteen months old, Malcolm had begun to react to a nappy changing as if it were an application of the Cruciatus Curse.

Both Maisie and her mother had assured her that this was common, but still . . .

She caught him and wrestled him gently to the ground. "I hate to do this to you lamb, but I need to have my hands free for a few moments . . ." she placed a light Binding Charm on the boy's arms and legs and immediately Banished his breeches to the grass beside her, then she Vanished the dirty nappy. After gently Scourgifying his bottom as he howled his indignation...Merlin, but she hated to do it that way; soap and water was much better on his tender skin in her opinion...then looked around before removing her bodice and chemise. She put the former back on and Transfigured the latter into a fresh nappy, which she deftly wrapped around his clean bottom and fastened with a Sticking Charm.

"There we are, all clean!" she said, releasing her still-howling son from his bonds. "Oh, now. That wasn't so bad! And now you'll be comfortable for the rest of our ride. Are you ready?"

Malcolm nodded and sniffled, his forlorn look making his mother giggle. She placed him back in the sling, and off they went, zooming above the Moray countryside.

By the time they landed in front of McGonagall Manor, Malcolm was whining and whimpering. He had grown tired of the ride somewhere over Keith, and Minerva could hardly blame him. She herself was chilled to the bone, and the wind stung her cheeks and eyes.

She no longer held the wards to the house, so she rang the charmed bell. A few moments later, a surprised house-elf answered the door, exclaiming, "Mistress Minerva! We's not expecting you today!"

"Yes, I know, Elgar, but Malcolm and I wanted to see my parents. Are they in?"

"Yes, Mistress Minerva. Come in! Master is in his study, and I think Mistress is in the kitchen talking with the kitchen elves."

"Elgar, would you mind terribly taking Malcolm and giving him something to eat? He's had a long journey."

"Of course, Mistress. What would Master Malcolm like to eat?"

"He's rather cold, so something warm, I think. Maybe some porridge and warm milk."

"Yes, Mistress."

She handed the boy over to the elf, who said, "Now, come along with Elgar, Master Malcolm. He'll get you something nice to eat, and then maybe a wee sweetie?" He winked an enormous eye at Minerva at this last, and she smiled and nodded her head indulgently.

*Dear Elgar.*

Minerva realised she felt safe for the first time in weeks.

## Chapter Nine

*Chapter 9 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

### Chapter Nine

**20 May 1946**

"I'll kill the man," Magnus roared. "Money or no, I'll kill him!"

"Magnus, no!" cried Glenna. "Think of the scandal . . ."

"Hang the scandal, the man's tried to abuse my daughter...his own son's wife! Where was that worthless husband of yours?" he asked Minerva.

"I don't know . . . out . . ." Minerva stammered.

"At the racetrack, I warrant," spat the old wizard. "Good-for-nothing whelp. I'm sorry I saddled you with him, Minerva."

"It's all right Father. I agreed to it."

"No, it isn't all right. Not at all. I thought it'd be best for you . . . that you'd be taken care of. Instead, I find that young scoundrel leaves you to the mercy of that sick bastard of a father. I should have known . . ." he muttered, running his fingers agitatedly through his wavy hair.

Minerva hadn't expected her father to react so dramatically to her tale. She had hoped only that he would shelter her and Malcolm until she could figure out what to do next.

"Father, please. No heroics. I just want a bit of time to think. May we stay here for a few days?"

"Of course, Minerva," said Glenna.

"Think about what? You canna go back to that house. I won't let you," Magnus asserted.

"I know, Father. But if I abandon Gerald, you'll likely have to return the money you got at our marriage. And the lease."

*And I'll have to repay the money for my apprenticeship.*

Goddamn Kenneth Macnair! She was close . . . only four months to finishing and attaining her mastery. If she had to abandon her studies to go out to work now, she might never have another chance to sit the exam. Everything would have been in vain.

"Do you want to leave Gerald, Minerva?" asked Magnus.

It took her a moment to answer. "No, Father. This wasn't Gerald's fault. His father is unstable, but I'm sure Gerald never thought he'd hurt me."

*That's true enough. It probably never occurred to him.*

"All right, Minerva. You and Malcolm can stay here. I'll go talk to the Macnairs and try to sort this out."

"No, please don't. I'll speak with Gerald, I can..." said Minerva. Her father, though he meant well, would likely make things worse with his temper.

But he cut her off swiftly. "No arguments. This needs to be addressed, and by the gods, it will be."

He stormed out of the room, leaving Minerva and her mother in the uncomfortable wake of his fury.

The two witches exchanged looks of anxious understanding.

"Thank you for letting me stay," said Minerva quietly.

"Of course. It will be a treat for us to have you and Malcolm with us," said Glenna.

"I know Malcolm will enjoy it. You must promise not to spoil him too much," Minerva said with a small smile.

"And when have I ever spoilt the child?" Glenna asked. "Och, I suppose you're right. But that's what a grandmother is for." After a few moments, she added, "I never spoilt you . . ."

"No, and I'm glad of it," answered Minerva. "I try not to spoil Malcolm, but I don't suppose it will hurt him to have his grandmother fuss over him for a few days."

"He's a lamb," said Glenna, and mother and daughter looked at one another with deep affection for a few moments before Glenna said, "Minerva?"

"Yes, Mother?"

There was another pause before Glenna spoke again.

"I've long wanted to ask . . ." Then she shook her head. " No. I've no right."

Minerva said nothing but kissed her mother's cheek and went to find her son.

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"What do you mean, 'gone'?" Gerald asked.

"Mistress Minerva took Master Malcolm and went away," answered the trembling house-elf.

"Where?"

"I's not knowing, Master Gerald."

Gerald frowned. It was unlike Minerva to leave the manse without leaving word with Maisie as to where she was going and when she would return. And why had she taken Malcolm? An outing?

Wherever she had gone, Gerald hoped it wasn't going to cost too much money. He was perpetually short on ready funds these days. He could kill Taran Goyle for persuading him to sink all his money into the "Swiss Venture", as they called it. Now it was all gone, and likely forever. But Goyle had talked about it as if it were a sure thing, that Grindelwald would eventually triumph and the rounding up of Mudbloods would commence. The "facility" in Switzerland would probably never be built now, nor the network of factories and brothels he and Goyle had believed would make them rich.

Thankfully, Minerva wasn't a spendthrift. Not like Goyle's wife, always dropping a Galleon here and there in the finer shops of Diagon Alley.

But where was she?

Gerald turned and strode towards his father's study.

At his father's barked, "Enter!" Gerald stepped through the door, a tiny thorn of trepidation pricking at his belly as it always did in his father's presence.

"Pardon me, Father, but I'm wondering if you might know where Minerva has got to? We were supposed to go to the Goyles' for tea this afternoon, but she seems to have gone out."

"It isn't my fault if you can't keep track of your wife," said Kenneth sharply.

"No, sir," replied a cowed Gerald. "It's just that it's unusual for her to forget an engagement."

Kenneth just grunted, and Gerald suddenly thought to wonder at the compress his father was holding against the side of his nose, which appeared bruised. But he knew better than to ask about it.

"Sorry to disturb you, Father," he said, receiving no reply and backing out of the room.

An hour later, a brooding Gerald was relieved to hear the chimes ring, and then he remembered that Minerva would have no reason to ring the bell. He wandered from the library toward the entry hall and was surprised to hear raised voices.

"You just go tell your master Magnus McGonagall would speak with him, and I'm not leaving until I do," said one of the voices.

*Minerva's father? What is he doing here?*

A sense of foreboding washed over Gerald suddenly, and he had the urge to turn and flee the house from the storm he knew was coming. Something had happened, he was sure of it, and it involved Minerva. And his father.

The sense of dread grew as he fought the urge to leave.

*If something has happened with Minerva, I should be there,* he told himself. *She's my wife.*

He forced himself to move forward...feeling as if he were walking through and breathing in thick mud...until he reached the entry hall.

"Mr McGonagall," he said, pleased that his voice did not shake.

McGonagall wheeled around and fixed a beady eye on Gerald.

"And where were you?" he demanded.

"Sir . . . I . . . I'm sorry, I don't . . ." he stammered.

"No, I know you don't," the older man spat.

Gerald swallowed and ignored the tone. "Please, sir . . . can you tell me where Minerva is?"

"Aye. She's at my house, and there she stays until we've got a few things straight. Where is your father?" he demanded impatiently. "Macnair!" he roared, his voice echoing through the house.

As frightened as Gerald was of this angry man, he was even more terrified about what would happen when his father appeared. Whatever was wrong, Kenneth would find a way to put him in the wrong, of that he was certain.

A minute later, Kenneth appeared with a very agitated house-elf in his wake.

"Just what do you think you're about, McGonagall, barging into my house roaring like a wounded dragon?"

"You know exactly why I'm here; do you need me to spell it out in front of your son here?"

Kenneth glared at him for a moment, then said, "Come into my study. No need to give the elves an earful."

Gerald noticed that the elf moved a few paces away from his master at that.

Kenneth turned and stalked away, followed by McGonagall. Gerald summoned what courage he could find and trailed after the two men. When they reached the study, Kenneth said, "Get out, boy. This doesn't concern you."

Gerald almost didn't believe he was hearing his own voice as he said, "If it's to do with my wife, I'm staying."

McGonagall said, "The boy's right, Macnair. He stays."

Kenneth peered at the man for a moment, then threw up his hands in a show of exasperation.

"Fine."

McGonagall asked, "Do you want to tell him what happened, or shall I?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Kenneth.

"Fine. I'll tell it, then," said McGonagall, turning to Gerald. "Your *father* tried to violate my daughter. Your wife."

Gerald felt the blood leave his face.

"That's what she told you, then?" said Kenneth.

"Aye. And she showed me the bruises on her arms to prove it."

"She must have gotten those when I tried to push her away . . ."

"And the ones on her neck? What of those Macnair?"

"I don't know," Kenneth said. "All I can tell you is that she propositioned me, and when I refused her advances, she hexed me. Broke my nose . . ." he said, hands moving, perhaps unconsciously, to the site of his wound.

"What are you saying, Father?" Gerald asked, his horror nearly obliterating his hearing.

*Could it be true?*

"That you aren't doing your duty, boy! If you spent as much time mounting your wife as you do your horses, she'd never have come to me."

"Enough!" shouted McGonagall. "You'll not speak of my daughter that way in my presence if you know what's good for you. I know as well as you do that it didn't happen as you say. You got Minerva alone, and you tried to force yourself on her, but she got the better of you, didn't she?" the man said with an ugly smile.

"It's her word against mine," said Kenneth mildly, and Gerald realised with sudden clarity that every word McGonagall had spoken was true. Nausea gripped him, and he had to take several deep breaths to steady himself.

"Please, Mr McGonagall," Gerald said when he found his tongue, "Is Minerva all right? Can I see her?"

"She's all right. You'll see her when she's ready to see you, and not before."

"So, you're backing out of the marriage contract, McGonagall? Can you afford that?" Kenneth said with a sneer.

After a few moments, McGonagall answered, "Minerva does not want to end the marriage. She says Gerald's not responsible for your twisted behaviour."

*She loves me, then*, Gerald thought with relief.

The notion replenished his nearly depleted reserves of courage, and he said, "Will she come back here?"

"No. But I'll ask her if you can come to visit her and Malcolm while you make different living arrangements."

"You can't keep my grandson from me, McGonagall," said Kenneth.

"You'll be allowed to visit the boy once Gerald and Minerva have their own home."

When Kenneth opened his mouth as if to object, McGonagall moved in close to him. He was a large man, and Gerald noted with satisfaction that his father seemed small and inconsequential next to him.

"And listen to me well, Macnair. If I hear a whisper in future...even the smallest one...that you've cocked a wrong eye at Minerva...I'll see you dead, for all your money and connections. I've connections, too, and some o' them aren't averse to a little behind-the-scenes sport to avenge a lady's honour, if you take my meaning. Blood and family mean a great deal in these parts. As you well know, Macnair."

"And you . . ." he turned on Gerald. "Isn't it about time you stood on your own instead of sucking at your daddie's teat all the while? Good gods, man, why haven't you provided Minerva with her own home before this instead of letting her rot here with your bent excuse for a father? It can't be the money...you got enough of that after the wedding. Do it now, man. Get your own home. I'll keep Minerva and the boy with me until I've seen you've done it. And I'll be sending one of our family house-elves along when she comes to you...just to keep an eye on you."

Gerald swallowed hard. How would he afford a home now that most of his settlement had gone up in smoke? He couldn't...~~he~~*wouldn't*...ask his father. He hated the man with every fibre of his being, and had for years, he realised suddenly. This business with Minerva just sealed it.

*He tried to . . . he would have . . .*

For the first time, Gerald was explicitly thankful for his wife's prowess with a wand.

"No need to see me out, Macnair," Magnus threw over his shoulder as he turned and stalked out of the room.

Gerald followed him, and when they got to the door, he asked, "Mr McGonagall, is Minerva really all right?"

"Aye."

"Please, sir, will you tell her . . . tell her I love her. Malcolm, too. And that I'm anxious to see her . . . when she's ready."

Minerva's father gave a terse nod and left.

*What am I going to do?*

Gerald turned and saw his father standing in the doorway from his study. The two men stared at one another for a few moments; then, for the first time Gerald could

remember, Kenneth looked away first.

Gerald held his gaze on his father for a minute, then turned and went upstairs to think.

## Chapter Ten

*Chapter 10 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**2 July 1954**

Minerva stifled a yawn as she watched her young student screw her face into a portrait of wrinkled concentration. She had been up with Malcolm half the night as the poor child suffered with an earache. The watered-down pain relieving potion had only provided partial relief, and her attempts at basic diagnostic spells hadn't revealed anything other than inflammation of his eardrum.

They'd need to see a Healer if he didn't improve in the next few hours, Minerva sighed to herself. That would cost money, and it would make Gerald cross. Not that he begrudged his son the services of a Healer when the boy was sick, but the added strain of an unforeseen expense made him tense, and a tense Gerald was a testy Gerald.

She could always withhold the money from her earnings for the week, she supposed, but that would leave the household account short. She made a quick mental inventory of what was in the larder and decided that another week of Welsh rarebit might be in order. Gerald would grouse, of course, but he'd quiet down when she explained that the alternative was to take the difference from the pocket money she gave him every week.

*If Malcolm's earache didn't go away today, that was.*

Turning her attention back to her pupil, she said, "Mam'selle Bonaccord, try to relax your face. The energy you expend in tensing your muscles should be focussed on sending your intention through your wand. Try it again."

The girl took a deep breath, pointed her wand at the matchstick, and spoke the incantation. As Minerva could have predicted, nothing happened.

"I think you are still too tense. Tell me, Mam'selle Bonaccord, is there something especially troubling you?"

Minerva was dismayed when the child burst into tears.

She quickly conjured a handkerchief and sat the girl down in one of the chairs flanking the room, Summoning another beside it for herself.

"Marguerite, can you tell me what's troubling you? I'd like to help if I can."

Taking the handkerchief and dabbing at her eyes and nose, Marguerite said, "Je m'excuse, Madame...I am sorry. I want very much to susee . . . succeed in my studies. It is so important that I be permitted to continue at Beauxbatons. My parents will be so unhappy if I am . . . comment dit-on 'expulsée' en Anglais?"

"Expelled."

"Yes, expelled. Everyone will say I am a Sansmagie, and my family will be so ashamed."

*The poor child. No twelve-year-old should be subjected to such pressure* Minerva thought.

And it was true; Marguerite Bonaccord was so magically weak as to be nearly a Squib. But there ~~was~~ was magic there, which was why she had been accepted at Beauxbatons and why her parents were spending many *Livres* on tutoring in various magical subjects. The Bonaccords were a very old, very important magical family of Norman-French, and Marguerite was a direct descendant of Pierre Bonaccord, first Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation. Her grandfather still held the family's honorary seat there.

*It might be better if she were a Squib*, Minerva thought.

As shamefully as Squibs were treated, at least then Marguerite might be permitted to integrate into Muggle society rather than endure the pressures that came with her current station...pressures with which Minerva was all too familiar. As a witch of a prominent family, it was almost essential that the girl demonstrate adequate magical power. If Marguerite were unable to complete her *Bac-magie*, not only would she have no prospects for employment, but she would be unable to make a good marriage, as fear of having Squib children ran high in magical society. Her parents would continue to support her in all likelihood, but aside from her lack of magical prowess, Marguerite Bonaccord was a bright and inquisitive girl, and Minerva hated to think of her mouldering away on the sidelines of magical society without an occupation or even a family of her own to occupy her mind.

"Well, we shall work very hard to ensure you are not expelled," said Minerva.

"I fear it is no use. I am horrible at magic," said the girl morosely.

"Magic does not come easily to you, that's true," said Minerva. "But you are improving."

The girl sniffled a bit, and Minerva continued, "And, you know, Marguerite, there are other things besides magic. You are very, very good at languages. In the six months we've been working together, your English has become almost impeccable. And I understand from Master Rosetti that your Italian is excellent too."

"Did he really say that?" the girl asked, looking up at Minerva with watery eyes.

"Oh, yes."

Marguerite gave the first smile Minerva had seen from her in weeks. "I like to learn new languages."

"That's a marvellous skill that not many witches and wizards possess," said Minerva. "Tell me, is there anything else you especially like to do that you think you may be good at?"

"Well . . ." said Marguerite hesitantly, "I do like to sing."

"That's wonderful. Do you study music?"

"Yes, Madame Macnair. My father promised that if I got through all my classes with acceptable marks last year, I could take lessons. That is another reason I need to succeed in my classes next year. I do not want to stop singing lessons."

"Then we should get back to work," said Minerva, and the girl nodded.

An idea suddenly occurred to Minerva. "Marguerite, perhaps it might help you to relax and focus if you were to sing while you attempt the Transfiguration."

"Sing, Madame?"

"Yes. Why not try it?"

"What should I sing?"

"Something you know well. Something you like."

Marguerite thought for a moment, then said, "This spring we worked on Vecquerlin...I did 'Jeunes fillettes'."

"Excellent. Let's try that. Why don't you begin the song, then when you feel comfortable, switch your focus to your intention and your wand and try the Transfiguration."

Minerva watched as Marguerite took a few breaths and began to sing:

*"Jeunes fillettes, profitez du temps.*

*La violette se cueille au printemps.*

*La la la rirette, la ri lon lan la . . ."*

Marguerite's voice was clear, sweet, and remarkably strong. Minerva watched with fascination as the girl's countenance seemed to relax and open up as she sang the old song. As she began the second verse, Marguerite raised her wand, and a moment later, spoke the incantation...or rather, sang it...and suddenly, the matchstick became a needle.

"Brava! You did it, Mam'selle Bonaccord! See?"

The girl's face changed to a tableau of wonder. "I did!"

She threw her arms around Minerva suddenly. "Oh, thank you, Madame Macnair!"

"No need for thanks, Mam'selle; you did it yourself. I simply suggested a method to focus your energy," said Minerva as she hugged back rather stiffly.

When the girl released her, Minerva said, "You have a truly remarkable voice, Mam'selle Bonaccord. I hope you will continue with your music studies. Will you sing the entire song for me now? I'd like to hear it."

Marguerite beamed at her teacher, and bobbing a quick curtsy, she said, "It would be my pleasure, Madame Macnair, if you really want to hear it."

"I do."

Both teacher and pupil left the day's lesson in good spirits. Minerva's lasted until she went to check on Malcolm and found that he was still in pain.

"Has he had more pain potion?" Minerva asked Elgar.

The loyal elf was twisting his hands wretchedly, "Yes, Mistress. I is giving him two tablespoons an hour ago, but Master Malcolm is still having pain. Elgar is very sorry, Mistress."

"It's all right, Elgar," Minerva said. "You've done your best." She took the warm compress from the elf and sat down beside her son.

"Does it still hurt so terribly, love?"

"Yes, Mummy."

"Do the compresses help at all?"

"A little," the boy said miserably.

Minerva applied the compress to his ear and summoned Elgar over. "Elgar, will you please go to Healer Lefebre's and ask him to come as soon as he's able? You can tell him Master Malcolm has been having ear pain for two days."

"Yes, Mistress," the elf said and popped away.

Two hours later, Malcolm was happily laughing as he read aloud to Minerva from his well-loved copy of *The Phoenix and the Carpet*.

The relief that Minerva felt nearly evaporated when she heard Gerald come in from the hallway.

"Well, you seem much better, Malcolm," he said, stepping in and kissing Minerva quickly on the top of the head.

"Oh, I am, Father. Healer Lefebre gave me some potion that tasted awful! But it made me feel better."

Minerva didn't fail to see the cloud that passed over Gerald's features.

"That's fine, son," he said, ruffling the boy's curly hair.

Minerva stood and said, "If you'll sit with Malcolm, I'll help Elgar get dinner on the table."

"Yes, fine," Gerald answered, as though he were far away.

Gerald said nothing about the meagre meal of toast and cheese sauce that graced their plates that evening, but Minerva could see by his expression that he was tense.

Once Malcolm had gone off for his bath, Gerald turned to Minerva. "How much did Lefebre charge?"

"Three and six. Plus another eight *Sous* for the potion."

When she saw Gerald's frown, she said, "He needed the medicine, Gerald."

"Did I say otherwise?" he snapped back.

She said nothing in response, but she was angry with herself for allowing him to put her on the defensive.

He surprised her then by putting his hand in his robe pocket and drawing out the leather pouch in which he kept his money, withdrawing two gold *livres* and several copper *Sous*.

"Here," he said, holding them out to Minerva. "This is what's left from what you gave me yesterday."

"Thank you," she said quietly, taking the coins.

"Don't thank me; it's your money anyway," he said, the undercurrent of resentment barely hidden.

"It's *our* money, Gerald."

"You earned it, didn't you?"

"Yes, but..."

"Forget it, Minerva," he said and stalked off up the stairs.

Minerva watched him go for a moment, then went to clear the dinner things from the table.

She was not surprised later that night when Gerald held her down, bruising her wrists, while he fucked her, as she had been the first time it had happened.

For a time after they had moved to France, things had been good between them. Finally out from under his father's thumb, and out of the reach of the Ministry officials who had been nosing around in his finances, Gerald had relaxed a bit. "A new start," he had called the move, and for a time, Minerva had believed it was so.

Gerald spent more time with her and Malcolm in the beginning, and had even taken a hand in teaching the boy some of his letters and arithmetic. They lived quietly and simply in their rented flat in Paris' La Butte aux Cailles neighbourhood, with only Elgar, the McGonagall family house-elf, for household help. Minerva had never had to learn much in the way of housekeeping, so she was glad of the help, but with Elgar's assistance, she quickly mastered many household and domestic spells, as well as non-magical tasks required to keep the flat running. Even if she didn't precisely enjoy it, she found she didn't mind housework terribly, and she had managed to learn to prepare a few simple dishes. In the beginning, Elgar had often protested when Minerva took up the scrub brush or the saucepan, saying it was his duty as a house-elf to manage the cooking and housework, but Minerva gently reminded him that there were only so many hours in each day, and as Elgar spent many mornings and afternoons looking after and tutoring Malcolm so Minerva could take on pupils, it made practical sense for her to help with the housekeeping once she was finished with the day's tutorials.

It hadn't taken long for Minerva to attract clients from France's magical families; qualified Transfiguration masters and mistresses were rare as Basilisk's teeth, and Griselda had written letters singing Minerva's praises to her French colleagues, including the Transfiguration master of Beauxbatons, who had referred several students to her for additional lessons. From there, it had only been a matter of weeks before the wealthier of France's wizarding families began to seek her services to help their failing progeny bring their skills up to snuff.

Minerva also had also had two apprentices and had mentored one student as he began the journey to become an Animagus. As much as she had enjoyed teaching these advanced students, she found that her true love was in helping struggling students become more confident and more proficient in the difficult art of Transfiguration. Her one regret was that, between her busy roster of clients and tutoring her son, she had had little opportunity for research. But she needed all the clients she could manage.

At first, Gerald had hoped he might secure a position managing a magical stable...Abraxan racing was even more popular in France than in Britain...but his lack of fluency in French was a stumbling block. Several months went by, then a year without Gerald's finding employment...then a year turned into several.

Minerva never chided him for it; truth be told, she didn't mind being the sole breadwinner, but Gerald clearly felt it. Moreover, given that Minerva could only tutor so many clients at one time, and that a goodly portion of her earnings went to pay off the creditors Gerald had left in his wake back home (creditors who could and would cross the Channel to see they were paid) money was perpetually tight. The activities that had formerly occupied Gerald's free time...Abraxan training and racing, betting on same...now fell by the wayside of necessity.

As time wore on, Gerald became sullen and withdrawn, snapping at Minerva, Elgar, and even Malcolm for the smallest of slights. Minerva began to encourage him to find friends, to go out...even if it cost them money...just to get him out from underfoot. Before long, he was disappearing afternoons and sometimes evenings, and Minerva had a suspicion that he was visiting brothels, as she knew he had done back in Scotland. She couldn't bring herself to care, other than to resent the expense and the fact that she had to spend an extra twelve *Sous* every month for the potions that would protect her from any disease he might bring home. At first, she had also slipped some of the potion into his morning Pumpkin juice, but eventually she stopped. She reasoned that he might be taking care of that himself, and if he wasn't, well . . . if he couldn't be bothered to protect himself (or her) from the hazards of his carousing, then she wouldn't either.

It occasionally crossed her mind to wonder what kinds of services Gerald bought during his outings. She doubted it was plain sex, as he had that whenever he wanted it at home, and he still seemed to want it regularly.

Once, in the early days of their life in Paris, when things were still good between them, she had tried to let him know that she would not be opposed to certain variations in their lovemaking.

That evening, she had undressed completely and lay naked on the centre of their bed as she waited for Gerald to complete his evening ablutions.

"Minerva?" he had said when he stopped, stunned, in the doorway from the bathroom.

"Come over here, Gerald," she had purred at him. He approached the bed with trepidation, then sat.

"Touch me," she had told him, and opened her legs slightly to emphasise the point.

"Minerva, I..." he had started, but shut his mouth when she had taken his hand and placed it on her breast.

"Don't you want to, Gerald? Doesn't it feel nice?" she asked as his hand began to tentatively squeeze and knead.

"Minerva . . ." was all he could seem to manage, so she had leant up and kissed his mouth, and then encouraged him to bend his head to her breast.

He had taken her nipple between his lips then, and began to suck at it with increasing ardour, his other hand at her other breast.

It had felt so wonderful to be touched like that after so long, and Minerva was lost in the sensation. After a few minutes, she had moved her hands to begin unbuttoning his pyjama shirt, and he didn't protest, even moving his arms to allow her to push the garment off his shoulders. She ran her palms over his bare chest as he licked and sucked at her breasts.

She had been exquisitely excited when he moved off her long enough to untie and push his pyjama bottoms down and off, and she took the opportunity to pin him to the mattress, kissing and licking her way down his body.

When her lips met the head of his penis, he moaned deeply, and began to thrust. She closed a fist around the base of him to control his movements and began to move her tongue around his shaft, finally closing her lips around it and taking its length into her mouth.

She had never sucked a cock before, but found she didn't mind it at all. It was rather exciting, she thought, to have him at her mercy thus and to make him moan and gasp as he was doing. Maybe, she had mused, she could someday persuade him to return the favour, remembering how incredible it had felt when Albus had put his mouth on her sex.

Suddenly, Gerald had pushed at her shoulders, and she thought she had hurt him somehow, so she released his cock and sat up.

He had sat up, too, saying, "Gods, Minerva . . . what are you doing?"

She had looked at him, perplexed. "I thought you..."

"You're my wife, not some whore."

"No, it's all right, Gerald, I didn't..."

"No, it's not." His voice had softened then, and he began to stroke her hair. "I'm sorry, Minerva. I couldn't help myself when you started to . . . I shouldn't have. You're my wife."

Minerva had been confused. He had seemed both angry and apologetic.

"Gerald, really . . . I didn't mind. I liked it . . ."

"*Shhh*," he had said, putting his hand to her lips to silence her. With his other hand, he had pushed her gently down against the mattress and climbed on top of her, parting her thighs with his knees, and proceeded to fuck her in precisely the same way he had done since their wedding night, the only difference being that this time, it took him less than a minute to finish and roll off of her.

He had then extinguished the light, kissed her forehead, and turned over to go to sleep.

It had been about a year after that that Gerald had begun to go out in the evening. He would return late, often drunk, and would sleep late into the next morning.

The only change to their sex life was that, in periods in which his pocket money was too scant to allow him his evenings out, he had begun to hold her down painfully as he fucked her.

Minerva never complained, nor did she ever try again to make any changes to their sexual encounters. She carefully filed away her memories of the one time she had received pleasure at a man's hand, in order to focus on the task of survival.

## Chapter Eleven

*Chapter 11 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

### Chapter Eleven

**6 January 1956**

Minerva was sitting at the small desk in the nursery helping Malcolm with his Latin when Elgar popped into the room.

"Elgar is sorry to interrupt the lesson, Mistress, but there is two gentlemens downstairs who wish to see you. They says it is urgent."

"Thank you, Elgar," Minerva replied, closing her textbook. "Malcolm, why don't you give the Tacitus a try? Please work on translating Galba's speech in chapter fifteen until I return."

"Yes, Mum," the boy said with a barely audible sigh.

The two men waiting for her in the small parlour removed their caps as soon as Minerva walked into the room. When one of them produced a card designating them Maréchaussées Magiques...agents of French magical law enforcement...Minerva was alarmed. Her thoughts immediately turned to Gerald.

*What has he done?*

She projected an air of calm, however, as she asked, "Yes, what is your business here, officer?" She addressed the younger of the two and spoke in English in hopes of wrong-footing the men. She didn't know what they were here about, but she fully intended to use every possible advantage until she found out.

"Forgive me, but you are Madame Macnair?" asked the older, bald one.

"I am."

"Your elf informs me that your 'usband is not 'ome, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Then we will speak with you, Madame."

Minerva nodded curtly.

"You may wish to 'ave a seat, Madame. We 'ave some news to impart, and it may be a shock."

Minerva's first thought was that something had happened to her parents or her brother, and she felt herself begin to perspire as she sat on a wing-backed chair and gestured for the men to sit across from her.

"Your 'usband is Gerald Findlach Macnair, yes?" asked the elder, taking a seat and gesturing for the younger man to sit.

"Yes."

"Then I am sorry to 'ave to tell you that your...I am sorry, 'ow do you say, 'belle-mère?"

"My mother-in-law, yes . . . what about her?" asked Minerva, knowing full well what was coming.

"She is dead, Madame."

"How?"

"Regrettably, I must also inform you that 'er 'usband is arrested for 'er murder."

"Gods!" After she had caught her breath, Minerva said, "And I suppose that is why you were dispatched with the news?"

"Correct, Madame. The English MLE office contacted us when the arrest was done."

"I see. Can you tell me anything of the circumstances?"

"I am sorry, Madame, but that is the only information we are permitted to supply. You may, of course, wish to contact the English MLE office for further information."

"Of course." The two men just sat looking at her as if expecting her to say something more.

"Well, if that is all, officers?" Minerva said, standing.

The two men took the cue and stood.

The bald one said, "Again, I am very sorry to 'ave to bring this news, Madame."

"I understand, thank you, Maréchaussée."

"May we expect that you will inform your 'usband?"

"Of course."

Minerva showed the officers out and went into the kitchen to pour herself a glass of water.

*Heloise. Dead.*

What unnerved Minerva was not just the shocking substance of the news, but the fact that she wasn't certain how she felt about it.

Minerva had never been close to her mother-in-law, of course, and she found she didn't feel much about the woman's death, although she was sorry it had happened.

As for Kenneth . . . much as Minerva had thought him a dangerous, wicked man, she was stunned at the idea that he had murdered his wife, although she didn't for a moment doubt it had happened.

*Gerald. Oh . . . what I am going to tell Gerald?*

Unfair as it was, Minerva was suddenly angry with him for being out when the officers had called. Now she was left with the painful task of informing him of the news, and she hadn't the slightest idea how to go about it. She supposed she would just have to be straightforward, as the officers had been. What he would do when she told him was anyone's guess.

She finished her glass of water and went back up to see to Malcolm's work and to wait for her husband to return from wherever he had gone.

Minerva's heart gave a painful jump when she heard Gerald's voice in the hallway.

"Hullo! Minerva? Where are you? I have good news!"

When she appeared in the dining room, where Gerald was pouring himself a small dram of Firewhisky, he turned and said, "Ah, there you are, my love!" He held up his leather money pouch and shook it so she could hear the jingle of coin from within.

"I ran into a spot of luck today! A tiny investment I made last week came in and has paid off marvellously! I'm up nearly fifty *Livres*!"

"Gerald..." Minerva said.

He put up his hand, saying, "Now, I know you don't approve, Minerva, but really, I don't do it often, and this tip was too hot to ignore! Now, what do you say you put on that lovely blue robe I know you've got hidden in the wardrobe, and we go out to celebrate? Maybe dinner at La Sorcière Bourrée?"

He took her by the waist, pulling her close, as she said, "Wait, Gerald..."

Then he was kissing her wetly as she pushed at his shoulders.

"No, Gerald . . . wait a minute . . ."

He finally released her mouth, saying peevishly, "Merlin, Minerva . . . what is the matter with you? Can't you even..."

"Gerald . . ." she said more forcefully.

"What?"

She looked at his still-boyish face, and her heart broke for him all at once.

"I . . . I have something to tell you."

His face clouded over as he looked at her grave expression, and he dropped his hands from her waist.

"What is it?"

"A pair of officers from French magical law enforcement came by today. Gerald . . . your mother is dead. And your father is accused of killing her."

"What?"

"Gerald, I am so, so sorry . . ."

"What?" he repeated, taking her by the shoulders.

"I didn't know how to tell you...I'm . . . I'm sorry . . ."

"What are you saying?" he repeated, shaking her, his fingers clutching painfully at her flesh.

"I don't know any more than that. Please, Gerald, you're hurting me . . ."

He released her shoulders with a push and took two staggering steps away.

She followed and put a gentle hand on his arm, meaning to guide him to a chair, but he threw it off violently. "Don't touch me!" he shouted.

Minerva watched him apprehensively, her hands wringing the folds of her robe in her agitation.

Gerald suddenly seemed to remember the drink he had been pouring and crossed back to the small, rolling bar to retrieve it. He downed it in one swallow, then threw the glass against the wall.

"What the fuck did he *do*?" Gerald howled. He dropped to his knees and began to sob.

Minerva quickly crossed to him and knelt down beside him. After a moment, she hesitantly took him in her arms and began to rock him, holding his face to her chest as he cried.

"Ohhhh, Minerva . . . he groaned against her

"I'm here, Gerald," she said.

She heard the dining room door open, and Malcolm appeared peering through the doorway.

"Mummy . . . ?"

"It's all right, darling," she said to her son. "Just go back to your room for a bit, and I'll be up in a little while."

When Gerald had calmed, she handed him a conjured handkerchief, and he blew his nose.

"I'm sorry, Minerva," he said as he stood.

"No need to apologise, Gerald. It's a terrible, terrible shock," she replied.

"No. I should be stronger, not crying like a baby," he said with disgust.

"Gerald, everyone cries."

"You don't," he said almost accusingly. "I've never seen you."

She was taken aback. "I . . . I . . ." she stammered as she searched for a response.

"Will you cry for my mother, Minerva?"

She didn't answer, but crossed to him, taking his hands in hers, hoping he would not strike out at her. He had never struck her, but she was afraid of him in his current state. She felt the reassuring firmness of her wand in her pocket.

But he let her hold his hands as she spoke.

"We should owl your family, find out what's happening."

He nodded, the anger seemingly gone as suddenly as it had flared, and Minerva quickly Summoned a chair as his knees began to buckle again.

Gerald looked up at her with desperate eyes. "I don't know how much more I can take, Minerva."

All she could say was, "It will be all right, Gerald."

In the end, it was Minerva who returned to Scotland to see to their affairs. Gerald could not go, as he would be in danger of arrest himself, thanks to the ill-advised investments he had made in Grindelwald's ventures...investments he had not even had the sense to hide, as his father had.

The cost of the trans-Channel Apparition fee, combined with Minerva's enforced time away from work, meant Gerald would be largely confined to their flat in Minerva's absence, which was, she thought, both blessing and curse. She left Elgar with very strict instructions never to leave Malcolm alone with his father and to be ready to Apparate the boy out of the house at any sign of trouble. She assured the elf that she would answer for any consequences and that Elgar was not to punish himself for disobeying any of Gerald's commands that, in the elf's estimation, placed anyone in jeopardy. As a McGonagall family house-elf, Elgar was bound first and foremost to obey Minerva, thank Merlin. Elgar was a sensible elf, and Minerva trusted his judgement.

She had to trust it; they could not afford the fee for a side-along Apparition back to Scotland, and in any event, Minerva had no intention of exposing her son to the madness that seemed to stalk his nominal father's family, nor to the attention of reporters who would be anxious to exploit the spectacle of a pure-blood family scandal.

Gerald had been increasingly unstable in his behaviour since receiving the news of his mother's death. He had not harmed Minerva or Malcolm, but his fits of temper had become unpredictable...he would be perfectly content in one minute, then screaming in a rage the next...and had taken to throwing things when angry. Thank Circe he had not touched her in bed in the week since the officers' visit. She had been afraid of what he might do, and they could not afford a Healer.

When she arrived in Scotland, after settling her things in her old bedroom at McGonagall Manor, she and her father sat in the library drinking tumblers of Scotch as Magnus told his daughter what he knew.

"A house-elf found Heloise in her bedroom. She had been badly beaten, and Kenneth was nowhere to be found, so the elf summoned the family's Healer, who contacted MLE. Apparently, MLE questioned all the house-elves, and they painted the picture that made Macnair the prime suspect. I guess he never gave any of them a direct order not to speak to MLE, and since he wasn't there when they were questioned, he couldn't give it then."

Magnus paused to take a sip of his drink, and Minerva saw a small smile cross his lips.

"If the bastard had been better to his elves, they might have taken it upon themselves to keep quiet even without an order," he said.

"Anyway, MLE was looking for Macnair and someone must have passed the word to him, because he showed up at the house a day later claiming ignorance of the whole thing. MLE wasn't buying what he was selling, apparently, because he's in Azkaban awaiting trial for murder."

"Where is Walden?" Minerva asked, remembering Gerald's younger brother for the first time.

"He was at Hogwarts when the news broke, and as far as I know, he's still there. Dippet will keep him safe, I warrant, and keep the reporters away from the boy. Speaking of which, you need to keep to the shadows while you're here, or they'll be after you too."

Minerva gave an inward shudder.

"When's the trial?" she asked.

"Next week. Looks like the man will be defending himself, too. His family hasn't had anything to do with him for years, and none of those so-called friends of his have stepped up to help. I'm guessing they'll use Veritaserum, unless he can come up with a good reason to stop it or get it excluded from evidence."

Magnus' predictions proved accurate: in questioning under Veritaserum, Kenneth Macnair admitted to repeatedly beating his wife until finally, one evening, he had killed her, then fled the home in hopes of creating a false alibi. It took only an hour for the Wizengamot to declare him guilty and sentence him to life in Azkaban.

Predictably, the trial made for a series of sensational headlines in the *Daily Prophet*, and two stories contained speculations about Gerald Macnair and his flight to France. Minerva was relieved that her name was mentioned only in passing, and Malcolm's not at all. Nobody made mention of the fact that, in the years in which Kenneth had apparently abused his wife on a regular basis, the marriage contract clause against physical harm had never been invoked.

Minerva's main task in the week that followed was to see to Gerald's interests in the oversight of Kenneth's assets. The task was made simpler by the fact that these were greatly reduced, given the poor performance of Kenneth's recent investments and the reparations that had been ordered to be paid to the Rookwood family for Heloise's death. Essentially, all that remained was the house and some land, and there wasn't much to be done other than to appoint an executor to manage the estate in the quite likely event that Azkaban prisoner number 243 was rendered unable to see to his own interests after a few years in the tender care of the Dementors.

Gerald was clearly not a candidate, nor was Minerva herself, given their ex-patriot status. Walden, at fifteen, was still two years from attaining his majority and would need a guardian besides. At Minerva's behest, Kenneth's sister, Louisa, reluctantly agreed to take the boy in for summers and see to any estate-related affairs until Walden came of age. When that happened, he could take over the estate's management until Kenneth's death and the execution of the terms of his will.

Minerva owed Hogwarts' Headmaster, Armando Dippet, with two requests: one, that the boy be permitted to stay at school over the Christmas and Easter holidays, and two, that an application be made to the Indigent Scholars' Fund on his behalf. Minerva wrote candidly to the Headmaster that she and Gerald were not in a financial position to pay for Walden's schooling themselves, but that they would contribute whenever possible. Minerva hoped and trusted that the memory of her outstanding work at the school might lend some weight to her requests. She also thought that the Deputy Headmaster might weigh in in favour of granting them.

When a Hogwarts owl came to McGonagall Manor bearing a note saying that Walden would be funded for his final two years at the school and was welcome to stay on over holidays, Minerva breathed a sigh of relief and sent off an owl to her young brother-in-law telling him to keep his head down at school and to contact her should he encounter any difficulty. With that, she packed her bags, embraced her parents, and headed back to France.

Minerva arrived home exhausted but anxious to see Malcolm. When she opened the door to the flat, she had to blink a few times before what she saw registered in her mind.

The place looked as if a herd of Hippogriffs had gone rampaging through it.

As she stepped in over the debris, she called hesitantly, "Elgar?"

Moments later, the elf appeared in front of her with a small *pop*, obviously in great distress.

"Elgar is terribly sorry, Mistress! Elgar is only just returning from taking Master Malcolm to Monsieur and Madame Berquier, and I is not having time to tidy up yet."

"Please don't worry about that, Elgar," replied Minerva, "but please, tell me what's happened here."

Elgar looked around and lowered his voice so that Minerva had to lean down to hear him.

"It was Master Gerald. He is making a big row and smashing things. Elgar is thinking . . . Elgar is sorry, Mistress . . . but Elgar is thinking Master Gerald is having too much Firewhisky. Master Malcolm is crying, Mistress, and Master Gerald is yelling . . . Elgar is thinking it is better for Master Malcolm to go away until Master Gerald is calmer."

"You did quite right, Elgar," Minerva reassured the distraught elf. "Do you know where Master Gerald is?"

"I is just checking on him, Mistress. He is sleeping on the floor of the Master and Mistress' bedroom."

"Thank you, Elgar. Please go ahead and tidy up as much as you're able. Dispose of anything that is broken that you cannot mend. I will see Master Gerald, then I will fetch Master Malcolm. Thank you for taking care of him in my absence."

Elgar gave a small bow of his head and popped away again.

Minerva steeled her nerves and ascended the staircase to confront her husband. She found him passed out on the floor of their bedroom, reeking of Firewhisky and piss. She used her wand to remove his filthy clothes, clean him, and Levitate him to the bed. After cleaning and healing the cut on his lip, she methodically tidied up the clothes that were strewn around the room. She then stepped out of the room and placed a Locking Charm on the door.

Minerva Apparated to the front stoop of the large, *Seconde-Empire*-style townhouse owned by Petrus and Celestine Berquier, the wealthy parents of one of her pupils. Malcolm had sometimes played with their younger son, and he had been a guest in their home on more than one occasion.

A house-elf answered the bell and showed Minerva into the small salon off the entryway. Two minutes later, Malcolm came bounding into the room and her arms, followed by Madame Berquier and Roland, Malcolm's young playmate.

"Mummy, I'm so glad you're back!" Malcolm exclaimed as he hugged her hard, then stepped back, a sheepish look on his face at having betrayed such childish emotion in front of his friend.

Minerva hugged him back and thanked Madame Berquier for having looked after Malcolm for the afternoon. She did not fail to notice the coolness with which the woman bid them goodbye.

That night, as she sat on the side of Malcolm's bed tucking him in, he said, "Mum? What's wrong with Father?"

"He's very, very sad right now, Malcolm."

"Because of Grandmother Macnair?"

"Yes, darling."

"But why is he so angry? Did I do something wrong?"

"Oh, no, love. Not at all. But sometimes, when people are very sad or frightened, they act angry."

"Father frightened me."

"I know, and I'm sorry. I know he didn't mean to. But I'm here now. Everything will be fine."

"I missed you, Mum."

"I missed you, too, darling," she replied, kissing his cheek. "Sleep well now, and we'll talk some more in the morning, all right?"

Two hours later, Minerva was sleeping on a small cot she had Transfigured from a bench in Malcolm's room, when she heard shouting from down the hall.

Gerald was rattling the door and yelling, "God damn it, Elgar open the fucking door! I'll have your hide for this, you little bastard!"

Minerva quickly cast a *Colloportus* on Malcolm's door to keep the sound out and went to see to Gerald. When she unlocked their bedroom door and stepped in, Gerald cried, "Minerva!"

She wasn't sure what he was going to do, but he surprised her by sweeping her into his arms and embracing her hard.

"Thank Merlin you're home!"

She patted him awkwardly on the back as he hugged her, and endured the kiss he planted on her lips, despite the odour of stale liquor and vomit on them.

*He doesn't remember*, she thought suddenly, and it frightened her.

"Oh, how I've missed you," he murmured against her mouth.

When his hands moved to undo the clasp to her outer robe, she said, "Don't you want to know what happened while I was in Scotland?"

"Later," he said, moving her toward the bed.

In future years, she would remember that night as the only one in which he had been truly tender, and the first and only one in which he took long enough to bring her to orgasm before he spent himself.

She fell asleep wondering what was to become of them.

## Chapter Twelve

*Chapter 12 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

### Chapter Twelve

**26 October 1956**

"Minerva?"

At first, she wasn't sure if the voice had been in her head...she had heard it in her dreams often enough to allow her to identify it immediately.

But when she looked up from her paperwork, there he was, beaming down at her like a benevolent apparition.

"Professor Dumbledore!" she exclaimed, knocking her quill from the table in her haste to stand.

He bent down to retrieve it, and as he handed it to her, he said, "I'm sorry if I startled you, my dear."

"No, I just wasn't expecting to see you here."

*That*, thought Minerva, *is the understatement of the year.*

"Well, that makes two of us, then," he replied. "I certainly wasn't expecting to see you in London, much less here at the Ministry."

"Yes, I . . . I've come back."

"Well, that is good news indeed." His voice grew soft and grave as he added, "I heard about your husband, of course. I'm very sorry."

"Thank you," she said, wondering how he had heard of Gerald's disappearance. It wasn't likely to have made the *Daily Prophet*.

"Have you had any more news of where he might be?"

"No, Professor."

"We must continue to hope, then," he said. "Are you planning to stay in Britain, or will you be returning to France?"

"No, I intend to stay."

"Well, you must come for tea, then. Let me show off my new office," he said.

"Oh, yes . . . I heard you had been made Headmaster after Professor Dippet's retirement; congratulations."

"Thank you. It was all rather sudden, of course, but Armando's health has been poor. I confess I am in a bit over my head at the moment."

Minerva doubted that and said so.

"In any case, I should like the chance to avail myself of your wise counsel on a few matters. And, of course, to renew our acquaintance. May I owl you?" he asked.

"Certainly. I am staying with my parents in Moray at the moment."

"Wonderful. You may expect my owl, then."

He clasped her hand as they said goodbye.

Minerva was trembling slightly as she put her quill to the parchment once again. Meeting Albus Dumbledore so unexpectedly had thrown her. He had haunted her dreams and thoughts throughout the past twelve years; not just memories of the time they had spent together...although she woke with an aching emptiness between her legs often enough when she dreamt of it...but of what he would think if he knew what she had done. And now . . .

She squeezed her eyes closed as she forcefully pushed such thoughts from her mind. She could not afford any weakness at the moment. The irony of meeting him as she was filling out the paperwork to have Gerald declared dead was not lost on her, however.

His owl arrived four days later, inviting her to tea at Hogwarts on Sunday next.

As she surveyed herself in the mirror while she made ready, she wondered what he would think of her now.

Her robes were well-turned and fit perfectly, but they were a bit threadbare from too many repairs, and her shoes were hopelessly out of fashion. Her hair had grown too long, she realised, and she used her wand to shorten it and remove the straggled ends. It was not nearly as tidy a job as a proper hairdresser would have done, but it was neat enough, she supposed.

She peered at her reflection and knew she was no longer pretty.

At thirty-one, she had deep furrows in her brows, and her eyes had become slightly hooded, with dark blue-grey circles underscoring them. Her lips seemed set in a thin, horizontal line, and her nose had finally regained its normal, straight, unremarkable form with a little help from her wand. She was too thin by half, she knew, and her cheekbones jutted out from above the concave slopes of her face, making her chin look even more pointed than it was, and her collarbones made sharp ridges along the neck of her robe. Her skin was pale and dull.

She briefly considered using makeup, or even a glamour, but quickly dismissed the idea. He would no doubt see through such artifice, and it wasn't as if she was trying to seduce him, in any event.

As she trudged up the path from the gates, she had to fight to keep the apprehension at bay. There was no way he could know what she had done, she told herself, but Albus Dumbledore seemed to know things that no one else knew, and it was not necessarily because he was a Legilimens.

The gargoyle that guarded the entrance to the Headmaster's office seemed to be expecting her, because when she presented herself to him, he merely said, "Please enter, my lady," as he rumbled aside to let her pass.

"Minerva! I am delighted you could come. Please, come in," exclaimed Dumbledore as soon as she appeared in the doorway.

He took her cloak and sent it to the hook near the door. She looked around; she had only been in Headmaster Dippet's office on a few occasions, and it didn't appear much different than she remembered. The only noticeable change was the tall, glass case that graced a corner of the large, airy room. In it were suspended several phials of a silvery substance, and next to it stood a stone Pensieve on a pedestal.

Dumbledore said, "Ah, so you've noticed my memory cabinet. One of my little luxuries, I must confess. I like to have my memories readily available for perusal. I used to keep them in cigar boxes, but now that I have a bit more space, I had this built. What do you think: too ostentatious?"

"No, it's beautiful," she replied. And it was. The light reflected off the glass shone through the phials, which refracted it in shafts of brilliant colour around the room. Minerva wondered if the memory of the time he had made love to her was contained in one of the phials. Did he ever take it out late at night...try to relive it...as she would have done if she had had a Pensieve?

No. She gave her head a slight shake to clear it of such a foolish thought.

"Won't you sit down, Minerva?" said Albus, gesturing to an overstuffed chair near a small tea-table.

When he had served the tea, he asked, "How are you, Minerva? Really?"

"I'm fine, Professor. It's been a difficult few months, but coming home has been a balm."

"Please call me Albus. And your son...I'm sorry, his name escapes me..."

"Malcolm." She was immediately on her guard.

"Yes, Malcolm. How is he?"

"He is as well as anyone could expect."

"How old is he now?"

"Eleven."

"Eleven already! May I enquire as to why he is not at Hogwarts? It is none of my business, of course, but I am naturally curious."

"He is at Beauxbatons. He had been looking forward to starting there this autumn, and I thought it best to maintain some stability in his life."

"I see. It must have been a difficult decision, though, to come home without him."

"Yes, it was." She did not trust voice to say more.

"Forgive me for prying, my dear, but have you been able to find employment since returning to Scotland?"

"I have been hoping to secure some private pupils, as I did in France. It is taking longer than I anticipated, but my mother and father have been most generous in allowing me to stay with them until I am back on my feet."

"You realise, no doubt, that my motives in asking you about your circumstances are not entirely unselfish."

"Aren't they?"

He gave her a small, knowing smile. "No. You see, I find myself in a rather desperate situation."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Since becoming Headmaster, I have been trying to find someone to replace me as Transfiguration master, but I have been sadly unsuccessful at finding a suitable candidate."

She said nothing, and he continued.

"Do you think, Minerva, that you might consider taking up the post?"

"Me?"

"Of course. You are by far the most qualified candidate that has crossed my path, and you would be doing me a tremendous favour if you would consider it."

She didn't believe him for a moment. Her reputation in Britain had been good during and after her apprenticeship with Griselda, but that was a decade past now. She had enjoyed the good opinion of the French magical academic community...at least until word of her domestic difficulties had begun to circulate...but that kind of information didn't tend to cross the Channel, and she had published no research that would have boosted her reputation internationally.

Why was he doing this?

He seemed to know what she was thinking, as he so often had in the past, because he said, "A research reputation is all very well and good, of course, but I want someone who can teach. And for that, my dear, you have a talent that is as rare as your ability to take feline form."

So he had been watching her from afar. She felt her cheeks begin to flush.

"Forgive me, Minerva, but yes, I have followed your career since you left Hogwarts. Is that so surprising?"

She shook her head.

"Griselda was kind enough to fill me in from time to time on your remarkable progress during your apprenticeship, and I have friends in France who were able to provide some news on occasion. I believe you were the tutor to the granddaughter of a colleague of mine at the International Confederation...a Mademoiselle Bonaccord?"

"Marguerite, yes," said an astonished Minerva.

"The reports I have heard all suggest you are an excellent teacher, and that is what I am looking for. Tell me, Minerva: do you enjoy teaching?"

"I . . . yes . . . well, I did . . . I . . ."

"I know as well that it became difficult for you to retain pupils, through no fault of yours."

"Yes," was all she could manage.

"I am sorry. So you see why I had hopes you might consider coming to teach at Hogwarts? In the interest of total disclosure, I would also ask you to take on the post of Head of Gryffindor House, as I cannot continue in that capacity. Your salary would reflect the added responsibility, of course."

When she didn't answer, he said, "I should also tell you that any past . . . personal association between us did not factor into my decision to offer you the post, and that it would not affect my professional regard for you should you come to work here. I hope that you would feel the same . . ."

Minerva left the meeting with a sample contract in her hand and feelings that roiled and churned within her breast.

Working at Hogwarts. With Albus.

Merlin, how she wanted to accept! It seemed the answer to all her prayers had arrived in the space of one afternoon. A job she could love in a place that had felt like home for so long, alongside people who could make her feel safe. And steady money, which she needed now more than ever.

Could she do it? Could she ignore the tremendous secret she had hidden from everyone, as if it had nothing to do with him, or would it eventually overwhelm her if she saw him every day?

How could she have forgotten how much Malcolm's eyes resembled his?

Could she really look into them day after day and keep the secret?

And how could she face him day after day...this man who had instilled in his pupils so adamantly the important difference between what is right and what is easy...knowing all she had done?

Could she do it?

Two days later, she had a signed contract and a date to move her things into her new quarters in Gryffindor Tower.

She was terrified.

She was elated.

# Chapter Thirteen

*Chapter 13 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

## 1 December 1956

Albus Dumbledore knocked on the door of his old quarters, a bouquet of white cabbage roses in his hand.

When the door opened, Minerva invited him in, exclaiming, "Such lovely flowers, Albus! That's very kind of you."

"I thought you might need something to liven up these old rooms until you have the chance to do a bit of decorating," he responded.

"I don't have much of an eye for décor, I'm afraid," she said.

"Well, whatever you do, I'm sure it will be an improvement over how these rooms looked when I was in residence here."

She gave him a thin-lipped smile and said, "Please, sit down. I'll have to order some tea from the house-elves, as I haven't had a chance to get any tea things yet."

"Oh? Did you not bring your things from France?" he asked.

"No," she replied quietly, and he knew immediately that he had put his foot in it. There had been, Albus surmised from the subtle enquiries he had made after he had heard of Macnair's disappearance, very little for Minerva to bring home. Gerald Macnair...wherever he was...had left his wife and son nearly destitute. Albus suddenly realised that he knew few details of Minerva's life in France, other than what he had been able to piece together from second-hand reports of acquaintances who knew people who knew Minerva. Or, to be more accurate, knew *of* Minerva. He had the feeling that there were few people on either side of the Channel who really knew her.

He said, "With your permission, my dear, I shall have Bilby bring up some tea and biscuits."

Minerva nodded agreement, and Albus summoned his personal elf to place the order. Five minutes later, when the elf had returned with the tea service and popped away again, Albus said, "Actually, Minerva, that's one of the things we need to discuss: the selection of a house-elf to serve you."

"A house-elf? For me?"

"Yes. It isn't part of the contract, but each of the live-in staff gets an elf to tend to their needs while they are in residence. They do have other, general duties around the castle, but they are assigned to be at your service specifically. Usually, when a staff member leaves his position, the elf previously assigned to him is passed to his replacement, barring any objections from either party, but Bilby has been with me since I began teaching at Hogwarts, and he would like to continue with me. Professor Dippet's old elf, Trasker, is getting on in years, and I'm guessing you would do better with a younger elf."

"It doesn't especially matter to me, Albus," she replied. When he didn't reply right away, she added, "Unless there's another reason you don't think it would work."

"To be honest, my dear, I fear Trasker would find it insulting to pass to a Head of House's service after serving the Headmaster of Hogwarts for so many years."

"Would he, now?" she asked, and he couldn't tell if she was amused or offended.

"Oh, it's nothing personal, I assure you. It's just that there is a very definite hierarchy among Hogwarts' house-elves, as I discovered when I became Deputy Headmaster. To serve a Head of House is considered an honour second only to..."

"...serving the Headmaster," Minerva finished. "I see."

"Quite. If Trasker were younger, I might have considered allowing Bilby to pass to you and taking Trasker myself, in order to maintain a certain status quo among the house-elves, but the fact that he has spent so many years with Armando might make it hard for him to accept new ways of doing things, and I fear that I am also rather set in my ways. I would hate to see him punishing himself constantly for resenting my orders."

"That makes sense," said Minerva. "But what will he do now? House-elves don't just retire, do they? The McGonagall elves always . . . well . . . died in service."

"No, they don't retire. Not in the sense that wizards and witches do, anyway. We generally just give them lighter and lighter duties as they get on...the hard part is getting them to accept it."

"How did you get Trasker to accept it? I don't imagine he took kindly to the reduction in duties."

"I hit upon the...rather brilliant, if I may say so...plan of giving him a new and exalted title: Head House-Elf Emeritus. He has a shiny new badge to go with his title, and his new duties include performing a daily 'inspection' of the younger elves and being chief taster of all the dishes to come out of the kitchens. He also is called upon to consult with me in any matters pertaining to house-elves' duties or welfare."

"Oh, Albus," laughed Minerva, and he was glad to see some genuine mirth from her at last. "That is clever. I shall have to pass your idea on to my mother; she used to complain all the time about getting the older elves to slow down. We had one that kept breaking everything in sight."

"That must have been difficult," Albus said.

"Yes, I remember her going from room to room after the elf, repairing the damage with her wand."

Turning back to the question at hand, Albus said, "You will need to select a suitable elf from among them. I've taken the liberty of having Trasker draw up a list of good candidates." He reached in his pocket and pulled out a rolled parchment, which he gave to Minerva. "I had him include elves of both genders, although I know some of the staff prefer one or the other."

"Either one is fine, thank you," Minerva replied.

"I would suggest interviewing several before setting on one. They are all wonderful in service, of course, but you may find some personalities more compatible than others."

"Albus," Minerva said thoughtfully.

"Yes?"

"Might it be possible to bring my personal elf to serve me here?" She sounded embarrassed, and he didn't know if it was because she thought her request was unreasonable or because she didn't like to mention that she owned a house-elf. Not many of Hogwarts' staff could say the same.

"It might, although it could cause difficulty among the other elves if your elf did not have other duties as well."

"I could ask Elgar if he would be willing to take on additional duties around the castle. I daresay he'd welcome it, as he's been unhappy at being so idle at my parents' house since we returned. He hardly knows what to do with himself without Malcolm to look after or a house to see to on his own.

"It would mean a great deal to me, Albus, if he could come," she added quietly. "Elgar was a great help and comfort to me when things . . . after Gerald disappeared. I really had no one else."

Albus felt his heart contract a little at her words. "Minerva," he said, taking her hands, "if ever you would like to talk to someone . . . about what happened in France, I would be honoured to listen." He felt her hands pull almost imperceptibly away, but he held them fast, wanting her to understand and to trust.

"I know that things were not easy for you for some time, even before Gerald disappeared. And I'm sorry you felt so alone. You turned to me once, Minerva. I'd like to be a friend to you now. To you, and to Malcolm."

This time, she did pull her hands away, and he was taken aback by her sudden coolness after having opened up to him, even that little bit.

"Thank you, Albus," she said. "But I'm fine. Malcolm and I are fine." She added, less stiffly, "I do thank you for the offer. And I do consider you . . . a friend, Albus."

He left her chambers after they had discussed holiday schedules and lesson plans: she would take over the first- through fifth-year classes, and he would continue with his N.E.W.T. students for the remainder of the school year.

As he sat in his study that evening, he could not concentrate on the letters he was already a day late in getting off. The conversation with Minerva had unsettled him. She had seemed to be warming up, becoming more comfortable...and then came the sudden chill that had fallen over her when he had offered her his friendship.

Perhaps he had been wrong to make mention of the evening they had spent together.

*Gods!*

It suddenly occurred to him that she might have inferred some kind of sexual overture in his offer. He mentally scourged himself for his blunder; just when he had wanted her to trust him, to feel she could lean on him, he had to go and frighten her...or offend her...with his thoughtless remark.

How could he tell her that he meant nothing of the kind? He didn't want to offend her further in bringing the matter up.

*Sometimes, he told himself, for a genius, you are remarkably stupid.*

## **7 December 1956**

"I think that's it, then," Albus said, closing his agenda as he looked around the staff room. "Unless anyone has something to add?"

The murmured "no's" prompted him to declare, "Meeting adjourned, and I wish you all a most pleasant evening."

As the staff were gathering their things and beginning to shuffle out, Albus caught Minerva's eye.

"Minerva, my dear, if you have a few moments . . . ?"

"Of course, Albus," she replied, and they waited in silence as the last staff member filed out and closed the door behind him.

"I'm sorry to keep you from the pleasures of your Friday evening, but I didn't want to speak in front of the other staff."

"Yes, what is it, Albus," she asked evenly.

"I just wondered if you were planning to have young Malcolm here over the Christmas holiday. If so, it might be as well to let the other Heads know, so they won't wonder who he is."

He noticed the colour rise slightly in Minerva's cheeks, and he thought for a moment she was angry with him, although why she should be, he couldn't say.

Her voice, however, was calm. "No. Malcolm will be at my parents' home for the holidays. I will visit him on the weekends and on my days off."

"I hope you aren't having him stay away because of any . . . discomfort. You are the only staff member in residence with a child, but it isn't unprecedented, and the Board was happy to make the residence exception for you. I assure you that Malcolm would be welcomed by all the staff."

"It isn't that, Albus. And I do appreciate the Board's flexibility in the matter. I just think it is better for him to spend his Christmas in a home rather than a school. Besides, my parents are extremely eager to have him."

"I'm sure they are. But won't you miss being with him?"

*Damn you for an old fool, Albus Dumbledore.*

Of course she would miss him...and he cursed himself again when he saw her eyes mist over momentarily before her remarkable control exerted itself once again.

She said, "Yes, but as I say, I will see him."

He looked at her for a moment, then said, "Very well. I just wanted to be certain there was no other reason."

As long as he was putting his foot in it again, he thought he might as well address the other issue that had been niggling at him since their conversation the prior week.

"There was one other thing I wanted to speak with you about, my dear."

"Yes, Albus?" she prompted when he paused.

"I . . . well, it's rather awkward, but something has been troubling me since we spoke in your rooms last week."

She said nothing, which made him all the more uncomfortable. She would be a formidable foe in an argument, he thought.

"It occurred to me later that you might have . . . mistaken my intentions. When I offered you my friendship, I hope you did not feel as though I were . . . propositioning you."

Her expression didn't change.

"No, Albus. I didn't feel that at all."

"I am glad. I thought perhaps when I said . . . well, never mind. There was no misunderstanding, and that's good."

She nodded, and he said, "Well, I won't keep you any longer. Enjoy your weekend, Minerva."

"Thank you, Albus. I hope your weekend is pleasant too."

He pretended to be reviewing his notes as she left. He wasn't sure why.

## Chapter Fourteen

*Chapter 14 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**15 April 1960**

Malcolm was sitting in the kitchen with Elgar, who was teaching him how to make a proper custard.

"It is crucial, Master Malcolm, to keep stirring the pot gently," the elf was saying, indicating the wooden spoon that was revolving in a steaming pot. "You can do it by hand or by magic...once you is of age, of course...but you must do it, or the custard will curdle. Here," said Elgar, stopping the spoon and urging the boy to step to the stove. "Master Malcolm should try it."

Malcolm did as he was bid and took the spoon, gingerly stirring the pot.

He had been so disappointed when Elgar had arrived without his mother. She was delayed at the school, the elf said, and would be along as soon as she could. His last visit was at Christmas, and he was aching to see her, but at fifteen, he wasn't about to let anyone know, so he affected what he hoped was a world-weary nonchalance on the subject.

He knew he wasn't fooling Elgar, however. Malcolm couldn't keep his eyes from glancing toward the entry hall every few seconds, and finally, the elf had suggested it was time Master Malcolm learnt to cook a little...why didn't young Master come to the kitchen to assist Elgar in making the ginger-lemon curd he so loved with his scones? Gran and Granddad had given their blessing to the arrangement, and off he went with the elf.

So here he was, standing over a hot stove, stirring the curd as if he weren't a wizard with a wand to help him do manual tasks like this.

*Ah, well*, he told himself, *one has to stir potions by hand, too*. And he liked being with Elgar. It reminded him of when they were all together in France, a proper family. Before his dad had come over funny and ran off.

Because that's what had happened, Malcolm was sure of it. When he was young, he had believed what his mum had said about Father disappearing and nobody knowing what had happened. Then, when he got older, he heard stories about fathers who left mothers to go off with other women...it had happened to a classmate, who came home from one summer hol groaning about having two mothers after his dad had married the woman he'd left for. Malcolm supposed that might be why his dad had drunk so much those last months; he was in love with someone else, and it had torn him apart not to be with her.

Sometimes Malcolm wondered if Mum knew where Father was. Did she really believe he had just disappeared? Or did she know where he was and whom he was with? Malcolm never asked her, though, because he didn't want to hurt her. If she was happier living in a dream, he wasn't going to go out of his way to change it. Whatever had happened to make his dad leave, it wasn't her fault. Malcolm was sure of that too.

At first, he had missed his dad, despite the last frightening months; then, as his memories of the man faded, it was more like he missed the ~~idea~~ idea of his dad.

Sometimes he wondered if his dad had another son now.

Malcolm was so intent on his task and lost in his thoughts that he didn't notice her standing in the doorway to the kitchen until Elgar nudged him and he looked up to see her watching him with a small smile.

"Mum!" he cried, dropping the spoon to go to her. She embraced him, kissing his cheek and hugging him to her.

"Och, Malcolm," she said, ruffling his brown mop, "don't they teach you any hair-trimming spells at that French school of yours?"

"No, Mum. They don't teach us anything at Beauxbatons. It's a second-rate institution you've sent me to," he teased. "Maybe I should transfer to Hogwarts. Although I hear their Transfiguration mistress is a terror."

"That's Professor Terror to you, lad," said a voice from behind him, and he saw his granddad come in and embrace his mother warmly.

"Ah, Minerva. 'Tis good to see ye."

"It's good to see you too, Father," she replied.

The curd forgotten, the three of them made their way to the parlour, where Malcolm's gran was sitting reading a book.

"So you found them, I see, Magnus," Gran said.

They talked of all manner of things until they were interrupted by dinner.

As they ate their cock-a-leekie, Gran asked, "What was the emergency that kept you at the school, Minerva?"

Malcolm's mum answered, "Professor Yates, our Deputy Headmaster, took ill on Wednesday. We got the news yesterday that it was dragon pox."

"Morgana preserve us!" Gran exclaimed.

"It's all right, Mother. He was wise enough to take to his rooms as soon as he began feeling ill, and we were under quarantine until this afternoon. I didn't tell you before because I didn't want to worry you. Albus brought some Healers up from St Mungo's to run diagnostics on the entire school, and nobody else has been infected, thank Merlin. That's why I was late getting here; we were just getting the last students off at five. I'm sorry to be late, Malcolm," his mother said, turning to Malcolm.

"That's all right, Mum. I'm just glad everyone is all right," he replied.

"Well, not everyone," she corrected. "Unfortunately, Professor Yates is in a very bad way. He's not a young man, and the pox is a nasty disease."

"I'm sorry to hear it. Do they know how he contracted it?" Granddad asked.

"Not with any certainty, no," Mum replied. "He has a friend who has been working in Romania, and evidently they've been having a small outbreak in the north. Phillip's friend was in town last weekend, and they met up at the Three Broomsticks...incidentally, they're still under quarantine. Fortunately, they didn't . . . um . . . leave the room much, so other exposures were limited, or we'd likely be dealing with a mass quarantine now. Phillip...Professor Yates...told Albus that the man seemed well at the time, but one never knows. The incubation period is around forty-eight hours, apparently, so it's possible he infected Phillip sometime over the weekend, while he still appeared well."

"Gods," said Granddad. "The man who invents a potion to cure dragon pox will be made Minister of Magic in a heartbeat."

Mum replied, "The man or woman who invents a potion to *prevent* dragon pox will have the eternal gratitude of the wizarding world. The scars are terrible, even if one survives the illness."

"Here, here," said Gran, raising her glass, and they all followed suit.

The next day, Malcolm and his mother were out on the manor grounds, Malcolm swooping and soaring on his broom. He'd been a Chaser for one of the Beauxbatons Quidditch teams since the past year and was anxious to show her some of his newest moves.

When he finally lit next to her, she was grinning widely. "You certainly know how to put that Silver Arrow through its paces. I don't believe I've ever seen anyone pull out of a dive and ascend again so quickly! I'd be surprised if a Bludger ever even caught your wind."

"Oh, Mum," he answered when he caught his breath. "You've never seen a professional game, then."

"I have! Amelia and I have seen the Harpies twice now, I'll have you know."

"You have?" Malcolm was surprised. "You've never been much interested in Quidditch."

"Well, I never had a son who was on a team before. Besides, I have to attend all the school matches, so I thought I might as well learn something about the game. Amelia's a big fan, and she's been giving me the introductory course."

"You surprise me, Mum," he said.

She just smiled at him.

"I wish . . ." he started, then checked himself. *If wishes were Thestrals*, his mum would say next.

But she surprised him again.

"What do you wish, love?"

"Oh, just that you could see me play sometime," he said, trying to sound casual.

"I wish that too," she said. Then: "Come. It's almost time for lunch, and you'll need a bath before Gran lets you anywhere near her table."

As he was scrubbing the grit and perspiration from his body, Malcolm thought about what his mum had said...that she wished she could see him play. Maybe this would be the time to ask her, then.

Malcolm wanted to come to Scotland to live with her.

He liked Beauxbatons well enough; he did well in his studies and had friends, and making the Quidditch team last year had been great, but he felt more and more untethered lately. Like an orphan. Oh, Mum wrote every week...sometimes several times...and they were together on hols (when she could get off, that is) and all summer, but the plain, unvarnished truth of it was that he felt he was missing something. Holiday gatherings like this only served to underscore the feeling of emptiness when his mum left him at the filigreed gates of the French school.

He also felt that there was an indelible mark on him that was visible only at school. He had been a first-year...only in his second week...when he had been called into Headmistress Charpentier's office to find his mother standing there, looking grave and shaken.

By the end of his third week at Beauxbatons, everyone knew about his father. By the end of his fourth, everyone also knew that his mother had been forced to sell nearly everything in their flat to pay for his second term at school.

To be sure, there were other kids whose troubled homes were common topics of discussion, but it didn't make Malcolm feel any kinship for them, nor did it make his own dubious fame easier to bear.

A new start, a new school...a new country...might ease that. And he'd get to be part of a family all the time, not just via letter from afar or over hols that were over all too soon.

He would ask her before the week was out, he resolved. He didn't know why he was nervous, though. There was really no good reason for her not to agree.

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"I think you've got it now," Mum said the third time Malcolm had managed to Transfigure the garden gnome into a perfect common gopher. "Change him back, then we can have a spot of tea, all right?"

Malcolm did so, and moments later, the gnome was gnashing its teeth and trying to bite Mum as she lifted it by one foot and dropped it into the cage on the desk. After she had summoned a house-elf and asked her to deposit the gnome on the grounds ("*outside* the gate, if you please, Gemmy"), she ordered the tea.

"I'm very pleased with your progress, Malcolm," she said. "You've a real aptitude for Transfiguration. Do you enjoy the subject?"

"Yes. It's my favourite, but . . ."

"But?" his mum enquired.

"It's just that Professeur Perrault . . . not to say anything bad about him, mind you . . . it's just that I feel as if he's holding me back. He won't give me any advanced assignments, even though I'm way ahead of my class."

"Maybe he doesn't believe you're ready to advance," Mum said.

"Maybe," said Malcolm. "But what do *you* think?" he asked.

He saw her lip twitching before she answered. "I don't think it's my place to criticise another teacher's methods."

"So you *do* think I'm ready!"

"That isn't what I said, Malcolm," she admonished.

"But Mum, you've seen what I can do. I just feel as if I'm . . . as if I'm...what's the word?...stagnating. Yes, like I'm stagnating in his class when I could be moving ahead. Didn't you do advanced projects when you were my age?" he asked.

"Yes, I did, but Malcolm..."

"See? Professor What's-His-Name didn't try to hold you back, he helped you get ahead!"

"Dumbledore."

"I'm sorry?"

"His name is Professor Dumbledore," she said quietly. "And yes, he did help me."

Malcolm was chastened for just a moment. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean any disrespect."

She didn't say anything for a few moments, and Malcolm thought she was angry. This wasn't going at all the way he had hoped.

When she spoke, though, she didn't sound angry. She sounded worried. "What of your other courses, Malcolm? Do you feel . . . constrained in any of your other classes?"

He saw his opening and took it. "Well, I feel as if I could be doing more in Charms and Magical Defence. But it's really Transfiguration where I'm frustrated."

"Malcolm, I'm very hesitant to interfere with another teacher's methods..."

"But you could teach me!" he blurted out.

"What do you mean?"

"Mum, I'd like to come to Hogwarts."

There. It was out.

He held his breath for a few moments as she stood saying nothing but looking at him in shock.

He was taken aback when he saw tears form in her eyes and begin to spill down her cheeks.

"Oh, Mum! I'm sorry!" he exclaimed and went to her.

"No, no, Malcolm," she sniffed. "You've nothing to be sorry for. Nothing."

He conjured a handkerchief and handed it to her, earning him a wan smile.

Drying her eyes, she asked, "Is that what this has all been about? You want to come home?"

"Um . . . well, partly."

"Were you afraid to ask me, Malcolm?"

"No, not exactly. It's just I know what you had to do to get the tuition for Beauxbatons, and I didn't want you to think I was ungrateful."

"No, lamb. I don't think you're ungrateful," she said, putting a palm out to stroke his cheek, which had lately begun sprouting a soft, auburn fuzz, lighter than the hair on his head. "I just thought you were happy at Beauxbatons . . ." she said, and he was alarmed to see her eyes fill again.

He quickly said, "Oh, I have been happy there, Mum. It isn't that. I just think that I'd like to be closer to you, to Gran and Granddad. I don't know why, exactly. It's just something I feel."

"If you're sure..."

"Oh, I am!"

"Well then, I'll speak to Professor Dumbledore to see if we can arrange a place for you for next term."

"Mum, that's fantastic!"

"Yes, well, don't thank me just yet," she said, and Malcolm was relieved that his familiar, stern mum was back. "Coming in in your fifth year won't be easy. You'll be ahead in some courses and behind in others."

"I know."

"And you may find it difficult to make friends. All the other students already know each other quite well by now."

"I know."

"And there's no guarantee you'll make the Quidditch team of whatever House you're put into . . ."

"That's fine, Mum. Really. I've thought about all those things, and it's worth it."

"If you're sure then . . ."

"I am."

She opened her arms and he let her hug him.

"It will be nice to have you home," she said.

Malcolm was pleased to note that she was trembling with happiness.

## Chapter Fifteen

*Chapter 15 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**28 August 1960**

"Professor Dumbledore, please meet my son, Malcolm."

Minerva felt her hands itching to clutch at the folds of her robes and stilled them by force of will.

She half expected Albus to cry out in shock, but he simply said, "Malcolm, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"It's an honour to meet you, sir," Malcolm replied. "Thank you for allowing me to come to Hogwarts."

"I was happy to do it. I used to chide your mother for keeping you hidden from us all this time. Some of us had begun to suspect you had two heads," said Albus, smiling at Malcolm beneficently as Minerva felt the trickle of perspiration that had beaded between her breasts.

Malcolm's shy smile widened into a grin. "No, sir. Just the one, I'm afraid."

"And a good one it is, too, if what I hear from Headmistress Charpentier is accurate." Albus looked over at Minerva with a wink.

"Oh, Albus," she interjected to cover the way her heart was pounding. "Don't flatter him, or his one head will grow as big as one of Hagrid's pumpkins."

"I hope you're settling in well, Malcolm," Albus said, ignoring his new Deputy's jibe.

"Quite well, sir, thank you," Malcolm replied. "Hogwarts is truly spectacular."

"Indeed, it is lovely. Although I expect you'll find the climate somewhat different from that of Provence. I'm afraid sunshine can be in rather short supply during the winter," said Albus.

"I'll look forward to the change, then, sir."

"Good lad," said Albus. "Now, we do need to get one piece of business out of the way before I let you go off to explore the wonders of Honeydukes Sweet Shop."

He crossed his office to a high bookshelf and removed the Sorting Hat from its perch. "We need to get you properly sorted into a House."

Malcolm looked nervous. "Mum's told me about that," he said. "The hat looks into you and decides which House you're best suited to, is that right?"

"Yes and no," Albus replied. "The Sorting Hat will also take into account your personal preference."

Malcolm hesitated. "So . . . if I tell it I'd rather not be in Slytherin, it won't put me there?"

"I daresay it will not put you where you don't want to be, but you should be assured that there is nothing at all wrong with Slytherin House. Many fine witches and wizards...like Professor Slughorn...have come through Slytherin. I believe it was your father's House as well."

"Yes, sir. And I meant no disrespect. It's just that . . . well, I've done a bit of reading . . . and it doesn't seem it would be a good fit for me," said Malcolm.

"I see. Well, you may be correct, although I advise you not to believe everything you read about Slytherin. Books and articles tend only to report the bad and none of the good of that noble House. In any event, it is just as likely you will be sorted into your mother's House. The sorting tends to fall along family lines, although there are, of course, many exceptions. Shall we find out?" Albus asked holding the hat aloft.

"Yes, sir," replied Malcolm.

Minerva closed her eyes along with Malcolm as Albus lowered the hat onto his head. In the brief silence that followed, she opened them and saw the hat scrunch up its already-wrinkled face before crying, "Gryffindor!"

Malcolm opened his eyes, obviously relieved, and grinned at his mother, who smiled back.

"Congratulations, my boy!" said Albus, removing the hat and placing it back on its shelf. "Are you pleased?"

"Oh, yes, sir," Malcolm replied.

Albus added, "I must warn you, you have a very strict Head of House." He glanced at Minerva.

"Yes, I've heard as much," said Malcolm.

"I should let you two get on with your afternoon, then," Albus said. "Minerva, would you mind coming by later? I have one or two questions about the timetables."

"Certainly, Albus," she replied. "I'll come by here when we're back from Hogsmeade, if that's all right?"

"Fine, fine. Enjoy your day," he replied, extending his hand to Malcolm. "Again, Welcome to Hogwarts, Mr Macnair."

Malcolm took the offered hand and shook it, saying, "Thank you, sir."

Minerva's belly clenched as their hands made contact, and she had to remind herself to breathe.

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As Malcolm browsed the stacks at Tomes and Scrolls, Minerva took surreptitious inventory of her son. Malcolm was tall...easily two or more inches taller than the fifth-year boys in her classes...and thin without being bony. The hair on his head was medium-brown and wavy, while his incipient beard had a reddish tint. His eyes were the blue of sea-polished glass, and he moved with a lanky grace that Minerva recognised. His high cheekbones and thin lips were hers, but that was all. There was nothing of Gerald in him.

*Did he notice?*

Albus had certainly not reacted as if he suspected anything about Malcolm's paternity. The fifteen-year-old's height alone should have been enough to suggest to a careful observer that Gerald Macnair was not involved in his siring. Though it was likely, Minerva thought, that Albus didn't recall what Gerald had looked like...medium height, golden blonde, with grey-blue eyes and a square jaw...but she wondered if Albus could see how much Malcolm was growing into a man that resembled himself.

*Of course he doesn't. He isn't looking for it. As long as I don't give anything away, he won't be looking for it, either* she told herself firmly.

*Do I want him to look?* The thought flashed through her mind like the light of a sudden spell, and she deflected it as sharply as if it were a curse.

"Mum?" Malcolm said, loping over to where Minerva was pretending to peruse the shop's selection of self-correcting quills. "Do you think I could get this? I could use something new to read."

She read the title of the book he was holding out.

"You really want *A History of Muggle-Wizard Relations in England, Scotland, and Wales*?"

"Yes. Why not?" he answered a little defensively. "I like to read history, and I got a bit tired of French authors on the topic."

"Then you may have it," she replied with a smile. "And I think I can get it inscribed for you, if you like."

"Inscribed?"

"Yes. I know the author."

"How do you know Bathilda Bagshot?" Malcolm asked.

"I did my Transfiguration apprenticeship with her partner."

"Madam Marchbanks."

"Yes" she said. "And I have tea with them every so often. As a matter of fact, next time I go, why don't you come along and have the book inscribed yourself. I'm sure Bathilda and Griselda would love to see you. They haven't seen you since you were not quite two years old."

"I've met Bathilda Bagshot and Griselda Marchbanks?" he asked, star-struck as if he were an ordinary boy talking about a favourite Quidditch player.

"Oh, yes. You came to see me receive my mastery. You mean you don't remember?" she asked with mock outrage.

"Sorry, Mum," he said. "I'm afraid I don't recall the occasion. So when can I meet Bagshot and Marchbanks?"

"That's 'Madam Bagshot' and 'Madam Marchbanks', Malcolm," she corrected.

"Yes, sorry. So when can I meet them?"

"Well, I'm usually invited to celebrate Bathilda's birthday with them, so I imagine it will be sometime in late September."

"That's brilliant, Mum!"

"I'm glad you think so. Now, is there anything else you can think of that you need before term starts? Or did we manage to get it all in Diagon Alley?"

"No, I think that's all."

As they walked the path back to the school, Malcolm said, "Professor Dumbledore seems very nice."

"Indeed, he is."

"He isn't quite what I expected."

"Oh? What did you expect?"

"I suppose I just expected him to be more . . . serious. You know . . . great hero and scholar and all."

"He is those things, certainly," Minerva replied. "But they don't preclude the possession of a sense of humour."

"I guess I'm just used to scholars being very serious and stern," he said, giving her an impish grin.

"If it's me you mean, I'll have you know that I have a sense of humour, just like everyone else. However, my standards are very high; I don't laugh at just any bit of a joke. Anyway, I'm hardly a scholar."

"See, now I can't tell if you're joking or not," Malcolm replied. "And you *are* a scholar. Didn't you publish an article on the molecular properties of Transfigured metals just a few months ago?"

Minerva stopped. "How did you know that?"

Malcolm shrugged. "I read it."

"You read my article?"

"Of course. It was good, too. What I understood of it, anyway. You should do more research."

"I'm trying," she said faintly.

An hour later, Minerva was sitting in front of Albus' desk as they revised the autumn timetables to ensure the new Herbology professor had at least an hour before the winter sunset to ensure the rare tropical plants she had brought with her were tucked in for the long Scottish night.

"Thank you, my dear. Pomona will be most grateful," he said as she closed her notebook. "I was just about to order some tea, would you join me?"

"It would be my pleasure, Albus, thank you," Minerva said. "Oh, I almost forgot! Here . . ." She withdrew a small tin from her pocket and handed it to him. "Mr Honeyduke asked me to give these to you. He'd like you to try them out; he's considering bringing them out for Halloween."

Albus took the tin with a smile and opened it. Minerva smirked when he jumped as the enchanted liquorice spiders scuttled out and up his arm, then she smiled indulgently as Albus plucked several up and popped them in his mouth.

"Very tasty," he remarked as he chewed. "Unorthodox texture, of course, but it adds to its charm, in my opinion. I'll owl Honorius in the morning." He scooped the rest of the sweets, whose crawling had lumbered to a stop, back into the tin.

"So, how did Malcolm enjoy Hogsmeade?" Albus enquired.

"He was enchanted, as you would expect," she answered. "He's holed up in my quarters with a new book. He's already been through most of the textbooks we got last week."

"Like mother, like son."

"Evidently. Do you know, he actually read my paper on Transfigured metals? How he got hold of that obscure journal, I will never know," she said.

"I sent it to him."

She was dumbstruck for a moment. "When?"

"Two or three months ago," Albus told her. "He wrote me, and when I responded, I enclosed a copy of your article. I thought it might interest him to know that his mother is making a name for herself in Transfiguration research."

Minerva's mouth felt like sandpaper suddenly. "Why . . . why did he write you?"

Albus peered at her with a queer look on his face. "The good manners you instilled in him, I expect. He wrote to thank me for finding a place for him at Hogwarts."

"Oh."

"Is there something wrong, Minerva?" Albus asked.

"No, no. I was just surprised, is all. I didn't realise you two had corresponded."

"Well, two letters barely counts as a correspondence, but yes. I'm pleased he actually read the article. He seems to have his mother's aptitude for Transfiguration."

"Yes, I think he does."

"Do you think he'll be happy here? It must be quite a change from everything he's accustomed to," Albus said.

"I hope he will be, but I suppose it remains to be seen. He's certainly chuffed at being here right now. I do thank you for allowing him to come."

"It is my pleasure, Minerva. Are you pleased he's here?"

"Yes. I have missed him."

Albus said, "There's something about him . . . I can't quite put my finger on it . . . but there's something familiar about him. As if I've met him before. Ah, well . . . I suppose he simply reminds me of you as a girl."

"Yes, that must be it."

After a moment, Albus asked, "Minerva, are you all right?"

She felt the heat rise in her cheeks as she said, "Yes, fine. Why?"

"You just haven't seemed yourself the past few days. You seem . . . preoccupied."

"Do I? It must be the excitement of having Malcolm here. I'm sure I'll settle in a few days."

"I'm sure." Albus put his hand across the table to rest it on hers. "Try not to worry about him, Minerva. He's a fine young man, and I'm sure he'll acclimate just fine."

"I'm sure," she repeated. "Thank you, Albus."

"And I do believe it will be easier for him to avoid the attention that would come from being your son, as you no longer share a surname," said Albus. "Not that it will be a secret for long, of course, but it's just as well not to remind the other students of it unnecessarily."

"No. Being a Macnair is likely to be hard enough," she said. "The family's sordid past was dragged through the papers often enough after Kenneth was sent to Azkaban."

"Indeed," Albus replied. "I believe you were wise to assume your maiden name once you began teaching. That sort of thing can be a distraction to the students, as I'm sure you realise."

"Yes."

When she rose to go, he said, "Do bring Malcolm to dinner in the Great Hall. It would be a good chance for him to meet the other staff...most of them have arrived by now. He'll relax more the first day if he's already met his teachers."

"That's an excellent idea, Albus. I'll do that."

"I'll look forward to seeing both of you then."

## Chapter Sixteen

*Chapter 16 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

### Chapter Sixteen

**5 November 1960**

"Stop fidgeting, now, the students will notice," Amelia said *sotto voce*, putting her hand on Minerva's to still it.

Minerva immediately folded her hands in her lap calmly. She had been delighted when Malcolm made the Gryffindor Quidditch team, but she hadn't counted on how nervous she would be when he played his first game.

Amelia leant over to whisper to Minerva, "He'll do just fine. The Gryffindor team is very good this year, and Prewett wouldn't have chosen him if he weren't up to it." Minerva gave her friend a brief smile and tried to relax.

Ninety minutes later, the Gryffindors had beaten the Hufflepuffs one hundred seventy to ten, with Malcolm scoring one of his team's goals, and Minerva was elated. She was very careful not to show any more pride in Malcolm than in any of his teammates when she went to congratulate them for their win, and she admonished them as sternly as ever to keep the noise of the celebratory party in the common room down to a dull roar.

Minerva was very pleased at how well Malcolm seemed to be adjusting to life at Hogwarts. He had quickly caught up with his classmates in Potions and Defence, and seemed to be making friends and fitting in well enough as far as Minerva could see. He was even more gifted at Transfiguration than she had realised, and Minerva had to be very careful not to let on in class how proud she was of him. When Albus had asked her one day how the boy was faring in her class, she had suppressed the urge to crow to her mentor over Malcolm's talent, and she told the Headmaster only that her son was doing quite well indeed.

Predictably, it had taken less than a week for someone to spread the word that Malcolm was the Transfiguration mistress' son, but Malcolm had taken the resultant ribbing in apparent stride. He had earned one detention, for a squabble with a seventh-year Slytherin in which the latter had had to appeal to his Head of House to have the Langlock Jinx Malcolm had apparently set on him removed. Professor Slughorn had later told Minerva that the boy had confessed that the quarrel had erupted when Malcolm heard Rabastan Lestrange make an obscene remark about her. She said nothing to Malcolm about the incident.

Minerva invited Amelia back to her quarters for tea, which turned into a wee drink to celebrate Gryffindor's victory.

"He's an excellent flyer," Amelia said of Malcolm as they sipped their Scotch. "Needs to work on his handling of the Quaffle, though. He could've had another goal if his pitch had been more accurate."

Minerva said, "Sometimes I think you're wasted as the Defence teacher; you really ought to be teaching flying and coaching Quidditch."

"If the Ministry thought I was too blind to continue as an Auror," she said, pointing to her monocled left eye, "I doubt the Board of Governors would see their way clear to letting me referee Quidditch. It's a much more serious business."

Minerva laughed. "In any event, I'm thankful to the Ministry for being so stupid. It's been lovely having you here this year."

"Well, I have you to thank, don't I? You were the one who sang my praises to Albus," replied Amelia.

"Actually, I can't take the credit. Griselda was the one who suggested it to me. Frankly, it wouldn't have occurred to me that you'd be interested in teaching. I had always thought Aurors were adventure-happy; I thought you'd likely be bored by the idea of sitting up here at Hogwarts."

Minerva had been very surprised when her old Transfiguration mistress had suggested Amelia Bones for the perennially vacant Defence Against the Dark Arts Post. Minerva and Amelia had become friends after meeting at Griselda and Bathilda's; they shared an interest in politics and chess, and Amelia had patiently introduced Minerva to the finer points of Quidditch after the latter had complained about having to attend all the Gryffindor matches. She had never cared much for sport, but Amelia's enthusiasm had rubbed off, and Minerva soon found that she enjoyed both watching and discussing matches with her new friend.

When she had considered Griselda's suggestion, however, Minerva realised that Amelia had the makings of a fine teacher, and she had been pleased to take Amelia under her wing that autumn, remembering her own introduction to teaching at Hogwarts, and how helpful both Albus and Filius had been, calming her fears and providing guidance when needed.

After they had finished analysing the Quidditch game, as Minerva poured another dram of Scotch for Amelia, the Defence teacher said, "Alastor was quite taken with you, you know."

"Mr Moody?" asked Minerva with surprise. She had never met the Auror before the little get-together Amelia had hosted for her own birthday the week prior. They had had what Minerva considered a pleasant conversation, but she would have assumed Moody had written her off, given that they spent much of the dialogue in polite but pointed argument.

"Yes. He's been pestering me to find out if you'd mind if he owed you." When Minerva didn't say anything, she said, "So, what do you think?"

"I don't know, Amelia. I don't know if I'm ready for . . . that kind of thing," said Minerva.

"He only wants to take you out for dinner or something . . . no 'that kind of thing' involved," said Amelia. "At least, not yet," she added. "Would a little of 'that kind of thing' be so bad, Minerva?"

"I don't know," laughed Minerva nervously. "It's been so long . . ."

"Exactly," said Amelia gently. "Gerald's been gone . . . what . . . three years now?"

"Four," said Minerva.

"Don't you think it's time you moved on? It wouldn't mean you didn't still care for Gerald, Minerva. It would just mean you've accepted that he's not coming back."

"I have accepted it. I accepted it a long time ago. It's just that I don't know if I want another man in my life now...and yes, Amelia, I realise that we're only talking about dinner," she said as she saw her friend open her mouth.

"All right, suit yourself," said Amelia. "But there don't seem to be many opportunities to meet people up here. Your pickings are rather limited if you ever do decide you want 'that kind of thing'."

"I see plenty of people..." Minerva began.

"Oh, yes; Hogwarts is full of eligible bachelors...let's see: Flitwick's married, so's Kettleburn; Pringle is way too old, Hagrid is . . . well . . . it would be a challenge; Dumbledore's gay, Slughorn's a playboy, and the rest are women. Although I hear Irma might be willing if you think you want to dive in there . . ."

"Wait . . . you said . . . Albus is gay?"

"Yes, didn't you know?"

"No. I had no idea."

"Oh, well. Actually, it's not surprising; he certainly doesn't advertise it, and I don't know that he's had any real relationships in years. I really only know because Griselda's known him for griffin's years, and she's mentioned it. I think he had some kind of traumatic relationship when he was young, so maybe he's just not that interested in being with anyone. Just speculation, of course," she said waving her hands dismissively.

Later, as Minerva lay in bed, not sleeping, she considered what she had learned about Albus. Assuming it was true...and she could think of no reason to doubt it...she wasn't sure how she felt about it. While she couldn't help being somewhat attracted to him, she had never harboured any hopes or fantasies that he would fall in love with her. Not really.

The realisation that the favour he had done her had likely cost him more than she had known at the time made her want to weep. She wondered if it had repulsed him to make love to her, and knew she could never ask him.

She was gripped by a wave of affection for the wizard; affection and sorrow. The thought that he might have been denied companionship...for whatever reason...for so many years tugged at her heart. He was so warm; surely he craved some warmth in return?

Thinking about what Amelia had said about Albus having had a traumatic relationship, it struck her that they were very much alike, she and Albus. If what Amelia had said was true, Albus had covered his sorrows with his genial manner while rejecting the possibility of true intimacy. She had done as much with her icy mien, and Merlin knew that the idea of intimacy with anyone scared her.

She wished that she could talk to him about it, but the truth was that, even if it had been in either of their natures to share intimate confidences, it would still be impossible. She could never be that close to him knowing what she had done. She did not deserve his intimate friendship and trust...she knew it, even if he did not.

Which brought her to her next consideration: did she want intimate friendships? Did she want more than friendship with anyone?

She had never even considered it after Gerald. Amelia might think it was out of some sense of loyalty to her long-departed husband, but the idea quite simply exhausted her. Although, thinking about it now, she reminded herself that, although it had certainly been an intimate relationship of a sort, her marriage to Gerald Macnair had never included anything resembling friendship. She had never thought to lean on him for support...he would likely have been incapable of giving it...nor to attempt share with him any of herself beyond her body.

Not liking where this train of thought was leading her, she forced herself to switch her focus from her past to her future. What might it be like to take a lover? As uncomfortable as she was with the idea of having a physical relationship with anyone, she was even more unsure of her feelings about emotional intimacy.

She turned her thoughts to Alastor Moody. He was an Auror, from the same group as Amelia had been, and Minerva could see why they were friends. Much like Amelia Bones, the man had a ready laugh that belied the serious nature she suspected lurked beneath the surface, and both were passionate about their work. He was evidently fiercely loyal; Amelia had told Minerva that Alastor had been her staunchest supporter when the Ministry had finally moved to push her out of the Auror corps.

Minerva and Alastor had had a nice conversation about current laws governing Dark objects...she had changed the subject quickly when he started on Dark potions...and she had enjoyed the good-natured sparring they had done on the topic.

Perhaps they could be friends, she mused, but would it be right to accept an invitation that was clearly meant as a salvo to see if there might be more than friendship in the offing?

Moody was attractive enough, she guessed: a little older than herself, fit, with a wry way of smiling when she came at him with a point he couldn't counter. His voice was a bit gruff, but it was softened by the lilt of what he had told her was his native Donegal.

A week later, she found herself sitting across from the Irish-born wizard at a small restaurant off Diagon Alley. They had enjoyed a nice meal and some lively discussion.

After the waiter had brought coffee, there was a lull in the conversation. She liked that Alastor didn't try to fill the silence; too many people found silence an intolerable burden and tried too hard to fill it, usually with nonsense.

Finally, as he looked at her over the rim of his cup, she asked, "Why did you ask me out, Alastor?"

"I would think that'd be obvious, Minerva," he answered.

She blushed at that, suddenly afraid he thought she's been fishing for a compliment about her looks, which were, she reminded herself, nothing remarkable.

He gave her his wry smile and said, "You interest me."

She gave a half-laugh, saying, "Me? I'm just a schoolteacher. I haven't even done any really interesting research."

"Not your job, Minerva. You. You clearly think a lot, and that attracts me. Neither of us suffers fools gladly, I think, and I suspect we'd find the same people fools. You're not

afraid to speak your mind, and you can back it up, which is rare as Basilisk's teeth around here. I'm frankly surprised you're here, and I find that attractive, too. You aren't as easy to read as it might seem at first.

"Now, turnabout is fair play: Why are you here with me?" he asked.

*Why, indeed?*

"Because you argued with me, I suppose. Not many people do," she said.

"Scared to, I expect," Alastor replied.

"No...I mean, yes, some of them, probably...but I think there are quite a few people who just don't think I'm worth the effort. I'm just a schoolteacher . . . and a woman."

"Then they're fools," Alastor said.

She smiled at him and answered, "We agree on that, anyway."

When they had finished dinner, and Alastor had paid the check, he Apparated with her to the castle's gates. She wondered if he was going to kiss her, but he didn't. He took her hand, but he didn't kiss that, either. Instead, he gave it a small shake and said, "I'd walk you up to the castle, but that might set tongues wagging, and I expect you'd rather avoid that. I also think you can take care of yourself for the quarter mile it'll take you to get back."

"I expect so, yes," she said.

"I enjoyed our dinner. Did you?" he asked, peering at her.

"Yes, I did."

"Want to do it again sometime?"

"Yes, I think I'd like that."

"Good. Owl me with the time and place, and I'll be there. Ta, Minerva," he said with a wave of his hand, and he turned and disappeared, leaving Minerva a little flustered and more than a little amused.

## Chapter Seventeen

*Chapter 17 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**20 May 1961**

Minerva felt Alastor's eyes on her as she gathered her things and began putting on her clothes. He had the damndest way of peering at people...her most of all, it seemed...and she could tell he was doing it even if her back was to him.

She had just fastened her skirt when he asked, "Why are you always in such a hurry to leave my bed?"

She turned to him with a look of surprise. "I'm not. It's just that I have to get back to the school . . ."

He said, "No, you don't. You aren't due back until lunch tomorrow...you're allowed the entire *dayand night* off."

"I just don't think it's a good idea for me to stay out all night; people might begin to talk."

"Let them."

"Alastor..." she said, warning in her voice.

"If anyone asked...and I can't think who'd have the bollocks...you could always say you were visiting your parents or your brother," he said. "Or you could just tell them to bugger off; it's no one's business, after all."

"I don't want the students leaping to any mistaken conclusions . . ." she remonstrated.

"Not so mistaken . . ." he said with a grin, grasping her wrist and pulling her down to the bed, kissing her still-bare shoulder.

"Please, Alastor," she said, disengaging herself from him and standing once again. "My private life is private, and I just don't like the idea of anyone speculating about it."

He got up and pulled on his undershorts and vest as she located and donned her blouse, her fingers making quick, efficient work of the tiny buttons. Once she had run a brush through her hair and charmed it back into its neat bun, she took a brief look in the mirror.

"Very respectable, Professor," he said, coming up behind her and kissing her exposed neck, and she gave him a small smile.

He followed her into the sitting room, and she let him put his arms around her and kiss her. When he had released her lips, he asked, "What about the summer?"

"What about it?"

"Come on holiday with me."

"Alastor, I'll have Malcolm with me."

"Send him to your parents for a week."

"I can't," she said, avoiding his eyes.

"Then bring him."

"Alastor!"

"What, Minerva?" he asked, a bit of exasperation finally starting to tell in his voice.

She looked at him in disbelief. "I'll not have my son thinking I'm . . ."

"What? Sleeping with me?"

"Yes."

He took her hands and drew her to the sofa.

"Minerva, Malcolm is sixteen years old. Old enough to be left for a week with his grandparents and old enough to understand that his mother isn't a Vestal Virgin."

"Please, Alastor..."

"Or is it me that's the problem?" he asked. "Do you just not want him to know you're seeing me?" There was no anger or resentment in his voice, only curiosity.

"Of course not."

"Then why have I not met him?"

She sighed. "I don't know, Alastor . . . the time just never seemed quite right. It isn't because I'm hiding you . . . or maybe I am . . . but it isn't you . . . this is just unfamiliar terrain for me."

He lifted each of her hands and kissed the insides of her wrists. "I know it is. I sometimes forget that. I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. I never thought of how it might make you feel. And . . . I would like you to meet Malcolm. Truly. I'm just nervous about it. I'm not sure how he'll feel about it."

"I imagine it will be awkward at first; I'll not lie about that. But I also imagine he wants his mum to be happy, don't you think?"

"Yes, I think he does. And you do make me happy, Alastor," she said quietly.

"Do I?" he asked, his voice taking on the slightly gruff tone that she had come to realise was his way of masking his deeper emotions.

"Yes. You do," she said.

"I'm glad," he said, kissing her again quickly.

"Would you like to come to tea? I could introduce you then," she said.

"I would. But only if you're sure, Minerva."

Minerva was not sure. Not sure at all, but she said, "I am. I'll ask Malcolm to come to my quarters for tea on Sunday next, then, if you're free?"

"I'll make certain I am."

As he saw her to the door of his flat, he added, "And think about summer. If all goes well with my meeting Malcolm...and he doesn't hex my bollocks off...I'd really like to spend a few days with you somewhere warm. Somewhere you won't need so many bloody clothes . . ."

She laughed in spite of herself. "Honestly, Alastor . . . you're as bad as some of the students."

"You might need to give me detention, then, Madam Professor," he said. "All right, off you go, now . . ." He gave her a light swat on the rear as she passed through the doorway, and she paused to glare at him, prompting him to grin back at her as she had known he would.

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Alastor was surprised to receive Minerva's owl the following Tuesday inviting him to tea at Hogwarts the following Sunday afternoon.

He had expected her to back out of it or to find an excuse to postpone it, but he had decided not to push her any further on it. Minerva liked directness, but she did not like to be cornered. He had realised it very shortly after they had begun seeing one another. She was an odd duck, Minerva McGonagall, he thought to himself, which was probably part of what attracted him to her. Strong and confident one moment, strangely skittish the next. It had taken him a little time to work out that the skittishness appeared when something...or someone...threatened to breach her emotional defences. He liked being the someone, but he tried to take care not to intrude too far. She'd have to make up her own mind to invite him in, and in her own good time.

The first time he had kissed her, two weeks after their first date, she had stayed strangely stiff and unresponsive, and he had thought perhaps she simply didn't find him attractive. But then, the following weekend, she had kissed him back with enough enthusiasm to dispel that notion quite handily. And she had been the one to suggest, three weeks later and with no coyness, that they repair to his bedroom after the glass of Irish whisky and several heated kisses they had shared when she had accompanied him back to his flat after their dinner.

When she had suddenly seemed to waver once they had undressed, he had thought she was simply shy, and he had been surprised again when she laughed (kindly, but still . . .) at his attempt to put her at ease by telling her she was beautiful.

As they had lain down on his bed, she had stopped his wandering hands long enough to say, "You should know, I'm not very good at this . . ."

He had tried to soothe her, saying, "It's all right, Minerva. Your just being here is better than anything that's happened to me in a long time."

She kissed him, then continued, insisting, "I just don't want you to be surprised . . . or disappointed. Despite my age, I'm not very experienced."

He wasn't quite sure what she was trying to tell him, so he asked, "I won't be disappointed, but I'm wondering what makes you tell me this. Did you and your husband not share a bed often?"

"No, we did. But there wasn't much in the way of variety. He liked things . . . a certain way."

"I see," Alastor had said. "Meat and potatoes man, then?"

"Exactly," she had said, and he was glad to see her give a small smile at his weak attempt at humour. "For example," she said, reaching down to touch his hard penis, "I'm not even sure how to touch you properly."

Alastor had been afraid he might come at just the touch of her fingers on him like that, but he didn't. He moved his hand down to cover hers and proceeded to guide her as she stroked him, saying, "How about this, Minerva? We'll work it all out together: what I like, what you like, and...Merlin, we'd better stop that or I won't last!" He had removed her hand from him then, and began touching her.

Together, and with humour and more tenderness than Alastor had known he possessed, they had felt their way through this first, slightly awkward, encounter, and as the months had passed, he had been pleased to discover a few things she liked very much indeed. He had also been pleased to find that, despite her avowed inexperience...or perhaps because of it...she was relatively uninhibited, and as anxious to give pleasure as to receive it.

He had not expected her to introduce him to her friends and family...she was, he knew, an extremely private person, and as a teacher at Hogwarts, she had to be very discreet...but her ongoing refusal to spend an entire night with him had begun to bother him. He was beginning to feel a bit like a...what did the Muggles call it?...a gigolo. Yes, that was the term. He didn't think it was intentional on Minerva's part, but it was clearly time to push her, just a bit, for a more definitive declaration of their relationship.

So it was that one unseasonably warm Sunday in late May, Alastor found himself trudging up the moss-covered path to the great oak doors he had last passed through almost twenty years previously. Minerva had met him at the gates and showed him to her quarters, telling him to make himself comfortable while she got the tea. Malcolm was due in ten minutes, she said.

Alastor had a look around, searching first and automatically for any alternate exits from the room...some bits of training were so ingrained you couldn't shake them even if you wanted to...and took stock of Minerva's personal living space, greedy to glean a bit more information about the woman he was coming to believe he loved.

The room was sparsely but tastefully furnished in creams and browns, punctuated by occasional accents of Gryffindor crimson and gold. An almost masculine-looking, room, he thought. Something was odd, though. At first, he couldn't put his finger on it, then it came to him: the walls were bare, as was the mantel. There were apparently no family heirlooms, no mementoes, not even any photographs from Minerva's past or of her family, anywhere in the room. He would have thought there might be at least one or two pictures of Malcolm, or even of Minerva's disappeared (or "late" as Moody privately thought) husband. He wondered fleetingly if she had taken them down because of his visit.

Minerva came back out bearing the tea tray and some biscuits. "I thought we'd start with this, and I'll have a house-elf bring up some scones in a bit."

"This is fine, Minerva. There's no need to go to any trouble on my account," he said.

"Well, in truth, it isn't on your account, Alastor. Elgar...he's the house-elf that serves me...makes a ginger-lemon curd that Malcolm especially loves."

"I see. Softening the blow of meeting me?" Alastor asked with a wink.

"Not exactly, but it can't hurt," she said.

Just then, there was a knock on the door, and Alastor, whose eye was trained to notice such things, saw Minerva's shoulders stiffen almost imperceptibly.

She crossed to the door and admitted a surprisingly tall young man with brown hair tied back in a ponytail and unusually blue eyes. He had a light dusting of hair on his upper lip and chin that appeared lighter than the hair on his head.

Minerva said, "Alastor, I'd like you to meet my son, Malcolm Macnair. Malcolm, this is Alastor Moody."

The two men grasped hands, Malcolm saying, "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir."

"Likewise, Mr Macnair," replied Moody.

"Please sit," said Minerva, her voice just a pitch or two above normal. "I'll just ask Elgar to bring the scones."

A moment later, a middle-aged (by Alastor's reckoning) house-elf wearing a Hogwarts tea-towel bearing a small red and gold crest popped in and loaded the tray with plates of warm, sweet-smelling scones and a dish of what Alastor supposed was the ginger-lemon curd. The elf then popped out with a quick bow.

As neither his hostess nor her progeny appeared ready to jump into conversation, Alastor said, "So, Mr Macnair, your mother tells me you play Chaser for Gryffindor . . ."

"Yes, sir. And please call me Malcolm, Mr Moody."

Alastor nodded, and Malcolm asked, "Are you interested in Quidditch?"

"Indeed, I am. Used to Beat for my old Ravenclaw team. We won the Quidditch cup in my fourth year."

"That's wonderful," said the boy, eyeing the scones surreptitiously.

His mother noticed and said, "Go ahead, Malcolm; I know you're dying to have at the scones. You too, Alastor. I know you don't care much for sweet things, but Elgar's ginger-lemon curd really is very good."

"Well, I'll have to give it a go, then," said Alastor with a smile at Malcolm. He helped himself to a scone and some curd, and the three sat munching and sipping for a few minutes before Alastor said, "This is good, I must say. Is Elgar a kitchen-elf, then? As well as serving you?"

"Oh, no," Minerva replied. "Actually, he was my family's elf, and when I came to work at Hogwarts, he came with me. He's still technically a McGonagall family elf, but he does have other duties around the castle."

"Unusual, isn't it? I mean for Hogwarts to employ a privately-owned elf?" asked Alastor.

"Yes, I suppose, but Albus made a special exception at my request. Once I moved here, he wouldn't have had much to do at my parents' home. I didn't want him to be unhappy. He is like family to me."

"And to me," added Malcolm. "He taught me to read . . . well, with Mum's help," he said with a glance at Minerva, who just smiled at him.

"That's unusual, too, isn't it?" asked Alastor, who didn't know much about house-elves. "Reading, I mean . . ."

"Perhaps," said Minerva. "Although I'm not really sure. As far as I know, all the McGonagall elves could read and write, but I don't know if that's common. It was helpful when my brother and I were growing up, as the elves could help us with our lessons when my mother and father were unavailable."

*Must be nice*, Alastor thought to himself, remembering the old biddy of a witch he and his sisters had been sent to to learn their letters and numbers. In exchange, the Moody children had done all the cooking, cleaning, and gardening for the woman...by hand, since they were too young to use magic...after the day's lessons were ended.

The three chatted further about house-elves, Quidditch, and Moody's work as an Auror until Minerva excused herself for a moment.

Alastor saw Malcolm eyeing him subtly as the boy pretended to be examining his teacup, and decided to address what he thought was bothering him.

"Is there anything you'd like to ask me, Malcolm? About me and your mother?"

The boy's eyes widened slightly, "No, sir. Well . . . that is, Mum didn't say as much, but I gathered that you two are . . . going out together. That's why she wanted me to meet you."

"That's right." Alastor leant in slightly and spoke quietly. "Between you and me, Malcolm, I think she was a bit nervous about it."

"Why?"

"Afraid you might feel funny about it, I guess."

"No," said Malcolm. "Not really. I mean . . . it's a bit odd, I'll admit, but . . . you seem . . . nice. And she seems happy. Just . . ." Malcolm hesitated.

"Just what, lad?"

"Just . . . be kind to her. She deserves a little kindness," said Malcolm.

"Aye. She does at that. And I'll do my best," answered Alastor earnestly.

Minerva returned just then, and the three settled back into conversation.

Later, as he gave the password to enter his flat, he thought to himself that the afternoon had gone well. Minerva had finally seemed to relax a bit, and after his brief but frank conversation with Malcolm, the boy had seemed more at ease, too.

There was something about the lad, Alastor thought as he sat down at the table in his small kitchen to do a bit of paperwork. Something vaguely familiar. The young man didn't look much like his mother, Alastor thought. Perhaps a bit around the mouth . . . but Malcolm reminded him of someone. Maybe it was his father. Alastor had known Gerald Macnair...had been only a year ahead of the Slytherin in school...but not well. They had been in different Houses, and their paths hadn't crossed in any of the extra-curricular activities Alastor had participated in. Still, it was possible that he was picking up on a familial resemblance.

Alastor made a mental note to see if he could dredge up any old pictures of Macnair. It wasn't important, he knew, but the question of Malcolm's appearance had reminded him that he had long meant to look a bit more closely into Gerald Macnair's disappearance. His Auror's sense of Something Not Quite Right was pricking at the back of Alastor's consciousness, and he knew it wouldn't let him alone until he investigated. Not that Alastor thought for a moment that Minerva had had anything to do with it. Alastor thought the man was dead...probably killed by a creditor, if the rudimentary investigation he had already conducted was any indication...but it would help him to rest just a bit easier if he knew that the man wouldn't suddenly come barging back into Minerva's life like a rampaging Hippogriff.

At the very least, thought Alastor, perhaps he could help Minerva to finally and completely close the book on that chapter of her life. Maybe then she'd be more at ease with herself, and with him.

## Chapter Eighteen

*Chapter 18 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**9 August 1961**

"I cannot believe Muggles actually go out in these things," Minerva said as she looked at herself in the full-length mirror on the back of the door.

Alastor crossed the bedroom of the small beach house they had let and came up behind her to plant a wet kiss on her bare shoulder. "If you ask me, Muggles have the right idea," he said. "Why you witches insist on hiding your lovely assets under yards of cloth has always been beyond my reckoning." He slid his hands down to run them over the backs of her bare thighs.

"Maybe it's because we don't fancy ourselves as objects for you wizards to slabber over," sniffed Minerva, although she was smiling. She'd been doing that a lot more lately, Alastor thought with satisfaction. After a moment, Minerva stepped away from Alastor and gave her maillot a firm tug to pull it down farther over the tops of her legs.

He put his arms around her, pulling her close. "We don't have to go to the beach at all, if you don't like," he said. "I'd be perfectly happy to stay right here for the afternoon. I'm sure we could find something productive to do." He pushed the strap of her swimming costume off her shoulder and attacked her neck with his lips. She turned in his arms, saying, "The beach can wait, I think." Her hands found the waistband of his Muggle swimming trunks and slid under them to cup his arse.

"It's cheeky y'are, Minerva McGonagall," Alastor declared. She silenced him with a kiss that made his prick sit up and take notice. When they came up for air, he scooped her up in his arms and more or less tossed her on the bed.

"Neanderthal," she remarked, grinning.

"Ah, lass," he said, approaching her, "you know how it excites me when you talk about science." He fell on her and felt the slight ~~wh~~*whoosh* of her wandless magic as she Banished their bathing costumes.

The bed was old and squeaked shrilly as they moved, and he made a mental note to make sure a simple *Colloportus* would prevent the sound from carrying into the other room. Malcolm would be joining them the following day, and Alastor didn't want Minerva to be concerned about her son hearing them make love. They only had another week together, and he didn't want anything to spoil what had so far been a perfect holiday.

Later, as they sat on the beach, Minerva under an enormous, wide-brimmed straw hat, Alastor with his nose coated in a thick white paste he had cribbed from a friend in

the Muggle Liaison office, who said it was the latest thing in Muggle beach-wear, Alastor thought he had never seen Minerva so relaxed. After he had met Malcolm, and the world hadn't collapsed, she had been less skittish about letting people know about their relationship. They had even gone to dinner together at Amelia's London flat at the beginning of the summer to celebrate her appointment as Deputy Head of the Auror Training Department.

Alastor had consulted Amelia about looking into Gerald Macnair's disappearance. She was better connected than he was among the witches and wizards who dealt with international law, and he had asked her to ask around for ideas about how he might continue his inquiry in France. Amelia had come back with a very few suggestions, capped off with her own advice to tell Minerva what he was up to. She wouldn't take kindly to his nosing around in her old business without her knowledge, Amelia had said, and Alastor reckoned she was right.

Still, he thought he'd poke around a bit before talking with Minerva. He didn't want to upset her needlessly if nothing came of his inquiries.

They returned to the house, and together they prepared a light dinner of fish bought at the local market with eggplant and fava beans, complemented with a jug of...plonk was the unvarnished word for it...from a bodega up the street.

After they had cleared away the dishes, they sat on the small patio overlooking the ocean to watch the sunset, and Alastor was as content as he had felt in ages. Minerva turned her face to him and said with a smile, "Suckle for your thoughts."

Decorated Auror though he was, if it hadn't been for the three glasses of bad wine he had recently consumed, he probably wouldn't have had the courage to speak what he did next. "I was just after thinkin' that I love you, Minerva McGonagall."

She said nothing for a few moments while he cursed himself and the bastard who had brewed the wine.

He barely heard her whisper over the sound of the surf and the guitar music that wafted over from the house next door.

"And I love you, Alastor Moody."

His heart leapt as he got clumsily to his feet. He went to her and knelt in front of her chair, taking her hands in his. He could think of nothing to say that wouldn't make him sound like a prat from a two-Knut romance novel, so he just sat there holding her hands.

He was a little disappointed, but not surprised, when she wouldn't look at him, but only stared out across the ocean. He knew that her soft declaration of love had taken a goodly part of her Gryffindor courage, and she had only had one glass of the nominal Malvasia Bianca to loosen her tongue.

He tugged on her hands to pull her to her feet, saying, "I'd say a kiss is in order, wouldn't you, Professor McGonagall?"

"So it would seem, Auror Moody," she answered. She brought her lips to meet his, and they stood softly kissing for a few moments until the sound of joyous shrieks and laughter startled them apart. A small group of teens was passing on the beach, and the boys appeared to be chasing the girls with long bits of seaweed, making them squeal with outraged delight. Moody had automatically reached for his wand, which was not in its usual place at his hip, but lay inside with his wizarding cloak on the coat hook in the small living and dining area.

"Children," said Minerva with a sigh. "They're everywhere."

Alastor gave a barking laugh to cover his pounding heart and said, "Shall we go inside, then?"

"Let's."

He followed her into the bedroom and grasped her by the waist from behind, moving one hand up to move the curtain of her hair out of the way so he could kiss the back of her neck. The other hand snaked around to her front to cup her breast and tease her hardening nipple between his calloused thumb and forefinger.

She hummed in satisfaction and moved her bottom against his growing erection, and with a practiced movement of her wrist, she Banished her peasant blouse and bra, baring herself to his busy fingers.

"Have I ever told you how much I appreciate your talent for wandless magic?" he murmured in her ear, licking the shell of it and flicking it across the inside surface for good measure.

"It isn't hard," she said, and he rejoined, "Oh, but it is, lass, it is . . ." grinding himself against her.

Suddenly, all their clothes were gone, and he found his cock pressing tantalisingly against the smooth, naked globes of her arse. He worked her legs apart with his knee and slipped his penis between them to rub against her increasingly damp folds, moving his hand from her neck down to dance his fingers against her clit, pleased to hear her breathing grow heavy and ragged as he played with her.

She cried out as she came, and he had to support her for a moment as her knees buckled. When she had regained the strength in her legs, he continued to move himself against her wetness, and before long, she was gasping again, moving her bottom insistently against him. It took all his willpower not to move the inch or so it would take to push his cock deep inside her, but he wanted her to be begging for it before he finally slid home.

Another minute, and he was in danger of spilling himself where he stood, so he backed away from her and moved her toward the bed. Dusk had taken hold, and he wanted to see her, so he quickly flicked on the lamp that sat on the rickety bedside table, congratulating himself briefly for remembering how to operate the Muggle contraption.

In the dim light, he could see her heavy-lidded eyes and the mottled pink announcing her recent orgasm on the pale skin of her chest, her breasts moving rapidly up and down with her respiration.

*Gods! Her breasts!* He'd always been a breast man, and he found Minerva's nothing less than enchanting. They were on the small side, but extremely sensitive, he'd found, and her nipples formed the most perfect coral peaks when he touched them. When he added his tongue, and even his teeth to his efforts, she rewarded him with a delightful repertoire of entrancing noises.

He worked her into a frenzy of arousal, his fingers and mouth playing over her beautiful breasts, licking, sucking, and pinching her lovely nipples while his achingly hard cock moved over her slick centre. Her hands were everywhere: carding through his hair, kneading his muscular shoulders, fluttering across his back, and finally, pulling impatiently on his arse to urge him to enter her at last. He grinned at her as he resisted; she wasn't begging yet, so he reached down and grasped her arms, bringing them up above her head, and held her wrists firmly to the mattress as he continued to tease her with his mouth and his penis.

It felt so good to move against her as he was doing that he didn't notice at first when her cries of pleasure turned to tense requests to stop.

"Alastor, please!"

"Not yet . . . not yet . . ." he moaned, his head buried in her neck, thinking she was finally beginning to beg him to put himself inside her.

"Let me up!" she shrieked in his ear, and he opened his eyes in shock. He looked into her face and saw apprehension and . . . something. Something not good.

He immediately released her and rolled off.

She sat up, and it frightened him not a little that she turned her back to him.

"I'm sorry . . ." she breathed heavily, her shoulders heaving slightly.

"No, Minerva, *I'm* sorry," he said, sitting up and putting a tentative hand on her arm. "I didn't mean to hurt you. Circe, I would never want..."

She looked at him then, and said, "No, you didn't hurt me. It's just that . . . I don't like to be held . . . that way."

"I'm sorry, love," he said.

He was immensely relieved when she gave him a wan smile, saying, "No, don't be. You didn't know. But now you do."

"Yes," he said, and waited for her to say more, but she didn't.

Instead, she pushed him down against the mattress and dove down, more aggressively than he had seen her do before, and took his wilted cock into her mouth. It was on the tip of his tongue to protest, to tell her she shouldn't, that he could wait until she was ready again, but he had a sudden insight that this was what she wanted and needed to do. She needed to have him in her control and...

*Merlin!* It felt so good! He stopped thinking for a while, and when it was over, she let him love her with his mouth, and then they lay in one another's arms for a time.

She slept, but he didn't.

The incident kept replaying in his mind the next day, despite his efforts to put it aside. Alastor Moody hadn't survived as an Auror for eighteen years by ignoring his intuition, though, so when Minerva left to retrieve Malcolm from his grandparents' home, he took a cup of tea out to the patio and rolled himself one of the cigarettes he liked but never smoked around Minerva. It was a taste he had picked up during his deployment to Muggle London during the waning years of the Grindelwald war. Minerva thought it a filthy habit, and he reckoned she was right, but he found it helped him settle his thoughts and think, which was what he intended to do for the two or so hours before his girl returned with her son.

*My girl.*

He knew Minerva would probably hex him for it, but it pleased him to think of her that way. It had been a long road...not hard, exactly, but filled with bumps and detours along the way...getting to the point at which he could comfortably call her his. And if she wasn't a girl, he nevertheless felt a sort of paternal protectiveness toward her. She was still an odd duck: seemingly brittle, and definitely fragile in some respects, but strong as any man Alastor had ever had the pleasure of knowing in others. She was cannier than anyone he'd met aside from Albus Dumbledore, and certainly far cannier than Alastor himself, although he wasn't falsely modest about his own keen intelligence. If she had been born a decade later, say, she would have made a hell of an Auror, but MLE had only this year started talking about admitting more witches to the Auror training programme, and only thanks to Amelia Bones, who was, to the best of Alastor's knowledge, the only woman ever to complete the arduous course to become a fully qualified Auror. (*And they certainly got her off active duty as soon as they could manage it*, he thought angrily. The curse she had taken to the eye had only damaged her close vision; Alastor knew other Aurors who worked in the field with far worse disabilities...missing digits, hands that shook, knees that didn't want to bend properly. By the time an Auror had been on the active duty rotation for a few years, he could usually count on being on a first-name basis with St Mungo's finest Healers. Alastor had been lucky so far, he reminded himself.)

Come to think on it, Alastor was glad Minerva wasn't an Auror. He liked all her parts exactly where they were, thank you very much. And they would have been competitors, she and Alastor, because that's the way things were in the Auror corps, and because it was in both their natures.

In any event, even had she been born a few years later than she was, there was still her background to hold her back. Despite his own very modest beginnings, Alastor Moody had seen a thing or two of pure-blood society...chasing would-be Knights of Walpurgis had been a quick and rough introduction...and he knew there was no way in Heaven or Hades that a girl like Minerva would have been permitted to pursue a real career, and certainly not one as "unsavoury" as law enforcement. The fact that she had managed to become a Transfiguration mistress was, he thought, a testament to her fortitude and will. He had often wondered how she managed it, and when he had found the marriage contract during his preliminary investigations into the disappearance of Gerald Macnair, he had whistled in appreciation. He sometimes wished he could have been a pixie on the wall when those negotiations had been happening.; he would have liked to see Minerva and her father put the thumbscrews to Kenneth Macnair, that piece of shite. How Minerva could have survived under the same roof as that bastard . . .

The memory of her agitation the previous night came flooding back. Alastor hadn't meant to frighten her...he hadn't even intended to truly restrain her...but he had thought she'd enjoy that kind of play. Merlin knew she had been enthusiastic enough about most of the other variations of lovemaking he'd introduced her to. As he thought about it, he came to the unwilling conclusion that somebody in Minerva's past had . . . harmed her. The idea made him slightly sick to his stomach, and he tossed the end of his cigarette forcefully to the patio tile and crushed it harshly under his foot.

He forced himself to think on it a bit longer. She had told Alastor that her husband had been less than adventurous in bed, and he wondered now if that had been the whole truth. Had Gerald Macnair abused her? Or had it been someone else? *Kenneth Macnair?*

Alastor wasn't about to ask Minerva about it...certainly not yet...but by god, he was going to try get some answers from somebody. Of that, he was certain.

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Malcolm was just deciding which of his books to pack when Elgar came into his room.

"Master Malcolm, your mother is here," the elf said with a bow.

Malcolm tossed his copy of *The Ten Greatest Quidditch Matches in History* aside in favour of the first volume of Churchill's *The Second World War*, which he Shrank with his wand and stuffed into his rucksack.

"Thanks, Elgar. Can you tell her I'll be down in a minute?"

"Of course, Master Malcolm." He added as he left, "Best not keep her waiting, now, Master Malcolm."

"No, Elgar. I won't."

He tossed a few last-minute items into the rucksack and zipped it shut. When he went downstairs, his mum and grandmother were in the entrance hall talking quietly.

"Ah, all ready to go, Malcolm?" Mum asked, striding forward to give him a quick hug.

"Yes, Mum. Got everything right here," he answered, patting his rucksack. "Sorry you had to come all the way back here to get me."

"It's no bother," Mum answered. "Next year, you'll be able to Apparate yourself, and I won't have an excuse to put my arms around you anymore."

Malcolm rolled his eyes. "Oh, Mum . . ."

"Did you say goodbye to your grandfather?"

"Yes, Mum."

"And Elgar?"

"Yes, Mum."

To Gran, she said, "Thank you, Mother, for looking after him this past week."

Gran answered, "'Tis no trouble; he looks after himself now."

"Indeed," said Mum. "He's practically a grown man now. Just look at you, with your man's beard . . ."

"Oh, Mum," Malcolm said again, putting a self-conscious hand up to his chin. He'd been delighted when it had finally grown something a bit longer than the auburn fuzz he'd been sporting for the past year. Beards weren't particularly in vogue among younger witches and wizards, but Malcolm Macnair had stubbornly let his grow, to the gentle ribbing of his classmates. He already stood out among the boys in his form by virtue of his height, so he had just sort of decided to go with a look he thought of as iconoclastic. Hell, he thought, maybe he'd even eventually grow his beard as long as Dumbledore's. He knew lots of people thought the Headmaster was a barmpot, and that his excess of hair just advertised the fact, but Malcolm rather admired the way the old man didn't seem to care what others thought of him.

As his grandmother and mother walked ahead of him toward the door, he heard Gran say to Mum, "Are you sure this is quite proper, Minerva? It's one thing for you to . . . consort with a man...you're a grown witch, after all...but to bring Malcolm into it . . ."

Malcolm took a few loping steps to catch up with them and interjected, "It's fine, Gran. Alastor's a great chap. I like him, and it'll be nice to spend a week with him and Mum. Besides," he added cheekily, "I think they could use a chaperone."

He only grinned when both witches gave him identical stern looks, Mum saying, "Really, Malcolm!"

More than an hour later, he and his mother had finally completed the last leg of their Side-Along Apparition and appeared in the combination dining and sitting room of the cottage. When Malcolm opened his eyes after fighting the urge to vomit (his mum wasn't the smoothest Apparator known to wizardkind), he saw Moody slide his wand back into his cloak pocket.

Malcolm liked Moody, all right, but he had to admit that the Auror's tetchiness sometimes grated on him. Who was going to attack them here? There probably weren't even any wizards around for miles...maybe even none on the island at all. That's why Mum and Alastor had chosen it, after all.

"Malcolm!" said Moody, approaching him and clapping a hand on his arm. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you too, Alastor," Malcolm answered.

Mum took his rucksack from him and set it on the table next to the sofa.

"I'm sorry the accommodations are a bit tight," she said. "We thought we could just Transfigure the settee into a bed, and there's a small loo over there," she said, pointing to a door across the room."

"It'll be fine, Mum," he said.

"That's the ticket," said Alastor. "We lads aren't above roughing it a bit, are we?"

"No, sir," said Malcolm.

"Well, I'm just going to go freshen up," said Mum. "And as long as you two are being all manly together, maybe you could clean the fish for lunch. It's still got its gills and scales attached."

Malcolm and Alastor looked at each other.

"Um . . ." said Alastor. "Actually, I'm not sure I know how to..."

"It's okay, Alastor," said Malcolm. "Elgar once showed me a spell to clean a fish. It's easy. I'll show you."

Alastor looked dubiously at the boy but said, "All right. Lead on, man."

They had lunch, and Malcolm's mum scolded Alastor for offering Malcolm one of the Spanish beers he had got in, saying, "That's about as far as this man-to-man bonding goes, Alastor. He's only sixteen."

"Aye, sorry Minerva," Alastor said with a surreptitious wink at Malcolm.

After lunch, the three changed into their Muggle bathing costumes and went out to the beach, and Malcolm was disappointed to find that there was no surf to speak of. The blue-green water just lapped gently at the sand, which was, admittedly, very soft and white. They walked down the beach a ways until they found a small shack that rented snorkelling gear. Alastor paid the three hundred pesetas, and Malcolm happily went to explore what was under the crystalline surface of the water while his mum and Alastor sat on the beach and did whatever it was they did.

Mum made them go in after two hours...she was afraid they were all getting too much sun...and after they changed into regular Muggle clothes, he and Mum walked down the street to the local market to select something for their dinner.

Malcolm was glad to get back to the house where they could use a few Cooling Charms; it had gotten very hot in the late afternoon. The three of them settled down on the patio to read, and later, while his mum wrote some letters...and wouldn't the Headmaster and Professor Bones be surprised to receive them through the Muggle post, she said...Alastor challenged Malcolm to a game of chess. Malcolm won the second game, and he saw his mother smile behind her book.

Dinner proved disappointing; the beef was tough, or maybe Mum just had overcooked it, and the lettuce for the salad was a little wilted, so Mum proposed they venture out in search of a decent pudding. They found it in a little restaurant near the centre of town and sat eating their *greixoneras de brossat*, Mum and Alastor having a bit of Madeira with theirs, until nearly ten-thirty.

When they got back to the cottage, Alastor said, "I'm going to turn in. Sitting around doing not much of anything all day is strangely exhausting. You coming, Minerva?"

There was an awkward moment when Malcolm saw his mum's face flush, and she mumbled something about "in a few minutes." To tell the truth, Malcolm felt a little strange at the idea that his mum would be joining Alastor in the double bed right in the next room, but he swallowed his discomfort and said, "Go on, Mum. I think I'll just Transfigure the settee and read a little more until I fall asleep."

"All right, if you're sure," she said, kissing him distractedly on the cheek.

When the bedroom door closed behind her, he tried very hard not to imagine her undressing in front of Alastor. When he heard soft murmurs coming from the bedroom, he couldn't help wondering with dread if they were going to . . .

*No, no, no . . . not going to think about that. Not going to think about it. Going to think about . . . Quidditch.*

He wished he'd brought the Quidditch book, after all. Looking around, he found a couple of Muggle coins sitting on the kitchen counter, and after a few bad attempts, managed to Transfigure them into a pair of waxy earplugs.

*Better.*

He went to the small loo, changed into his pyjamas, cleaned his teeth, and came back into the small room to Transfigure the settee into a cot. With a nervous glance at the bedroom door, he leant over and turned off the lamp as Alastor had shown him, pulled the blanket his mum had left out for him up over his shoulders, and tried to go to sleep.

## Chapter Nineteen

*Chapter 19 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**12 August 1961**

It had turned into another unusually hot Balearic summer day, and Minerva begged off going to the beach, claiming the beginnings of a headache.

"You two go on, though," she said. "But mind you don't get overheated."

"Yes, Mother," said Alastor, earning him a grin from Malcolm.

He and the boy went down to the beach and decided to have a walk along the water, letting the cooling waves lap at their ankles and feet as they walked, and he was glad to have a bit of time alone with Malcolm to try to get to know him a bit better.

The three of them had relaxed a bit over the past two days. The morning after the first night, he had seen Malcolm flush when he and Minerva had emerged from the bedroom in their dressing gowns, and he noticed that Minerva hadn't been quite able to look her son in the eye for a bit. But the awkwardness seemed to have dissipated, and this morning there had been no blushing or averted eyes, Alastor was pleased to note.

Despite the *Colloportus* he had cast before they turned out the lights that first night, Minerva had been nervous about making love with Malcolm so close by, and although she had eventually relaxed into the idea when Alastor had spooned up against her and caressed her breasts through her nightdress, she had been far quieter than she usually was. Minerva wouldn't agree, he was certain, but Alastor privately felt that the danger of being caught added a dash of titillation to the proceedings. It reminded him just a bit of the few times at school he had sneaked into a disused classroom with Trudie Hopkirk for a bit of snogging and petting. Not that he would share that information with Minerva. Of course, if there were some way to get Minerva into one those old classrooms at Hogwarts . . .

*Watch yerself, boyo*, he thought sternly. *You don't want to get a stiffy when you're walking right beside her son. Not when you're practically in your skivvies.*

Malcolm was quiet as they sloshed along, and Alastor reckoned he was thinking about something. He had an inkling what it was, but decided to let the boy bring it up in his own good time.

When they stopped after a bit, they stood tossing bits of driftwood into the water, and Malcolm came out with it. "Are you and Mum going to get married?"

"I don't know, Malcolm," Alastor answered. "We haven't talked about it, and to be honest, I haven't thought about it."

"Oh."

"Are you asking because you like the idea or because you don't?" Alastor asked.

Malcolm shrugged.

"Does it bother you? Me and your mother?"

Malcolm answered quickly, "No. I'm glad for her . . . for both of you. She seems happy. I just wondered if . . ." he trailed off, shrugging again.

"If I was going to try to replace your dad?"

"No . . . not that, not exactly."

"What, then?"

"Just if . . . Mum wanted to get married again."

"Do you think that's what she wants?" Alastor asked. He truly hadn't considered the notion, and Minerva had certainly never made any noises about it.

"I don't know," answered Malcolm. "It didn't work out too well for her before."

Alastor felt a wave of sympathy for the boy. He hadn't planned on asking Malcolm about his dad in his quest to discover what had happened to Gerald Macnair...he wasn't quite *that* hardened yet...but if the young man was going to provide an opening, Alastor thought he'd take it. Gently, though.

"Why do you say that, Malcolm?"

He saw a look he couldn't quite pinpoint cross the young man's face. "Well, look at what happened," said Malcolm.

"You mean your dad's disappearing."

"Yes. If you want to call it that."

Alastor's Auror senses zinged at that. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it?"

"Sorry, Malcolm, but it isn't obvious to me," Alastor said. "What are you trying to tell me?"

Malcolm turned his face toward the sea again...deliberately, Alastor thought...and said, "He ran off. With another woman. Didn't he." It wasn't a question.

"I don't know. Did he?"

"It's the most likely conclusion," said Malcolm, turning back to face Alastor.

"I'm not sure I agree," said Alastor. "He might have had an accident . . . been killed . . ."

A look of anguish passed over the boy's face. "Yeah, but wouldn't there have been some trace? A . . . a body?"

"There isn't always," said Alastor.

"No, I guess not," Malcolm allowed.

They were silent for a few moments, Alastor trying not to peer at Malcolm, but watching him carefully nonetheless.

"Alastor, things were . . . things were bad. At the end." This was spoken quietly but forthrightly.

Alastor's heart started beating fast, but his long law-enforcement experience spoke to him: *Careful man. Don't spook the witness. Let him tell it his own way. He wants to tell it . . .*

"Do you want to tell me about it Malcolm?" He put a hand on the young man's shoulder, although he had to reach up to do it.

Malcolm heaved a deep sigh, and Alastor dropped the hand.

"I don't know . . . it's private, you know? Mum wouldn't like it."

"No," agreed Alastor. "She might not. And I don't think you should do anything that would make you uncomfortable. But I care about you and your mum, and I'd never say anything to anyone. Not even her, if you didn't want me to. I guess I just want you to know that you can talk to me, Malcolm. Sometimes a man needs someone...someone not his wife or his mother, or even his best mate...to talk to. To bounce things off of. Get what I'm saying?"

"I guess," said Malcolm. "Mum never talks about it, you know."

"I know. Sometimes I think she should. It might help her be happier . . . more comfortable with herself, if you see what I'm saying."

Malcolm gave a terse nod.

Alastor continued, "But she's got to make up her mind to do it. I'm not going to force her. But I think, Malcolm, maybe you need to talk about it too. And I'm just telling you that I'll listen if you want. And I'll say nothing to anybody about it."

He waited.

"I remember a lot of shouting," said Malcolm, his face turned away from Alastor once again. "Father, I mean. Mum never . . . she never raised her voice. He just . . . crazy stuff, you know? And he . . . he cried. I remember that. Elgar...that's our house-elf..." Alastor nodded "...he'd take me out when Father would go into one of his rages. It was when he was drinking, mostly. They tried to keep it from me, but I knew . . ."

Alastor understood. Children always knew. His mam had had trouble with the drink, and even at the age of five or six, young Alastor had understood about the empty Firewhisky bottles and their connection with the switch that reddened his bum on a regular basis until his da had arranged for old Madam Delancey to teach the Moody children on afternoons while he was out in the Donegal countryside collecting herbs and other potions ingredients for the area's apothecaries and potioneers. Alastor didn't resent his mother...not then, not now...but he felt sorry for her, and he had grieved for her when she died during his first year at Hogwarts.

Malcolm said, "One time, Elgar was out, and Father came home in the afternoon...it was usually in the evenings...and Mum was teaching. He must've pulled her out of the lesson, because when I came downstairs to see what was going on, I heard Mum saying he was going to ruin us...did he want her to lose all her pupils?...things like that. Then Father started shouting, saying . . . really awful things, Alastor. About Mum. And about Gran and Granddad McGonagall. He said maybe his father had been right all along. And Mum was trying to shush him and he pushed her into the wall and then she saw me on the stairs...and this is the only time I ever remember her yelling...she shouted at me to go to my room and stay there.

"So I did. I heard some more shouting, then it got really quiet, and that scared me. I was really scared, Alastor, but finally I sneaked down the stairs again, but they weren't there. I don't know where they were, but I went back to my room, and then a little while later Mum came in and said we were going out. She took me to a wizarding pub, and she got me something to eat, and then we went to get ice cream," he said with a small smile that quickly melted into a frown. "She didn't have anything, though. I remember that.

"She didn't say much about what happened. She just said that Father was upset and didn't mean any of what he said. She said he was still sad about Grandmother Macnair...she had died that winter, and . . . well, you probably know about Grandfather Macnair..."

"I do. It was a terrible thing," said Alastor gravely.

"Yeah. So anyway, Mum said Father was just still sad about that and that sometimes grief made people do things they wouldn't normally do."

The boy looked down at his large, sandy feet, and Alastor had a sudden vision of the child he had been. Still was, in some respects.

He waited a minute before posing the question that had been uppermost in his mind during Malcolm's monologue: "Malcolm. Son. Did your dad hurt your mum?"

Malcolm looked startled for a moment, but to his credit he kept his gaze steady on Alastor. "No. I don't think so. She looked okay . . . I mean there was nothing wrong with her that I could see. Anyway, she's . . . she was stronger than my father. Magically."

Alastor nodded. "She's a very strong witch," he said. "And you were a canny lad to have noticed it at . . . what were you? Ten?"

"Eleven. It was right after I got my letter from Beauxbatons."

"Right. That was a bit before your dad went missing, wasn't it?"

"Yes. About a month," said Malcolm.

"So you think maybe your dad did a bunk because he was unhappy with your mum?"

"Maybe. But it wasn't her fault, he..."

Alastor interrupted quickly, "I know that, Malcolm." After a moment, he said, "Have you ever considered, Malcolm, that maybe your dad ran off because he loved you and your mum and didn't want to hurt you anymore?"

The boy's eyes widened a bit, then went back to their usual shape and size. "Maybe," he said again, but Alastor could tell he didn't believe it. And the Auror couldn't blame him; Alastor didn't buy it, either.

He decided to press on. "How were things right before he disappeared? The same? Better? Worse?"

"About the same, I guess. I didn't hear them fight like that again, though, but they might have done during the times Elgar took me out. I think Father was drinking even more, and one time, when he was out, a bunch of men came to the house. I was in my room studying with Elgar, but they must've got Mum out of her lesson again, because she summoned Elgar. I went out to the balcony above the staircase, and I could hear them talking a bit. Mum was offering them tea and biscuits, but they said...and I remember this clearly...they said they didn't come for a pure-blood tea-party. They wanted their money, they said, and Mum said how much did Father owe, and they said five hundred Galleons."

He looked at Alastor, who whistled and said, "That's a lot of money."

"Yes," said Malcolm glumly, and Alastor asked, "What happened then?"

Malcolm continued, "She said she didn't have it. And the men said . . . they said maybe they'd need to leave something to remind Father about his debts. Maybe if his wife had some curse scars . . . So Mum asked them if there was anything she could give them in lieu of the money. They . . . they laughed."

Malcolm looked down and kicked his feet miserably in the wet sand. When he looked back up, he was deeply flushed, and Alastor's heart leapt into his throat. He could hardly croak out: "And then what?"

"They said . . . I don't want to repeat it. But the idea was that Mum wasn't worth that much. So Mum offered them her wedding ring. They said okay, but emeralds were cheap these days, so what else did she have? There was some silver, she said, and then I heard them opening some cabinets."

"Anything else?" Alastor asked, his heart still pounding.

"No. I don't think so. They went away after that."

Alastor tried not to let Malcolm hear the relief in his voice. "Don't you think those men might have had something to do with your dad's disappearance? If he owed them more money . . ."

"I don't think so," answered Malcolm. "Because I heard Mum and Elgar talking after they left. Elgar..."

He stopped.

"What, Malcolm. It's all right, you can tell me."

"Elgar offered to . . . to hurt those men. So they wouldn't come back."

He looked at Alastor for a reaction, so Alastor said, "He's a very good, a very loyal elf. He loves your mother."

The boy gave a small smile. "Yes." Then anxiously: "You won't tell anyone, will you, Alastor? I'd hate to get Elgar in trouble."

"Of course I won't. I don't think your elf did anything wrong, any road, so there's nothing to tell that would get him in trouble." That wasn't entirely true; house-elves had been executed for threatening wizards before, but Alastor thought the last time had been more than fifty years previously.

Malcolm looked relieved. He continued: "So Mum said no, she didn't think that was necessary. The ring alone was worth more than five hundred Galleons, whatever the men said, so they wouldn't be back to stir up trouble they didn't need."

"I'm sorry," said Alastor. "That's a lot for a kid to have dealt with."

"It wasn't me, it was Mum dealing with it," Malcolm protested.

"Yes, but you hearing it . . . it was a heavy burden, I'm guessing. Weighed on your mind."

"It did," agreed Malcolm.

"So how long after that was it that your dad disappeared?"

"About two weeks, I guess. I was at school when he went missing. The last time I saw him was when he and Mum saw me off."

"You miss him?" Alastor asked.

"Yeah . . . this is going to sound bad, Alastor, but . . ."

"What, Malcolm?"

"In some ways, I'm glad he . . . he left. I mean, it was hard at first, knowing he was gone, and then when Mum came back to Scotland, I felt kind of alone, but in a way it was better. I was at school, so it wasn't like I was hanging around the house wondering where he'd got to, and then when Mum got the job at Hogwarts and I started coming home for holidays, it was better. Mum was more relaxed, there were no more worries about money . . . no fights. And then I got to come to Hogwarts and see Mum more, and . . . then . . . well . . . she met you, and she's happy."

"Not that I wanted anything to happen to my father . . ." he added quickly.

"No, I know you didn't," reassured Alastor. "You know, I understand a little how you feel. When my mam died, I was eleven...just come to Hogwarts. And when I went home that Christmas, it was very sad, of course, but it was also a bit of a relief not to have the fights."

"Your mother and father fought?" said Malcolm with surprise.

"Yes. See, Mam drank . . . like your dad," said Alastor.

"I didn't know that."

"No reason you should. I'm only telling you so you know you're not alone. There's lots of folks that have trouble with the drink...it's a sickness, like dragon pox. And there's lots of kids lose parents to it. And lots of 'em...even if they wouldn't say so out loud...I think lots of 'em are just a little relieved mixed in with the grief. And you know, Malcolm, I think it's all right to feel that way. Doesn't mean you didn't love your dad. I know I loved my mam."

Malcolm nodded slowly. Then he bent down and picked up another piece of driftwood, flinging it into the sea. "Thanks, Alastor," he said. "For telling me about your . . . your mam. And, um . . . thanks for the talk."

Alastor nodded and clapped the young man on the arm.

"Why don't we get back and see how your mother's faring? I don't want one of her looks if we get back too late and sunburned into the bargain," he said.

As they walked back down the beach toward the cottage, Malcolm said, "It would be all right, you know. If you were to get married."

It was easy to forget, Alastor thought, that Malcolm was only sixteen. His height, combined with what Alastor had both heard and observed of the boy's sharp intelligence and his considerable magical talent, made people prone to treating him as if he were a grown man rather than a child, with all a child's insecurities and his way of looking at the world.

To a child...especially one brought up on the edges of pure-blood wizarding society in France and Scotland...the natural consequence of love was marriage. He'd felt it himself at that age, when he'd known with the certainty of a seventeen-year-old that Trudie Hopkirk was his One True Love, and that they'd get married as soon as she'd finished school and he was done with Auror training. He'd even taken to eating only noodles and broth that first year of his training, trying to put away what little money he could from his stipend to save for a ring.

But a year's separation had done what all the worried man-to-man talks from his da could not: Alastor had slowly started to realise that, more often than not, out of sight was out of mind, and that out of mind became out of love, especially when there were girls...women...close by who, come down to it, had more in common with Alastor Brendan Moody than a shared common room and a mutual appreciation for the Ballycastle Bats.

He'd felt guilty at first, when he'd rid himself of his virginity with an ambitious secretary from the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects, then progressively less so as the weeks wore on and the letters from Trudie had gotten less frequent and more distant. It had been a big relief when he'd finally gotten her letter saying she was horribly sorry, but they had better break it off. She'd met this Hufflepuff, you see, and . . . Alastor had felt only a momentary pang of jealousy, then tossed the letter in the fireplace and met his lady friend for a drink at the Leaky. He had a four-month dalliance with her, then they had parted amicably and with no regret. He'd enjoyed their brief affair, but he hadn't fallen in love, though he had enjoyed the time they had spent out of bed possibly as much as the time in it, and he later realised that it hadn't even mattered that she supported Puddlemere United.

He could tell none of this, of course, to Malcolm Macnair. So he only said, "I think we should just see how we go." And after another minute: "I do love your mum, Malcolm."

The boy gave him the first genuine smile since their walk had begun. "Hell, Alastor, even a blind Boggart could see that."

He was his mother's son, no doubt about that. Alastor said, "Well, if I'm so bleedin' obvious about things, I might have to turn in my badge, then."

Malcolm laughed and Alastor joined him. Growing more serious, Alastor said, "Even if we never get married, Malcolm, I'm going to try to take care of her."

To his surprise, Malcolm laughed again. "Don't let her catch you."

"Sage advice, my boy, sage advice. What do you say we head down to the market? Surprise your mother by picking up the things for dinner?"

"Great idea."

## Chapter Twenty

### *Chapter 20 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

### **23 December 1962**

"Oi, Yaxley. Take a look at that." Goyle gestured toward the corridor.

When Quentin Yaxley looked out the compartment window to see that prat Macnair framed in it, he saw red. Macnair was talking to Annabel Nott. Not just talking to her, either. He had one of his hands on her arm and was rubbing it in a way Quentin didn't like. Not at all.

Not two months ago, Annabel had been Quentin's girlfriend. Now she was hanging around that bloody Gryffindor who thought he was Merlin's gift to witches now that he was Head Boy.

*Hah!* Quentin snorted to himself.

As if anyone else had a fucking shot at it, with the Deputy Headmistress' son around. Not that Quentin had wanted it, but there were plenty of fellows who deserved it more than Macnair. Marks weren't everything, and anyway, Quentin's marks were nearly as good as Macnair's. And he'd been a prefect for a year longer. But there was no way a Slytherin was ever going to get Head Boy, not with those two Gryffindors in charge of the school.

What the hell did Annabel see in Macnair, anyway? Yeah, he was okay at Quidditch, but hadn't Quentin bested him in the last game and nearly knocked the bastard off his broom to boot? And Merlin, he was so funny-looking! Freakishly tall, with that long hair and scraggly beard. It was like he was trying to imitate Dumbledore. All he needed was a pair of those weird specs and he'd look like the Headmaster's bloody doppelganger. Shit, no wonder he got Head Boy.

As Quentin eyed him through the window, Macnair leant over to kiss Annabel's cheek before she moved off down the corridor.

"He sure moved in on your girlfriend fast, didn't he?" remarked Goyle with a smirk.

"Yeah," said Quentin, drawing his wand. "Too bloody fast." He flung the compartment door open, the other occupants rising from their seats behind him in anticipation of a

fight.

Macnair simply looked at him as he stood in the doorway, wand pointing at the Head Boy.

"What's the problem, Yaxley?" Macnair asked calmly. He didn't even pull his fucking wand.

*Smug little prick.*

Quentin just stood there seething, unable to think for a few moments until a short bark of laughter from behind him pulled him from his trance.

"You. You're the problem. Parading around here like you own the fucking place."

"What are you on about, Yaxley? I'm just doing my patrol," replied Macnair.

"Your patrol," spat Quentin. "So that includes pawing girls, now does it, Macnair?"

"I wasn't pawing her."

"Yeah? Well it's time you Gryffindors learned to keep your bloody mitts off our Slytherin girls." He jabbed his wand toward Macnair.

Macnair didn't flinch, but he looked at Quentin as if he were a bit of Kneazle-sick. Then he carefully pushed Quentin's wand aside, saying, "Sure, Yaxley. Whatever you say. Go sit down and cool off."

He turned to move off down the corridor.

Quentin felt like a complete arse just standing there watching Macnair saunter away. Hearing someone snickering behind him, he knew he had to do something.

"Hey, Macnair!" called Quentin. "I'm not finished with you!" He shot a stinging hex at Macnair's back. The Slytherins gathered behind him laughed as the gangly Gryffindor cried out, then clawed at his side pocket for his wand, and cast a hurried *Finite*. They gasped almost as one, though, as the boy turned, wand drawn, his face pink and angry. His height and, Quentin had to admit, the power he radiated were intimidating. But Quentin stood his ground. He really had no choice now.

He was relieved when Macnair didn't retaliate, but he felt another frisson of fear when his nemesis said, his voice a rumbling bass that was like thunder, "Never hex me when my back is turned, Yaxley. Never. Now. Go. Sit. Down."

Quentin's first impulse was to do exactly as Macnair instructed, but he could feel Goyle and the others watching him.

"Make me."

Macnair just shook his head. "I'm not going to fight you just so you can save face with your friends, Yaxley. It isn't worth it."

He turned to go again, and Quentin called after him, "Yeah, run away, Macnair. I hear it runs in your family."

Macnair stopped and turned around. "Leave my family out of it," he said quietly. He stared directly into Quentin's eyes, and Quentin felt almost as if those sea-blue orbs were burning him. He lifted his wand...he felt in that moment that he'd do anything to get Macnair to take his eyes off him...and fired a Conjunctivitis Curse.

Macnair was fast, casting his first *Protego* without even lifting his wand, and Quentin's curse bounced off, very nearly hitting its caster on the rebound. Furious now, Quentin cast another and another and another, each easily deflected with a flick of his opponent's hand.

"Stop, Yaxley," Macnair said with that eerie calm. "You're just making a fool of yourself."

"Or what, you going to murder me?" yelled an increasingly desperate Quentin, not liking the way his voice rose to a near-girlish shriek. "You could share a cell with your grandfather or your uncle. Another Mad Macnair!" Suddenly, Quentin couldn't make a sound, and he realised after a moment that Macnair had sealed his lips. He turned to Crispian Goyle in mute appeal. Crispian pointed his wand and said, "*Finite*." Nothing happened.

Goyle turned to Macnair, saying, "Take it off."

"Do it yourself," said Macnair. He turned to go, and Quentin panicked. He couldn't spend the rest of the ride to London like this! What would his father say when he found out he'd been bested by a Gryffindor? He pushed Goyle roughly toward Macnair's retreating form.

Crispian took the hint, drawing his wand and casting: "*Petrificus Totalus!*"

Macnair froze mid-step and toppled over.

Quentin moved forward and snatched Macnair's wand from his frozen hand. The moment he touched it, a searing heat burned his fingers, and he gave a grunt, tossing it into the corridor.

*What kind of fucking hex is that?*

He moved to bring his stinging fingers to his mouth, but he still couldn't open his lips. He shoved Goyle toward the fallen Macnair.

"Lay off, Yaxley, I've got it. Help me move him, you lot," Goyle said, and the four Slytherin boys grabbed Macnair, pulled him into their compartment, and laid him across a seat.

Goyle bent down and pushed the point of his wand against Macnair's neck. "I'm gonna release the spell, and you're gonna fix Yaxley's mouth. Got it? Or I'll slice your neck open and they can send you back to your mummy in a box . . . *Finite*."

Macnair didn't move, and Goyle poked him harder with his wand. "Release it!"

"Can't. Don't know the counter-spell," said Macnair smoothly, sitting up. "I guess you'll have to get someone at St Mungo's to do it, Yaxley."

"The fuck you can't!" shouted Goyle, but Macnair knocked his wand from his hand with a quick chop of his large arm. He dove for the door, but the four other boys fell on him, wands forgotten for the moment.

Quentin felt his fist connect with Macnair's nose, and the crack reverberated thrillingly through him. Then Macnair was down, his body half in, half out of the compartment door, and the others were kicking him, Macnair trying in vain to get up. Quentin drew his wand, preparing to cast a cutting spell, intending to hack off his stupid pony tail, and maybe give him a few light scars into the bargain, but he remembered his predicament when the only sound that came out was an inarticulate grunt. More furious now, he started kicking Macnair harder, images of him kissing Annabel running tauntingly through Quentin's mind. He drew his foot back and aimed a particularly hard kick at Macnair's crotch. He connected squarely, nearly knocking himself off balance, and Macnair howled in agony. Quentin caught his breath for a moment, then drew back again, intending to repeat the kick, when the weirdest thing happened.

Macnair simply shimmered out of being. One moment he was there, the next, he wasn't. Quentin could hear the dull *whump* of feet connecting with a body and the violent

expulsion of breath that followed each, but they stopped after a moment.

"What the hell . . . ?" said Goyle. They fell silent for a moment, then Quentin saw the compartment door clatter shut, as if Macnair had gotten through it at last.

"Where'd he go?" asked Goyle, but nobody answered.

/\*\*\*/

Albus Dumbledore had just finished dinner in the Great Hall and was intending to retire to his study to read Griselda's latest paper. When he arrived at the door to his quarters, however, he was greeted by the sight of a terribly agitated Minerva McGonagall. Her arm was extended awkwardly to her side, and she was sagging slightly as if burdened by a great weight.

"Minerva! What..."

"Let us in, please, Albus!"

*Us?*

He gave the password, and when the door swung open, Minerva staggered through. He went to take her arm, and she said, "No, over on this side...help me hold him."

Albus didn't know who "he" was, but he could feel a body when he went to Minerva's burdened side, and he felt along until he was able to get an arm under it. A groan emanated from the body as he and Minerva manoeuvred the unseen sufferer to Albus' settee.

"Thank you," gasped Minerva, and he noticed she was perspiring heavily.

"Minerva, who is this?"

A familiar voice said, "It's me, sir. Malcolm."

"My boy! What has happened?"

Before Malcolm could respond, Minerva cut in quickly: "He's injured, Albus. He was beaten...I can't tell how badly. I cast a few basic Healing Charms, but I couldn't do anything very specific because..."

"You can't see him," finished Albus. "Malcolm, where are you injured?"

"My ribs got the worst of it, I think," he said. "And my..." the boy stopped.

"What, Malcolm?"

"My um . . . my balls. Sorry, Mum," he wheezed.

"Don't be ridiculous, Malcolm," she said. "Did someone hit you there?"

"Kicked me."

Albus winced. "Are you having any trouble breathing, son? Any blood in your mouth?"

"No. There was a little blood, but I think it's from my lip," replied Malcolm's disembodied voice.

"That's fine," said Albus. "No punctured lungs, anyway."

"Albus, can you help him?" Minerva asked, sounding desperate.

"I will try, but he would be better off in the infirmary. I wonder you didn't go to St Mungo's...weren't you in London?"

"Yes," she answered agitatedly, "but Malcolm insisted we come back here. He thought you'd be better able to deal with...the main problem."

*The boy is embarrassed and scared to death. How well I remember . . .*

"Maybe," said Albus. "Can you tell me how it happened, Malcolm?"

The boy relayed his story...omitting the names of his assailants...up to the point when he staggered off the train and nearly made Minerva jump out of her skin with fright when he spoke to her.

"So I Apparated us back here and helped him up to the castle," Minerva finished. "I didn't dare Levitate him, as I couldn't see him."

Albus silently conjured a glass and filled it with an *Aguamenti*, handing it to a grateful Minerva.

"So you say it just . . . happened? You weren't performing any spells at the time?"

"No, sir. I just felt . . . I don't know . . . a sort of hum inside me, and then they stopped kicking me, and I just got out. It wasn't until I got partway down the corridor before I realised . . . I realised I was invisible. I tried casting an *Homenum Revelio*, but it didn't change anything."

"Do you think one of those boys did this?" asked Minerva.

"No. I don't think so," Albus replied. "I believe it was an organic event."

"What do you mean?" asked Minerva.

"I shall tell you, but first I would like to pay a brief visit to Madam Warburg to get a pain-relieving potion for Malcolm. What I have on hand isn't very strong."

"Oh, yes. Thank you, Albus," said Minerva.

He Floo-ed to the infirmary and was back again in five minutes.

"Here you go, Malcolm," he said, pouring out a teaspoon of green liquid.

It was odd watching the teaspoon seemingly float through the air, the fluid disappearing as it...presumably...entered the boy's mouth.

"Thank you, Professor," said Malcolm.

"You're quite welcome. You should start to get some relief in a very few minutes."

Minerva gave Albus a watery, grateful smile.

He Summoned a pair of chairs and indicated for Minerva to sit, which she did. He took the seat next to her, across from Malcolm.

"I think I know what has happened to you, Malcolm," he said at length.

"Can it be reversed?" asked Minerva.

"Mum," admonished Malcolm's voice, "I'm sure Professor Dumbledore will get to that part. But let him speak, please."

"Yes, Minerva," answered Albus. "You may rest assured that Malcolm will not remain invisible forever. As for what has caused this . . . interesting effect . . . I believe it to be a rare gift. A very rare gift, in fact."

"A gift?" asked Malcolm.

"Yes. Or a talent, if you will. As you undoubtedly know, Minerva, and you may, Malcolm, wizards have long sought ways to become invisible at will. But with the exception of Invisibility Cloaks, the ability to do so has remained elusive. At least, for the vast majority of our kind. However, there is a very small group of witches and wizards who are able to become invisible at will. It isn't mentioned in any but the most esoteric books because it is so vanishingly rare. There have only been seven documented cases in the past three centuries. The Ministry doesn't even bother registering them as they do Animagi."

"And you think Malcolm has this ability?" asked an astonished Minerva.

"I believe so," replied Albus. "I can think of no other explanation for what has happened, and the details of his experience are suggestive."

"How so?" asked Malcolm.

"In most of the documented cases, the first change occurred during adolescence, and generally under circumstances of great stress or duress. Invisibles have reported feeling frightened and disoriented at the change, and many had trouble changing back or otherwise controlling the ability at first, although they generally learned how to do so eventually."

"So you really think I'm one of these . . . Invisibles?" asked Malcolm in hushed tones.

"I do."

"So how do we get him back?" asked Minerva.

"Mum, I'm right here," objected Malcolm.

"You know what I mean, Malcolm," said Minerva testily.

"Malcolm, do you feel up to attempting a little magic with me?" enquired Albus.

"Yes, sir," the young man answered. "The pain potion is working. I feel much better."

"Good. If you'll stand up and take my hands," Albus said, extending his hands, palms turned upward.

He felt the boy's hands on his.

"Close your eyes, Malcolm, and just listen to my voice. I want you to concentrate on feeling your body. Start with your toes . . . wiggle them, if you like . . ."

Albus took him through the entire exercise, from toes to scalp, and when they were finished, he asked, "How do you feel?"

"Good, I guess."

Minerva interjected anxiously, "Albus, I still can't see him."

"Patience, my dear, patience," he told her. To Malcolm, he said, "Now here's the harder part: I want you to go through it again, toes to crown, and envision each part from the inside out . . . bones to muscles, to fascia, to skin . . . imagine what each bit looks like. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Good lad. Start with your toes . . ."

By the time they had finished, Malcolm had begun to shimmer back into being.

Albus said, "Very good. Do it again, and I think we've got it."

Three minutes later, a fully visible Malcolm was receiving a very relieved and very tight hug from his mother, making him yelp.

"I'm sorry!" she cried. "Your ribs . . ."

"It's all right, Mum."

"Oh, Malcolm, your nose . . ." she said, reaching up toward his misshapen proboscis.

"Don't touch it, Mum," said Malcolm flinching away.

"No, I won't, but just let me . . ." She drew her wand, pointed it at her son's nose, and said, *Episkey!*

Malcolm winced as his nose made a sharp cracking sound and put itself to rights again. Albus conjured a handkerchief and gave it to Malcolm to dab at the blood that had begun to trickle from it once again.

"Who did this to you, Malcolm?" Minerva asked.

The boy shrugged noncommittally. "Just a couple of those Slytherin gits," he said. "The usual."

"But why?"

"One of them started a fight about . . . um . . . about a girl, and things got out of hand," Malcolm said.

"Oh, Malcolm," said Minerva, pursing her lips.

"Were any of the others injured, Malcolm?" Albus asked.

"No, sir. That is . . . well, not exactly, but one of them . . . I . . . well, I hexed his lips shut."

"Oh, Malcolm! Not again! You didn't!" said Minerva.

"Yeah, I did," he said sheepishly. "I shouldn't have . . . I know it." He turned to Albus, saying, "I understand completely if you want my Head Boy badge, sir." He began to unpin it from his robe, but Albus put his hand up to stop him.

"No need for that at present, Malcolm. From what you've said, the Slytherins were spoiling for a fight. And I think you've certainly paid for your minor lapse in judgement."

Albus thought the attack by the Slytherins must have been a bit more severe to have prompted the boy to become invisible. All kinds of thoughts were roiling through Albus' mind, but he put them aside for the moment.

He said, "Malcolm, if you think you are well enough, please return to your common room to rest. I'll have a house-elf bring you something to eat shortly."

"All right, Professor. Thank you for everything," the boy said.

Minerva said, "Yes, thank you, Albus," and turned to follow her son.

"A moment, Minerva, if you would. I have a few things I'd like to discuss with you briefly."

"All right," she said. "Malcolm, I'll come by in a bit to check on you."

Albus thought he saw Malcolm begin to roll his eyes, but then the boy checked himself and gave his mother a brief smile.

"All right. Good night, Professor."

"Good night, my boy."

When the door had closed behind Malcolm, Albus turned back to Minerva.

"This is quite a surprise," he said, watching her closely.

She noticed his scrutiny, and he saw her fingers begin to rub nervously at the selvedge at the neck of her over-robe.

"Yes."

"Has he ever given any indication . . . any hint of this ability before?"

"No. Never. When he found me after getting off the train, I was certain it was a practical joke."

"No. Not a joke," said Albus. "I'm sorry your holiday was spoiled . . . or at least, postponed."

Minerva waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, no matter. We were just going to do a bit of shopping, maybe visit the theatre. Since he had to be on the train to supervise, I thought it would be a good opportunity to meet up in the city. We can do it another day."

After a short silence, Albus asked, "Minerva, has there ever been anyone in your family with this ability?"

She looked surprised at the question. "No. I thought you said it was rare . . . only seven people in the past few centuries..."

"Seven *documented* Invisibles," Albus corrected. "As with Animagi, it is likely that there are more than we know about. There isn't much evidence, of course, but it appears there may be a genetic component to the ability. Among the documented cases, four were from a single family line, and two others were more distantly related."

"And the other?"

"The other was apparently a Muggle-born wizard."

"Odd."

"Yes. May I assume you are aware of no one in his father's family with the ability to become invisible?"

"No. But I don't know very much about the Macnairs. Or the Rookwoods. If there were anyone, I wouldn't necessarily know about it."

Albus was quite certain none of the documented Invisibles was a Macnair or a Rookwood. He was familiar with all the ancestral lines of each of the seven.

"Well," he said, "I won't keep you. Tell Malcolm to come see me tomorrow in my office...say around two? He will need to learn to control this rare gift, and I would be pleased to help him to the best of my ability."

"Thank you, Albus," Minerva said quietly. "I'm terribly grateful. For everything."

Albus took her hands and kissed her cheek.

"Good night, my dear."

When she was gone, Albus sat gazing into his fireplace. He wasn't sure how long he sat, turning events both recent and distant over in his mind.

When he rose, he had come to a decision.

He went to his office and crossed to where the Great Book sat on its stand. He paged through the tome until he found the entries for 1945.

The first portion of each entry used an ancient and powerful magic that detected each new magical life as it separated from its mother. Inscribed in red ink was the precise date and location of the birth of the magical child:

*Magical Birth*

*14 February 1945 16:08:23*

*Seventh bedroom from the left of the main staircase, second floor, Macnair family manse, Aberdeen, Scotland*

The second portion, added in black ink via a more mundane Ministry spell once the child's name and parentage was registered, read:

*Macnair, Malcolm Gerald*

*to Macnair, Gerald Findlach & Macnair, Minerva Maighread McGonagall*

Albus counted backwards from 14 February.

*Thirty-seven weeks.*

It was thirty-seven weeks between the conclusion of N.E.W.T. exams and the Feast of St Valentine.

Albus closed the Great Book and went up the spiral staircase to his library to hunt for the spell that would tell him conclusively what he needed to know.

## Chapter Twenty-One

*Chapter 21 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**24 December 1962**

For the first time in many years, Albus had trouble concentrating. He'd sat down at his desk directly after lunch, intending to complete the paper he was to give at the Magical Educators' conference in Berlin over the Easter holidays, but he gave it up as a bad job when he realised he had botched the tables on the correlation between teacher experience and N.E.W.T. scores for the third time. The parchment would only take so much Erasing.

He rose from his desk and cast a Tempus Charm.

*One forty-five.*

Crossing to a cabinet on the other side of the room, he withdrew a small music box. It was made of ebony with an inlaid lacquer design depicting a brilliant red-and-gold plumed phoenix against a deep blue background ringed with an orange sunburst pattern. The beautiful box had been a gift from Nicolas Flamel when he and Albus had completed their analysis of the chemical properties of alkahest.

Albus opened the box's top, thought for a moment, then pointed his wand at the box, saying, *'Sonorus.'*

A moment later, the pensive, elegiac sound of Bach's eighty-second cantata filled the air. Filius had charmed the box to play it for Albus, waxing rhapsodical about the singer, Hans Hotter, pronouncing the decade-old recording the greatest performance he'd ever heard of "Ich habe genug". After listening for about five minutes, Albus was inclined to agree with him, although he suspected Nicolas might have a different opinion. Of course, the old alchemist had heard the piece sung by the Kantor of Leipzig's *Thomaskirche* himself.

Albus was nearly through his second listen when Malcolm's knock came.

"Come in, Malcolm," he said, showing the young man into his office and gesturing for him to take a seat in a large, upholstered chair near the fire. He noticed how gingerly the boy sat down.

"How are you feeling today?"

"Better, sir, thank you."

"Any pain?"

Malcolm said, "Just . . . you know . . . where I was kicked. The potion you gave me helped, though."

"Good," said Albus. "Are you swollen?"

Malcolm coloured slightly and answered, "No, I don't think so. I've got a little . . . um . . . a little bruising."

"May I take it you didn't have your mother attend to it?"

"No . . . I didn't really think . . . well, I wasn't exactly comfortable with that idea."

"No, I can appreciate your feelings," said Albus. "Would you like to see Madam Warburg? I'm sure she could help you relieve the bruising."

"No, thank you, sir," Malcolm said quickly. "I'm sure it will resolve itself soon."

Albus understood why the boy was reluctant to see the matron about such a sensitive issue. Madam Warburg was rounding on one hundred years of age, and her hands shook terribly. Moreover, Albus was not entirely certain the lady was not blind, too. She was scheduled to retire in the coming year, and Albus had already found what he believed to be an excellent replacement, but Madam Warburg's contract didn't run out until the end of the spring term. Albus had met privately with the other staff to recommend that any seriously ill or injured students be taken quietly to St Mungo's rather than the Hogwarts infirmary. He was quite certain that he would not want Eugenia Warburg anywhere near his privates, either.

"Would you like me to have a look?" Albus asked. "I'm no Healer, and I'm probably not as skilled as your mother at such things, but I can do simple spells to reduce swelling and heal any superficial bruising."

He could see Malcolm hesitate, and he was almost sorry he'd offered...he didn't want to make the boy uncomfortable...but having been the recipient of his brother's angry boot to his crotch on more than one occasion in his childhood, Albus knew how painful such injuries could be.

He said, "If you'd rather not, I will take no offense."

"No," said Malcolm. "If you want to . . . it would be good if you could heal the bruise. It hurts to sit, actually."

"All right," said Albus, drawing his wand and gesturing for Malcolm to take down his trousers.

Malcolm stood and unfastened them, hesitating only a moment before pushing his briefs down.

Albus winced when he saw the contusion discolouring Malcolm's right testicle. The dark purple bruise spread down from the outside half of his scrotum to his upper thigh. Cold fury filled the Headmaster as he examined the boy's injury; if he ever discovered who the culprit was, several months' worth of detention would be the least of the little bastard's problems.

"Not too terrible," he said to Malcolm as he looked. "I'm just going to cast two spells, with your permission. The one to reduce swelling...and you don't have too much...may be a little uncomfortable. The one to heal the bruising should just feel a bit tingly, all right?"

"Yes, sir. I'm ready whenever you are."

"All right," said Albus. "The uncomfortable one first, hmm?" He pointed his wand at the testicle and said, *Reducere tumescens!* He heard the boy's sharp intake of breath and asked, "All right, Malcolm?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good lad. Now the easy one: *Curo contusionem!*" The purple discolouration quickly faded. It didn't disappear completely, but it was noticeably reduced. "Done," Albus said. "I couldn't get rid of the bruising completely, but you should feel a bit better now. Do you?"

"Yes, I think," said Malcolm. "Should I . . . um . . . pull my trousers up?"

"By all means." Albus turned and went to his desk, shuffling some papers to give the boy a bit of privacy while he buttoned up.

When he turned back, he asked, "Are you able to sit more comfortably now, Malcolm?"

The young man sat carefully back down on the chair, and Albus was pleased to see his face brighten.

"Oh, that's much better. Thank you, Professor Dumbledore!"

"You're most welcome, my boy." He could see Malcolm struggling with something and decided to let the boy come to it in his own way.

After a moment, Malcolm did just that. "Professor?"

"Yes?"

"You don't think . . . well, this is a little embarrassing . . . but you don't think the injury will affect . . . how things work? Down there?" Malcolm's face was now bright pink.

"No, not at all," Albus said. "I don't think any permanent damage was done, and even if it had been, most men are quite able to father children with only one working testicle." Albus was suddenly acutely uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation.

"That's good to know," said Malcolm. "But what about . . . um . . . the . . . other aspects of . . . um . . . you know . . ."

"Ah. I see. No, I don't think you should have any lasting problems there, Malcolm. At the moment, things in that region are a bit traumatised, and you might be noticing that . . . certain events that might be expected to arise in the morning, for example, aren't. But in a few days' time, I'm sure things will be back to normal. If not, well . . . when the bruising is gone, you might try . . . a test flight . . . if you take my meaning. Then if things still aren't as they were, we can see about consulting a Healer. But I very much doubt that will be necessary. These things do happen, and our equipment is far more resilient than one might think. Believe me." He looked at Malcolm meaningfully.

"Yes, sir. Thanks. Sorry to trouble you about it," said Malcolm.

"It's no trouble. And your concerns are quite understandable. I'm happy to be able to allay some of them," Albus said. "Now, we need to talk about how you're going to learn to control this gift of yours and turn it into a skill," he said, happy to change the subject to another line.

They spent the next few minutes discussing the benefits of being able to become invisible at will, and Albus spoke to Malcolm very seriously about the pitfalls of abusing the ability.

"You may find, Malcolm, that you become complacent," Albus said. "A number of witches and wizards have gotten themselves into quite a bit of trouble while invisible, whether that invisibility was conferred by a charmed cloak or by innate ability. You must not rely on it to get you out of trouble, and it is not a substitute for good defensive skills. And above all, you mustn't go looking for trouble simply because you think you can get away with it without being seen."

"No, sir," said Malcolm.

"Very good."

Albus spent the next ninety minutes taking Malcolm through a series of exercises designed to help the young man develop control over his newly discovered talent. By the end of it, Malcolm was able to make himself invisible with great difficulty...he managed it fully only once, partially twice...but was able to Reappear fairly easily.

When they had finished, Malcolm was perspiring lightly with the effort. Albus said, "You did very well, Malcolm. I think it advisable for you to refrain from practicing, though, unless you are with me, at least for the time being. I can work with you on Sunday evenings, if you agree."

"Yes, sir! Thank you, Professor!"

When the door closed behind the boy, Albus stood looking at it for a few moments.

Taking care of Malcolm's injury had helped the older wizard settle his nerves a bit; it had given him something to focus on other than what was foremost in his mind, but as he had watched over the young man during the exercises he had taught him, he could not help examining him closely, and he had realised with considerable shock that the young man looked very much as he himself had at the same age. It was not obvious, exactly, but noticeable if one was looking for it.

By the time he had dismissed Malcolm Macnair, Albus was convinced that his suspicions were correct. He didn't really need the spell he was about to perform to confirm them, but as a man of science, Albus Dumbledore had to test his hypothesis with the best tool he had.

He went to his desk and took from the bottom right drawer a copy of Melvyn Derwent's *Advanced Techniques in Magico-molecular Genetics* and thumbed through it to the section on matching magico-types. The spell Albus had found was complex and tricky. He read through it several times, then withdrew from his right robe pocket several

long, brown hairs he had surreptitiously snipped from Malcolm's ponytail when the boy's eyes were closed. He took a single strand and laid it on the smooth surface of his desk, putting the remaining hairs back in his pocket.

From the top drawer of his desk, he withdrew a letter-sized envelope and took up the flap. From it, he withdrew a single black hair and resealed the envelope, putting it back in the drawer. He had retrieved the hair from Minerva's brush while she was overseeing breakfast in the Great Hall with the small group of students who had remained at Hogwarts over the Christmas holiday. He was not proud of having used his privilege as Headmaster to enter her rooms without her knowledge, but he had been unable to think of another way to get the specimens he needed without raising her suspicions. He placed the black hair next to the brown one on his desk.

After removing his hat, Albus plucked several hairs from his own head and separated out one silver strand, laying it next to the two darker hairs on the desk and putting the remainder in his left robe pocket.

He looked over the spell once more, closed his eyes, and cast, using the ancient Greek Derwent recommended for the incantation. He faltered once, and when he opened his eyes to regard the hairs, nothing had happened. Sighing, he swept them from the desk and took out three new specimens, placing them next to one another on the desk again.

Albus reviewed the spell carefully before re-casting. And again, nothing happened. Perhaps his understanding of magical genetics was too incomplete for him to form a specific enough intention. He resolved to try just once more. If it didn't work this time, he told himself, he would forget about the spell for the time being, until he had a chance to consult an expert...perhaps old Derwent himself...and concoct a believable cover story about the reason for his sudden interest in a branch of magic that was so far afield from his normal pursuits.

He lined the three hairs up, then did a short mind-clearing exercise to help hone his focus. He took up his wand again and cast, certain this time that he had the incantation correct. When he opened his eyes, there was a shimmering pale yellow glow surrounding the specimens. Albus felt his pulse quicken, but admonished himself not to become too excited. The book had said the aura would turn green for a non-match, orange for a match. Yellow could become either...or nothing at all, meaning the spell had failed once again.

For two minutes, he simply listened to his heart thudding its rhythm dully in his ears, his eyes closed. When he opened them, he had his answer.

It was a near certainty.

Albus groped for the edge of his desk to steady himself. He'd known even before he saw the bright orange glow, of course, but there was a difference between knowing a thing and *knowing* it.

After a moment, he went around to the back of the desk and pulled open a drawer, withdrawing a bottle of the good Firewhisky he kept there for impromptu toasts and celebrations. He conjured a glass and poured himself two fingers, thought a moment, then added another finger.

A few minutes later, the potent liquor hit his bloodstream and calmed the storm that had been raging within him. But only slightly.

How had this happened? An accident?

Minerva had told him she had taken a contraceptive potion, he was certain of it.

Wasn't he?

He went to the large stone Pensieve that sat in the corner of the room and closed his eyes, concentrating on the night he had taken Minerva to his bed, and withdrew a silvery strand of memory, depositing it in the basin.

Albus smiled a little at her fit of giggles at seeing his erect penis, remembering his surprise and relief at the sudden appearance of a normal teenager under the mask of the serious young woman he had known. Not to mention his relief at having achieved the erection in the first place.

*"Do you need me to cast a contraceptive charm?"* he heard himself ask.

*"No. I took a potion."*

Had she lied?

He withdrew from the memory and siphoned it up with his wand, replacing it in his head.

*"I took a potion."*

She didn't say she had taken a contraceptive potion specifically. Clever little cat.

*I should have asked her which one. Or better, I should have cast the charm anyway.*

Except he would never have cast a charm of any kind on her body without her permission. She would have known that, certainly.

And if he had insisted? Would things have been different? Might she have simply backed out? Perhaps confided in him? Even asked him outright to father her child?

Questions, questions . . . he was a-fever with questions. But there was one he didn't have to ask himself. He knew why she had done it. Hadn't it been one of his own chief concerns when he had heard about the betrothal?

The Macnairs were mad. Not Gerald, perhaps, but his father, grandfather, and his uncle . . . probably others as well. Minerva was not stupid and never had been. She had been a budding scientist, after all, and knew the maxim: You don't breed a mad dog.

And Minerva hadn't.

She had concocted and carried out a plan, carefully and methodically, as she did almost everything, no doubt calculating each possible step and its potential outcomes, charting the risks and benefits of each, and what it would mean to her plans. He had been merely a variable. Something to be managed. She had used him.

And now he had a son he hadn't even met until the boy was fifteen.

*(I cannot be a father. I am not a father.)*

She had tricked him, then she had stood up and married Gerald Macnair, knowing she was carrying another man's child. Then she had taken that child and gone to France, probably thinking never to see Albus Dumbledore again.

And then she'd brought her child here.

All this time, and she'd known . . . kept it carefully hidden from Albus and, presumably, from everyone else.

*(My son . . . our son . . . no, not mine . . . hers . . . only hers.)*

Or had she? Had she told Malcolm?

A wave of nausea gripped him at the thought. Did Malcolm know? Did they sit together in her quarters at night discussing him? Malcolm's ~~father~~?

No. The boy couldn't know. No child was that sly, that deceptive . . .

*She was.*

Anger began to boil up from deep within him, so hot and enveloping that he was blind with it for a few moments. He dared not move; he was afraid his magic might explode from within him and destroy the castle. Along with the anger, though, was another feeling . . . one he couldn't, wouldn't give name to. He forced it back, and found that it would yield. His fury was stronger, for the moment. And his fear . . . irrational, yet undeniably present. What would he do? What *could* he do? What could he do that would not destroy his relationship with Minerva...fractured and damaged though it indubitably was now...and with Malcolm? His *son*.

He had a child. He and Minerva. Together, they had made this boy . . . this young man. And now that he knew, he couldn't un-know. The knowledge was in him like a growth that couldn't be removed.

And there was nothing to be done.

He simply stood where he was as the shadows in the room slowly stretched out, then disappeared completely, shrouding him in darkness. He didn't move again until he heard the knock at his office door.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

*Chapter 22 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

### 24 December 1962

While Albus Dumbledore was discovering the truth about Malcolm Macnair's paternity, Minerva sat in the Hogwarts library trying to learn a bit more about Invisibility. Apollyon Pringle had been kind enough to let her in during Madam Pince's absence, and she sat at a corner table, several books of magical history and theory stacked next to her.

There was precious little information in any of them about invisibility, probably because it was apparently so rare. After paging through six books that barely made mention of it, Minerva had finally found a book outlining what little was known about the phenomenon:

*Idiogenic invisibility is defined as the ability to become invisible at will. Other magical methods of self-concealment are well-described...Disillusionment Charms, objects enchanted to conceal the wearer to give the impression of invisibility are the best-known...but an organic method for achieving true invisibility has eluded wizardkind, despite the efforts of a number of noted scientists to develop such spells (see pp. 245-246).*

*Nevertheless, the magical literature has described several cases of idiogenic invisibility, and these reports range from anecdotal and barely credible to a very few well-documented experiments by subjects reported to have the ability.*

*The first formally recorded report appeared in Historia Magica Gentis Britannicum (1723) and concerns a wizard from the Lincolnshire region who was reputed to have become invisible during an encounter with a Boggart. Following this incident, the wizard allegedly plagued the county's villages, absconding with sheep and accosting young women, for several weeks in the final decade of the late seventeenth century, until he suddenly Reappeared and was immediately set upon by the villagers, who reportedly beat him to death with sticks and stones.*

*The wizard's name is lost to us, but the reported location of the anecdote is intriguing.*

*Three of the four best-documented cases of idiogenic invisibility occurred in a family known to have inhabited the Lincolnshire region for several centuries before the final remaining branch of its direct descendents left to settle in Dorset at the end of the nineteenth century. Members of this family, the Dumbledores, were the first to document their rare talent with any degree of credibility.*

*The first of these was Alaric Dumbledore (ca. 1702-1789), who meticulously recorded each occurrence of invisibility in a diary that he subsequently published. The published version also contains accounts by eyewitnesses who claimed to have both seen Dumbledore become invisible and witnessed the experiments he conducted while in that condition. These accounts describe an ability that was not under the control of its subject, and Dumbledore reported spending weeks in the invisible state before gradually reverting to visible form. Seven separate episodes of invisibility are documented in Dumbledore's diary.*

*Alaric's great-nephew, Wulfric Dumbledore (1823-1902), was the first to attempt to control the phenomenon, and with his son Talfryn (1845-1914), who shared his father's unusual ability, he reportedly developed methods that eventually allowed the pair to Disappear and Reappear at will. Unfortunately, neither Wulfric nor Talfryn made any formal publication of their work, and what we know of it comes from secondary sources<sup>2</sup>.*

*The most recent member of the family reported to share what must be deemed the invisibility trait, Oswin Dumbledore (b. 1858), published several accounts of his experiences in the popular press<sup>3</sup> and subsequently vanished from the public eye. His last known appearance was in London in 1894. His remaining family claims no knowledge of his current whereabouts or fate. No subsequent occurrence of idiogenic invisibility has been reported among the Dumbledore family, although the two remaining individuals known to possess the trait are distantly related.*

Minerva closed the book with a thump, her heart echoing the sound.

So this was why Albus was so certain about what had happened to Malcolm.

*He knows now.*

The thought reverberated through her as she sat frozen in place, a tide of paralysing dread washing over her.

Of course he knew. How could he not?

*Sweet Circe, he knows. He's with Malcolm right now, and he knows.*

She forced herself to stand, and without further thought, she flew from the library, her feet carrying her swiftly and almost against her conscious will to the Headmaster's tower. She gave the password, and when the gargoyle opened for her, she didn't wait to be conveyed by the swirling stones of the staircase, but propelled herself upward as if pursued by a banshee. The moment she reached the inner door to his office, she pounded on it with one hand.

A few moments later, it opened, and the look on his face told her all she needed to know.

He said, "I cannot talk to you," and shut the door shut in her face.

She stood shaking, wishing he had hexed her, cursed her, anything . . . anything was better than the coldness in his eyes as he had regarded her. She didn't knock again, but she stood at the door, both hoping and fearing that he would change his mind and admit her to his office and his presence.

When it became clear that no such thing was going to happen, she transformed into her feline form and raced to Gryffindor Tower. Changing back into her human form, she asked the Fat Lady if she had seen Malcolm.

"Yes, Professor. He came back through several minutes ago. Do you wish to enter?"

"No. No, thank you."

Slightly relieved, she headed quickly to her quarters, but once inside, she was at a loss as to what to do next. She wandered aimlessly through the small apartment, moving items from one place to another...a stack of essays from desk to table and back, a book from her bedside to the chair by the fireplace, a photo frame from one side of the mantel to the other...and rubbing off bits of dust that weren't there from things that Elgar had cleaned only that morning.

When the ebony king from whom she was wiping an imaginary bit of grit with her conjured handkerchief stabbed her with his sword, she dropped it with a slight shriek, realising that it was the second time she'd polished her chess pieces in the space of five minutes.

*No wonder he was a bit cross* she thought absently, sucking off the blood that had beaded on her thumb and reaching down to grasp the thing carefully by the back of his gorget as he flailed madly at her. He settled as soon as she placed him back in file, but she noted that the pieces with mouths were growling at her softly, and she backed away from the table where the board sat.

*Stupid. Stupid,* she chastised herself as she blinked back the tears from her eyes.

*Where is your Gryffindor courage, Minerva?*

She employed her old self-calming trick as she went to her desk, withdrew two pieces of parchment, took up her quill, and began to write. She didn't want to think or to feel as she composed the first letter.

An hour later, when she had finished writing, she had one short piece of parchment and another that measured nearly thirty-six inches in length. She used her wand to dry and fix the ink, and then read over each page methodically, keeping up the carefully-erected shield between thought and feeling whenever it threatened to crack by re-reciting another of the exceptions to Gamp's Law. The almost-forgotten habit served her well.

*Which to send?*

After thinking for a few moments, she added a few lines to the shorter letter, then rolled and sealed both.

"Elgar!"

A moment later, the elf appeared with a pop.

"Yes, mistress?"

Handing him the rolls of parchment, Minerva said, "Please take these to the Headmaster. I'd like you to see that he gets them, so please hand them to him personally. If he is not . . . in a position to receive them immediately, I'd like you to wait until he is."

Elgar eyed his mistress warily. "Yes, mistress. Is Elgar to wait for a reply?"

"No. Not unless the Headmaster requires it."

The elf took the letters, but instead of Disapparating immediately, he stood looking at Minerva for a few moments.

"Is Mistress Minerva unwell?" he enquired.

"No. I'm . . . I'm fine, Elgar."

"Forgive me, mistress, but you is looking very pale. Elgar is fetching you some Pepperup Potion from the infirmary as soon as the letters is delivered," he said decisively and Disapparated before Minerva could order him not to bother.

When he was gone, Minerva crossed to the window and gazed out across the east courtyard, blanketed by the snow that had been falling steadily since the prior evening. It would be a white Christmas at Hogwarts.

She burst into tears.

A few minutes later, she heard the pop of house-elf Apparition but didn't turn to acknowledge Elgar's presence.

"Does the Headmaster have the letters?" she asked.

"Yes, mistress."

*That's that, then.*

She felt a warm hand on hers and looked down to see the elf looking back up at her, deep concern etched in his dear, wrinkled face.

"Is there something Elgar can do to soothe Mistress Minerva's pain?" he asked.

"No," she said, barely able to get the words out. "Thank you, Elgar."

"I brought tea. The Pepperup Potion is with it."

"Thank you," she repeated.

Elgar released her hand and snapped his fingers, startling her. He beckoned with his long fingers for Minerva to bend down, and he used the handkerchief he had conjured to wipe the tears from her face. Minerva took it with a nod of thanks and dabbed at her running nose.

Elgar said, "Mistress is to have the tea and eat something. You will be feeling better." He added, "Potion is optional."

Minerva gave him a watery smile. "You're right, of course," she said. "You always are."

The elf smiled back at his mistress and asked, "Elgar would offer to stay with you, but I am thinking Mistress Minerva is preferring to be let alone"

How well he knew her.

"Yes, I'd like to be alone now, please, Elgar. But thank you."

Elgar nodded and said, "Elgar is coming back to check on you later. Almost as an afterthought, he said, "With mistress' permission."

"Of course."

The elf nodded again and Disapparated.

Minerva went to the table and poured herself a cup of tea. She sat poking at the scone Elgar had brought for a moment before standing again and going back to the window, leaving the tea untouched.

She sat in the window seat and pressed her forehead to the cold glass, closing her eyes.

And that's how Alastor found her twenty minutes later.

/\*\*\*/

Albus was at his desk, once again attempting to finish his conference paper, when there was another knock at the inner door to his office.

He ignored it, and a moment later, it sounded again.

Rising from his desk, he went to the door and called through it, "Please go away, Minerva. Have I not said I don't wish to see you right now?"

A small voice answered, "It is Elgar, Headmaster, sir. I have some letters for you."

"Leave them with the gargoyle."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but I am to give them to you directly. If you are not ready to receive them, Elgar is to wait until you are."

Albus sighed. She'd told the elf to wait, and no doubt the creature would sit on the Headmaster's doorstep until he died of thirst unless Albus relieved him of his burden. Albus opened the door and held out his hand.

"I will take the letters. Thank you, Elgar."

The elf handed him two rolls of parchment, bowed his head, and Disapparated again immediately.

Albus carried them to his desk and laid them on the corner, trying to ignore them as he continued to work. After a few moments, he swept them into a drawer and closed it with a bang.

Ninety minutes later, he dried and sealed the ink on his paper, rolling several sheets of parchment and sealing them with his wand. These he placed in a bag on the table near the door to his office, along with several Shrunken books and a set of reports he had gathered earlier in the day.

He considered pouring himself another drink, but then thought the better of it. He took the letters out of the drawer and laid them on his desk, eyeing them as if they were a pair of Ashwinder eggs.

*Why two?*

He decided to read the shorter letter first. Snatching it up, he broke the seal and unrolled it.

*24 December 1961*

*Dear Headmaster Dumbledore,*

*Please accept my resignation from my post as Transfiguration mistress and Head of Gryffindor House.*

*As my contract runs through the end of the spring term, I am prepared to remain in place until that time, but if you wish it, I am willing to terminate the contract effective immediately, or at any time you are able to engage my replacement. I am likewise prepared to vacate my quarters at a time of your choosing; I ask only for a day's notice in order to secure alternate lodgings.*

*I also ask that you permit my son to remain at Hogwarts through the end of the coming term. If, at the end of that time, you would prefer he transfer to another school, I will make the appropriate arrangements if you would be kind enough to provide an appropriate letter of recommendation for him.*

*I know that I have no right to beg any further kindness from you, but I must ask, not on my own behalf, but on behalf of one who is blameless: Please do not let my faults colour your behaviour toward Malcolm. He knows nothing of the reason for my loss of your regard, and I should prefer it to remain so. You have been so very good to him, and while I cannot help but imagine your feelings for him are not as they were, I know that you are wise enough and kind enough to conceal from him any animosity you may feel toward either myself or an innocent boy.*

*I shall, of course, write a more official letter of resignation to the Board of Governors upon your direction.*

*Regretfully,*

Minerva McGonagall

Albus placed the letter back on the desk and took up the second, longer one.

24 December 1961

Dear Albus,

*I do not know if you will ever read this letter; I can hardly blame you if you decide to cast it into the fire, but before you do, please know that whatever happens to me from this point on, I shall always be grateful to you for the kindnesses you have shown me. I am terribly, terribly sorry for the wrong I have done you, but I cannot bring myself to regret my actions, at least as they pertain to Malcolm and the circumstances of his birth.*

*There. Now you may have done with me.*

*If, perchance, you have determined to read further, I will confess to you all I have done...all that can safely be committed to parchment, that is...and the reasons, holding no hope that you can ever forgive me, but for your own dear sake. You are a man who needs to know things, and I can only imagine that any speculation in which you may engage as to my motives will prove unsatisfactory without confirmation of the truth.*

*The truth . . . such heavy words.*

*I have lied for so long. No, not lied. I have concealed the truth for so long that it is nearly impossible for me to determine exactly in what it consists.*

*This much I know to be true: I didn't think of your feelings when I set out to ensure that you would be the father of my child.*

*I thought only of the child.*

*When my father contracted with the late Kenneth Macnair for my marriage, I knew...and I believe he knew...only the superficial facts about that family: They were wealthy; they were politically conservative; they had a few skeletons in their familial closet. I thought at the time...and I must believe that my father thought...that the latter consisted of the source of their wealth (Muggle railroads) and the fact that the uncle of my betrothed was serving a life sentence in Azkaban for violent crimes of an "unspecified" nature. At the time, I could discover no more about Findlach Macnair, as the records were apparently sealed upon his imprisonment.*

*I subsequently discovered much more about the Macnairs. Gerald and I spent some time together in the weeks prior to our marriage (but after the contract had been signed and sealed), and it was through him that I discovered the true extent of the madness that runs through that family like a cancer.*

*Gerald himself was not mad; I believe this firmly. But he had been so tainted by the madness of his father that he was utterly unable to comprehend the true horror of his family situation. Had he been mad, I might have persuaded my father to break the contract and damn the consequences, or perhaps I would have found the courage to make my escape, whatever might have subsequently become of me.*

*As it was, I believed...perhaps with the overconfidence of youth...that I could reap the benefits of the contract for my family while mitigating the drawbacks to myself. I believed that Gerald, with the settlement that would be conferred upon him at our marriage, would secure a home for us, and that I could begin my Transfiguration apprenticeship relatively unfettered.*

*I also knew that I would be expected to make good on "my part of the bargain," as I put it those years ago. Thus, I faced a dilemma, and it was there, my dearest Albus, that I fell into the great sin of selfishness.*

*You see, I had already determined, upon learning of the Macnair family curse, to prevent myself from bearing yet another in that unfortunate line of mad, dangerous men.*

*I had found in the Hogwarts library...and here again, I must confess to having abused your trust in securing under false pretences permission to access the Restricted Section...a book that contained the description of a potion that would ensure I could never become pregnant.*

*And yet, I could not bring myself to use it just then. I was selfish, Albus. I wanted a child of my own. And I wanted to be left in peace after providing the all-important heir. I believed that once he had a son, Gerald might grow tired enough of me to stop coming to my bed, especially once it became clear that no further offspring would be forthcoming. Had I not produced at least one child, the Macnair family could have voided the contract, and although my father would have been permitted to keep the money he had earned at our betrothal, the remaining terms would have been nullified. And, of course, that would have ended any further prospects of marriage. While the idea of such a fate did not make me entirely unhappy, it would also have put paid to my ambitions to become a mistress of Transfiguration, and thus, my dreams of relative independence.*

*All I needed was one child...one male child...but I could not take the chance that my child would fall victim to the inheritance that plagues the Macnair men. So I devised my plan.*

*I can hardly expect you to be flattered by my confession, Albus, but I selected you as the putative father of my child because I loved you. You were the kindest person I knew . . . and the wisest . . . and the most powerful. And I felt that you loved me. Not as a man loves a woman...I was not that deluded...but as a friend and perhaps as a kindred spirit. Amidst all the lies...or rather, half-truths...I told, one thing was absolutely true: I was attracted to you because of those qualities.*

*And so I had made my plan, and selected my unwitting co-conspirator. I next endeavoured to ensure that that it had the maximum chance of success. From the same book in which I found the potion to ensure I would never have a child, I was able to make one that would greatly enhance the likelihood I would conceive during my next period of fertility.*

*You know the rest.*

*Again, I do not expect you to take any pleasure in it, but you should know that I carried in my heart the memory of the brief time we spent together, and it sustained me in the difficult years that followed. The knowledge of what an intimate act between a man and a woman could be made what was more bearable. And it was that, I believe, which made it possible, once my circumstances were so drastically changed, for me to find joy in loving and being beloved of another. It is yet another debt of gratitude I owe you, my benefactor many times over.*

*And there is Malcolm.*

*When I despair of all I have done, all the harm I have, however unwillingly, caused, I need only look at him to know I would do it all again.*

*And that is why I cannot ask, nor ever expect, your forgiveness.*

*Now you know most of it. Not all...there is more to tell, and I must not hope you will permit me to confess to you that which I do not dare here...but you now possess the*

*truth of what pertains most intimately to yourself.*

*I do hope, Albus, that having read this will, in some way, bring you peace.*

*Know that I will ever love and respect you, and that whatever your feelings about me and what I have done, I remain*

*Your friend,*

*Minerva*

Albus stood with the letter in his hand for some minutes. Most of what she had written, he had already surmised, but she was right: it was a comfort to have confirmation of his suspicions. Her confession ensured that they would not keep him awake at night.

It was also a relief...a great relief...to know that Malcolm knew none of this . . . strange history of how he came to be. Albus wondered suddenly if the boy would find it comforting to know that he was not the product of a long line of murderers; he had to be aware of the Macnair family legacy. But Albus put that thought out of his mind. Perhaps Malcolm would never know the full truth of his heritage.

Unless, of course, the young man took it upon himself to research his new talent and drew the same inferences Minerva had done. If and when that came to pass, he would have to be told . . . something. Perhaps the truth, perhaps part of it, perhaps none.

Albus' head ached with the combination of the day's shocks and the liquor he had taken to fortify himself against them. He could not sort this out now.

He felt . . . empty. His initial anger had waned, and nothing else had rushed in to fill the void. It would, no doubt . . . tomorrow.

There were discussions to be had . . . steps to be taken . . . but he could not think about them now.

Albus opened a drawer and took out a piece of parchment. On it, he wrote:

*Minerva,*

*Your resignation is not accepted.*

*We shall speak tomorrow.*

*Albus*

He summoned Bilby and told him to take the note to Professor McGonagall.

Then he went to prepare himself to face dinner in the Great Hall.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

*Chapter 23 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**Author's Note:** *This chapter contains a brief description of vigorous, but consensual, sex.*

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**24 December 1962**

When Alastor knocked at Minerva's door and received no answer, he began to worry. She might be anywhere in the castle or on the grounds, of course, but it was unlike her to be late or forget an engagement.

*Now what?*

He couldn't exactly go tramping around Hogwarts asking, "Have you seen Professor McGonagall?" nor could he stand here like a prat outside the door to her quarters.

Maybe he should wait inside. Then if her elf showed up, he could ask the fellow to find her, or if not, he could use her owl to send a note to Dumbledore to ask if he knew where the Deputy Headmistress was. There might have been some school-related emergency that kept her from meeting him at the gates.

Alastor eyed her door appraisingly. Besides, he thought, it wouldn't hurt to test out how strong her wards were, would it? How angry could she get?

Plenty angry, if he knew Minerva.

*Well*, he decided, *she can't stay angry*. She'd invited him, after all, and then hadn't had the good grace to meet him when and where she'd said she would. She had to know he'd be worried. It was his stock-in-trade.

Withdrawing his wand from its holster, he gingerly teased out the enchantments that guarded her door.

*Too bloody easy*, he thought to himself as they disintegrated like wet tissue under his wand. *Got to teach her some better protective spells.*

He opened the door with a simple *Alohomora* and stepped in.

To say he was startled to see someone sitting at the far window across the room would be an understatement. He hadn't been expecting anyone to be there, so he reflexively whipped his wand forward and crouched slightly in the classic defensive stance, crying, "Don't move!"

When she turned, and he saw that it was Minerva, he immediately lowered his wand.

"Merlin's balls, woman, you gave me a fright!"

She stood, but didn't move otherwise. "Alastor, what on earth are you doing?"

"Looking for you." He took in her pale face and reddened eyes and went to her, putting a concerned hand on her arm. "Minerva, love, what's the matter?"

"Nothing, I just . . . I . . . I had a frustrating day." Her eyes widened and she said, "Oh! I was supposed to meet you at the gates! I'm so sorry, Alastor. I must have lost track of the time . . ."

He pulled her into his arms, saying, "No matter, Minerva. I was just worried, is all."

"I *am* sorry. How did you get in?" she asked.

"That Hagrid chap saw me at the gate. Told him I was supposed to meet you, and he let me in. You need to talk to him, Minerva. If he lets just anyone in like that, he's a security risk."

"You're hardly just anyone, Alastor."

"Yeah, but he doesn't know that, does he?"

"You are fairly well-known these days," she said.

Alastor grimaced. He had been written up in the *Daily Prophet*...and those gits had included his bloody *picture*!...two weeks earlier when he had saved the life of the Minister when a low-level Ministry functionary had attempted to assassinate him during a meeting with his Japanese counterpart. Alastor had taken it upon himself to keep watch over the meeting...a function usually assigned to lower-level members of the Auror corps...because he had heard rumours about a plot being hatched by a vampires' rights group angry over recent legislation banning them from having sexual relations with witches or wizards. Others in MLE had pooh-poohed the threat, but as it turned out, Alastor had been right, and he had taken a nasty curse in the belly for his trouble when the plant at the meeting had made his attempt on Minister McKinnon.

"Maybe," said Alastor. "But I could've been Polyjuiced, couldn't I?"

"You're paranoid, Alastor," remarked Minerva.

"Yeah, well . . . paranoid or not, you and I are going to go over the wards to your quarters here, Minerva. It was altogether too easy to break through them."

"If it will make you feel better," she said.

"That it will." After a moment, he asked, "Why did you not answer the door when I knocked?"

He noticed how she looked away as she said, "I guess I was just so lost in my thoughts that I didn't hear you."

He didn't believe it for a moment. But he decided not to push it for the time being. She was clearly upset about something, and he'd have a better chance of finding out what it was if he let her come to it on her own.

"Well, now that I'm here, where would you like me to put me things?" he asked, patting the pocket where he had stashed his Shrunkn suitcase.

"There's a set of guest rooms just down the corridor. I'll show you," she said.

After he had put the few things he had brought for the holiday visit away in the small guest bedroom and bath, the two of them returned to Minerva's rooms to find an elf standing just outside the door.

When he saw them approach, the elf gave a short bow and said, "Professor Minerva, I has a message from the Headmaster for you," holding out an envelope.

*Short message, then, Alastor thought. Good.*

He had hoped she wouldn't be called upon for any time-consuming school business during the holiday, although as Deputy, she had to stay at the castle to help supervise the small group of students who also remained. Since Alastor had the Christmas holiday off for once...probably in deference to his recent service to the Minister...he'd convinced her to let him visit her at Hogwarts so they could spend it together...with properly separate rooms, of course...and the Headmaster had apparently been amenable.

He saw Minerva blanch as she took the envelope.

*What the devil is going on?*

"Thank you, Bilby," she said. "There will be no reply at present."

"Very good, Professor," the elf said and popped away.

When they got inside, she said, "I'll just be a moment, Alastor," and went to her desk. She broke the seal on the envelope by hand, and he watched her as her eyes scanned the note. He thought he saw her tear up momentarily before she went to the fireplace and tossed the note in...a bit too casually, Alastor thought.

"Anything important?" He couldn't help asking.

"Oh. No. He just . . . answered a question I had."

Alastor reaffirmed his commitment not to push her on the subject, so he took a seat on her settee and patted the space next to him for her to join him, which she did.

They talked a bit, mostly about the annoyances of Alastor's new, and hopefully temporary, celebrity, then Minerva excused herself to tidy up before dinner, and, giving his wrinkled shirt and trousers the gimlet eye, she suggested he do the same.

They went to the Great Hall together...it would not be unusual for the Deputy Headmistress to escort an honoured guest to dinner, after all...and when Malcolm Macnair came in, taking a seat next to another boy near the end of the High Table, Alastor gave him a small nod of acknowledgement and got one in response.

The Headmaster appeared a few minutes later, and he greeted Alastor warmly, shaking his hand and saying, "Auror Moody! Such a pleasure to see you again. I'm very glad you could join us."

"I thank you for the invitation, Professor Dumbledore," Alastor replied.

"Please sit, friends," Dumbledore said to the twenty-odd students and staff at the High Table, who had stood when the Headmaster entered. "We are very fortunate to have with us two visitors for the next few days. Some of you may recognise the wizard to my left," he said, indicating Alastor, who sat between himself and Minerva, "as Alastor Moody, the well-known Auror." The Headmaster waited for the murmurs to die down, then he said, "And seated next to Professor Flitwick, I am pleased to introduce Mr Felix Flitwick, who will be visiting his brother during the holidays." There erupted another round of whispering as those at table couldn't help noticing that diminutive Professor Flitwick's brother appeared to be quite tall.

When the main course was finished, Albus leant over and said to Alastor, "Please forgive me if I don't invite you and Minerva in for a drink, Alastor, but I have some pressing business to attend to this evening."

"No worries, Professor," Alastor said. Albus got up and left the table just as the treacle tart began to appear on diners' plates. Alastor watched Minerva follow him out with her eyes and realised that the two hadn't spoken to one another at all during the meal, although Dumbledore had conversed with Alastor genially, and spoke with everyone else within earshot of him.

*An argument, then?*

Alastor knew that Minerva set great store by Albus Dumbledore, so any disturbance between them could certainly be a cause for her distress that afternoon. He knew it wasn't his business...except insofar as Minerva's happiness was his business...but he couldn't help being curious as to the cause.

He and Minerva joined the Flitwick brothers, old Madam Warburg, and Professor Kettleburn in the staff room after dinner. Felix Flitwick had brought some rare Veela-made Tokay back from his travels in Eastern Europe, and he generously shared it with the group, who chatted about Flitwick's most recent trip and, predictably and irritatingly, about Alastor's most recent feat of supposed heroism.

"But how did you manage to survive the Killing Curse?" enquired Kettleburn.

"Simple Shield Charm," said Alastor. "I was lucky the bas...er, the git didn't have much energy behind his AK...probably scared to death...or I would have been Kneazle food," said Alastor, wishing they'd find another topic of conversation.

"Yes," said the taller Flitwick brother, "but wasn't it risky? The curse could have rebounded and hit someone else."

"Sure" said Alastor. "But they teach you how to deal with that in Auror training. The trick is to let yourself absorb some of the curse energy while deflecting enough to keep from doing too much damage to you."

"That sounds tremendously difficult," said Minerva.

"Well, it takes practice to learn how to do it right," Alastor answered.

The smaller Flitwick said, "And I have to imagine it takes some considerable magical power to do it."

"Yeah, well . . . the training tends to weed out guys who don't have the magical chops for it," said Alastor.

"It sounds very dangerous," piped Madam Warburg, sounding slightly disapproving. "Absorbing that kind of negative energy...even in small amounts...can be tremendously damaging."

Alastor unconsciously put a hand on his recently-healed belly. "It isn't exactly healthy, no, Madam Warburg, but the first thing they teach you in Auror training is not to get yourself into a situation where you might have to do it."

"And you obviously skipped that day of lessons," said Minerva.

"I don't go looking for trouble, if that's what you mean Mi...Professor. Sometimes it just goes with the job."

"Hear, hear," said Professor Kettleburn, raising his glass with a hand that was conspicuously missing two fingers, and Alastor laughed, saying, "If you like trouble, Professor, you should've gone into the Aurors; I hear the pension's better."

Everyone laughed at that, and the evening continued in a similar vein until the two Flitwicks stood to take their leave.

The rest of the group followed suit, and Alastor had a feeling they were fooling no one when Minerva said, "If you'll come with me, Mr Moody, I'll show you to your guest quarters. They're on my way."

When they got to Minerva's door, Alastor leant in and whispered, "Your place or mine?"

"Mine," she said. "I need to be available in case a student needs me in the night."

Alastor had made up his mind to ask her about Dumbledore and the reason for her distress, but as soon as the door had closed behind them, she pressed her back against it and pulled him to her, her mouth seeking his, and he forgot his questions.

"Mmmm, missed you . . ." he moaned into her mouth.

He had half-thought she'd decline to make love, given her upset that afternoon, and thought perhaps she'd be unready to shed the proper façade they'd kept up during the meal and afters, but he was delighted to find that she had no such inhibition as she began to kiss him almost aggressively. Her leg came up around his hip and urged him closer...as if he needed any urging...her hands moving down to cup his buttocks.

"My, we are mad for it tonight, aren't we?" he said as he nuzzled her neck, nipping at it gently as he went.

She gave him her answer not in words, but by clasping her arms around his neck and bringing her other leg up around his waist.

"Hold up there, girl," he said, staggering slightly, "let a man get his bearings before you attack him."

"Bedroom's over there," she said, indicating a door opposite with her chin.

"Right-o."

His recently-healed belly was starting to protest, but Alastor wasn't about to let her know it; not when she was wrapped around him like a second skin. He carried her awkwardly but gamely into the bedroom and dropped her with some relief on the edge of the bed. Her hands found his belt and undid it, quickly unbuttoning his trousers and reaching inside to find his prick, which was straining up to meet her fingers, or any part of her she chose to expose to it.

He pushed her skirt up and grasped her knickers, taking a step back as he slid them off. When he stepped toward her again, his trousers fell down around his ankles, and he stumbled slightly, falling forward toward the bed, her knee catching him just on the side where he had taken the curse.

"Ah!" he cried, doubling over and grasping his belly.

Minerva jumped up. "Alastor! Gods, I'm so sorry! Are you all right?"

"Yeah," he said, panting slightly with the pain. "Just caught me in the wrong spot is all. Be fine in a minute."

She stood rubbing his arm for few moments as the pain waned, and he straightened, slightly chagrined by the concern evident in her face.

"Ah, don't look like that, lass. I'm fine."

"Maybe we'd better forgo this until you're better . . ."

"Now I really am wounded," he replied. "You wouldn't want me to have to take matters into me own hands, now would you?" he said with a glance down at his semi-erect penis.

"Yes, but..."

"*Shhh*. Here . . . like this," he said, urging her to turn around and face the bed.

"Are you sure?" she asked as he pushed her down over the edge of the mattress.

"Yeah. This'll put less pressure on my belly," he said, pushing down his shorts. "Are you going to lift your skirt, or do I have to do everything for you?" he asked, hoping to forestall any more discussion of his injury.

He was slightly surprised when she complied without comment, and he proceeded to take her more roughly than he ever had, and at her command.

"Harder!" she cried, over and over, until he was grunting with the effort and their skin made sharp slapping sounds as it met with each forceful stroke of his hips. When she begged him yet again to fuck her harder...exciting words he'd never heard from her mouth...he had to lean over to rest his arms on the mattress for support as his legs threatened to give out with the effort, and still she urged him on: "Harder . . . please, Alastor, harder!" and he was both shocked and aroused by the desperation in her voice.

He endeavoured to give her what she seemed to need, and by the end he didn't know if she was crying out in pain or in ecstasy, but he couldn't stop himself as he thrust into her, his climax coming on like the Hogwarts Express, and all he could do was keep moving, the feeling in his cock dragging him onward whether he would or no, and when he finally came explosively, a hot wave of guilt followed hard on the heels of his short-lived euphoria.

He climbed off her and backed away a few steps. She stayed there, bent over the bed, and he could see her shoulders heaving. There was a spot of blood on the front tail of his shirt.

*Merlin, what did I do to her?*

He quickly pulled up and fastened his trousers, tucking the offending shirttail in.

"Minerva? Love?" he asked fearfully.

She got up then, and when she turned to him, he thought the sight of her tear-stained face might just finish the job that Ministry git's curse hadn't quite managed.

"Oh, Jaysus, Minerva, I've hurt you . . ."

"I'm fine, Alastor," she said.

"Yeah," he said, "'cause you always cry when I shag you." He wanted to run and hide, but he forced himself to go to her. "I'm so sorry, Minerva. I didn't mean to hurt you . . . I just..."

She put her arms around him and cut off his apology, saying, "It's all right. You didn't hurt me. I'm the one who asked you to . . . do what you did."

"No, it's no excuse. I lost control."

"Hush. It's fine."

"No, it isn't. Christ . . . they ought to lock me up . . ."

"Alastor," she said, putting her arms around his slumped shoulders, "you didn't do anything wrong. I wanted you to be . . . a little . . . a little rough this time."

His relief that she hadn't thrown him out was tempered with confusion and concern. He looked down, searching her face. "But why, Minerva?"

She shrugged and pulled out of his arms. "I don't know. I just wanted it," she replied in that tone that said she wasn't going to say any more about it. She looked around and found her knickers, slipping them on carefully over her boots.

"Minerva, please talk to me." He took her hand and led her to the side of the bed, where they sat. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," she said, trying to stand, but he kept hold of her hand.

"You can't make me believe there's nothing wrong. We've been together for more than two years, and you've never cried in front of me, and today I come and find you crying, but you won't tell me why. And then I . . . I shag you hard enough to make you cry again, and you tell me you wanted it. Forgive my language, Minerva, but 'nothing's wrong' is a load of shite."

"I can't talk about it, Alastor," she said. "Please. It's nothing to do with you." She pulled her hand out of his and stood. "I'm just going to go get cleaned up."

"Is it Dumbledore?"

That stopped her in her tracks, and Alastor felt a sheet of cold terror wash over him.

*Is she in love with him?*

Turning to face him again, she asked, "What do you mean?"

"Minerva, it doesn't take an Auror to see that something's wrong between the two of you. If it's upset you so much, why can't you tell me about it?"

"It's . . . it's personal. It doesn't concern you."

*Courage, man.*

He couldn't quite look at her face as he asked, "Are you in love with him?"

Her barking laugh startled him, and now he looked up at her. "Oh, Alastor." She came back to sit next to him on the bed. "Is that what you think? No." She took his face between her hands and turned it to face hers. "*No*. I am in love with you."

"Then what..."

"There are things between Albus and me, Alastor. He has been very good to me, and he helped me at times when I had no one else to turn to. And what is between us . . . is just that. Between us. When I said it didn't concern you, I didn't mean to hurt you, but it's the simple truth. I am not in love with Albus Dumbledore, and he is not in love with me. We are not having an affair, if that's what is troubling you."

She sighed deeply and continued, "We have had a . . . a disagreement. I have hurt him, and it makes me wretched because he is my friend, and I love him as my friend. But don't ask me any more about it, please, Alastor. *Please*. You cannot help me with this, but it does make me feel better to have you here with me. Believe that."

"All right."

She kissed his lips gently. "And you didn't hurt me. I enjoyed what we did, however it may have appeared to you. But I'm sorry if I asked you to do something that made you uncomfortable."

"You've no call to apologise to me. I'm the one lost control," he said.

"Well, you weren't the only one, then," she replied. "Here," she said, beginning to unbutton his shirt. "Why don't we have a proper lie-down together."

When he started to remonstrate, she said, "Just a lie-down. But I want to feel your skin next to mine, all right?"

That sounded just fine to Alastor. Suddenly, he was exhausted. His belly was hurting and his legs ached with recent effort.

They undressed silently, and when she slipped under the sheets and curled into him, everything felt just as it had before. He fell asleep stroking her hair.

She woke him sometime after one, and they agreed that he should return to the guest quarters for the rest of the night, in case someone came looking for the Head of Gryffindor.

He lay in the narrow bed staring at the ceiling, watching the shadows made by the moonlight playing through the mullioned window.

She didn't want him to ask any more about her troubles, so he wouldn't. But he couldn't stop wondering about them, and what they had to do with what had happened between them this evening.

Christ, he still felt terrible about that. No matter what she had said, he shouldn't have lost control as he had. If there was one thing Diarmid Moody had impressed upon his son, it was that you never hurt a woman. And lord knew if any man ever had provocation to break that rule, it had been Alastor's da. But Alastor'd never seen him lay a finger on his mam, not even when she was deepest in her cups and wilder than a banshee. His da had protected his mam right to the very end because he'd made a promise and because he'd loved her once.

Alastor's desire to protect Minerva was currently warring with his promise to let things lie.

He certainly never wanted to hurt Minerva, but another thing his da had told him was that the road to Hell was paved with "didn't mean to."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

*Chapter 24 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**25 December 1962**

Minerva woke with a tickling sensation in her nose.

She opened her eyes to find Alastor leaning over her, a sprig of mistletoe in his hand, Malcolm standing beside him, grinning.

She sat up, exclaiming, "Alastor Moody! What on earth..."

"Happy Christmas, Mum!" said Malcolm, leaning in to kiss her cheek. "I wanted to surprise you this morning, and I roped Alastor into being my partner in crime. I figured he'd know how to get in here without waking you."

"Now, don't be cross with me, Minerva," said Alastor. "Your boy here is almost as persuasive as you are."

"I don't doubt it," said Minerva, rubbing the sleepiness from her eyes.

"*Ahem*," said Malcolm, who had Levitated the sprig of mistletoe to hover over his mother. "Aren't you going to give Alastor his kiss?"

Minerva quickly pecked Alastor on the lips, then said, "All right now, you two, make yourselves scarce while I get dressed."

Five minutes later, she emerged into her sitting room to find a full breakfast and a roaring fire waiting for her.

"What's all this?" she asked.

Malcolm replied, "Breakfast. I thought we could have a private Christmas morning together . . . just, you know, the family."

Minerva saw him glance at Alastor, and she realised in that moment how badly her son wanted to be part of a family rather than just the Deputy Headmistress' son. She pressed her lips together tightly and went over to the table, more to hide her pooling eyes than out of hunger.

"Professor Dumbledore said it would be all right," continued Malcolm. "He's covering breakfast in the Great Hall with Hagrid."

At the mention of Albus' name, Minerva felt a slight shiver that had little to do with the snow that had blanketed the grounds overnight.

"This is a lovely surprise, thank you Malcolm," she said.

They tucked into breakfast, Malcolm with considerably more gusto than either of the adults, and when they were finished, they settled next to the fire to open presents.

Just before they began, Malcolm said, "Wait a minute! We need Elgar. Can you call him, Mum?"

She did so, and a moment later, the elf appeared, asking, "Did you need something, Mistress?"

"We're having a bit of an early Christmas celebration, Elgar," Minerva replied, indicating the gifts that were piled near the fireplace, "and we wanted you to be with us."

"Mistress is very kind," said Elgar with a bow. "If you will excuse Elgar, Mistress, I is returning to my quarters to get some things. I is returning in a moment."

The elf popped away, then returned a few moments later, two small parcels in his arms.

"Now," said Malcolm, rubbing his hands together in mock greed, "let's see what we have here."

A half-hour later, Malcolm was already lost in the pages of the book Alastor had given him...a thriller set during the 1940s that interwove details from the Grindelwald and Muggle wars and featured a Muggle-born spy with seemingly amazing powers...sitting on the floor by the fireplace, absently munching on one of the scones from the broomstick-bedecked tin Elgar had presented him with.

The elf had popped out a few minutes earlier, delighted with the small woollen throw blanket Minerva had gotten for him. He had clearly been touched when she told him that Malcolm had charmed it himself to take the McGonagall family tartan pattern.

"Anyone care for a walk?" said Alastor. "Maybe help me try out me new cloak?"

Minerva had given him a beautiful brown leather cloak that was enhanced with numerous magically-expanding inside pockets and several charms that would protect the wearer against many common hexes and jinxes, although, of course, it would not work against true curses or other stronger magic.

"All right," said Minerva. "I'll get my cloak."

"I'll catch up as soon as I finish this chapter," said Malcolm.

The snow on the grounds was several inches thick, and Minerva had to use her wand to clear a path so that their boots wouldn't sink into it. As they set out across the central courtyard, Minerva was a little self-conscious at being seen walking alone with Alastor.

Several students were there, attempting to build an enormous snowman, and she could feel their eyes on her and Alastor as they went by. When the couple emerged from the courtyard into the west meadow, Minerva was suddenly hit in the chest by a snowball. The attack was followed by a male voice calling, "Merlin! Sorry, Professor! Thought you were someone else!"

"As you can see, I am not," said Minerva, brushing the snow from her cloak. She was about to scold the offender when he was suddenly pelted with snowball after snowball, and she turned to see Alastor, wand pointed at the boy, snow being rapidly siphoned from the ground and formed into the round, wet missiles that were assaulting young Amos Diggory.

When the barrage ended, Amos stood there dripping snow, looking utterly stunned, and several of his friends stood a few feet behind him, equally immobilized by the extraordinary spectacle of a grown wizard pummelling their schoolmate with magical snowballs.

"Well, boy?" Alastor challenged. "Aren't you going to fire back? Or don't they teach you any defence skills here anymore?"

Minerva saw the grin that slowly spread across Diggory's face, and she decided to get out of the line of fire as the boy and his friends began gathering snow for the counter-attack.

"Come on, lads!" shouted Alastor. "Are you telling me you lot can't manage a simple spell to throw snow?" as he dodged and *Protego*-ed against the onslaught.

It was about five minutes before one of Alastor's opponents, a girl Minerva recognised as first-year Molly Prewett only after she removed the enormous hood of her cloak, cried, "Wait!"

Her voice was surprisingly loud for such a tiny thing.

The battle sputtered to a halt as she yelled, "Wait a minute!"

Everyone turned to look at her, and Minerva couldn't help feeling a small burst of pride at the young Gryffindor's perceptiveness when she said, "Why isn't anything hitting him? I mean, he couldn't have dodged *everything*, could he? Not with the six of us aiming at him."

Now everyone turned to Alastor, who was wearing a subtle smile.

"Yeah, he's not even wet," said Amos.

"Ah, lads, you've been shown up by the lady," Alastor said with a slight bow in Molly's direction. "While you were all firing away at me, wasting your energy and showing me what you've got into the bargain, this young lass took the time to make an important observation."

Alastor stepped forward, his arms wide, saying, "Do ye see the mark of any snow on me? Any at all?"

The students were silent.

"You don't, do you? It's as she said: nothing got through. And you'd all have been shooting away until yer arms fell off or until you were buried under my fire, if your friend here hadn't sussed it out. Come on, out with it, lassie: What's going on?"

"It's a charm," said Molly. "Some kind of Impervious. A really strong one."

"Very good," said Alastor. "And what do you do when an opponent uses a charm against you?"

Silence.

Alastor answered his own question: "You either use a counter-charm, or figure one out right quick. Or you retreat and live to fight another day." Minerva saw him put a hand...probably unconsciously...against his injured side.

"So what's the counter-charm?" piped up a treble voice belonging to another first-year Gryffindor, Arthur Weasley, easily recognisable by his shock of red hair.

Minerva saw Alastor roll his eyes. He said, tapping his temple, "Come on, lad, think! What's the first thing you should try if you suspect an opponent is using a charm you don't like?"

"*Finite Incantatem*," said Amos Diggory.

"Very good. Give it a try," said Alastor, stowing his wand and clasping his hands behind his back.

Looking around at his pals for moral support, Diggory stepped forward and pointed his wand at the Auror, giving the incantation in a firm voice.

"All right, now. Have at me again," said Alastor.

Amos bent to collect some snow, fashioned it into a ball, and hurled it at the man's chest. The snowball appeared to explode several inches in front of Alastor, who was smiling sanguinely.

"Why didn't it work?" asked Diggory.

"Because the protective charms I've got on me won't respond to a simple *Finite*," Alastor responded. "But you were right, lad, to try the simplest counter-charm first. When you don't know what spells your opponent is using, a basic counter-measure should always be first on your list. It just might work, and even if it doesn't, it has little chance of rebounding and harming you or any bystanders. At the very least, it tells you your opponent isn't a piker and you'll need to watch yerself. So good work, young man. P'raps you've got the makings of an Auror. Along with that auburn-haired lass there."

Both Molly and Amos beamed.

"Now if you lot don't mind, I'd like to be gettin' on with me walk," Alastor continued. "Professor?" he said, "Shall we move on?"

"Quite," said Minerva. As they walked on past the group of students, Minerva turned to say, "And five points to Gryffindor and Hufflepuff each."

They had a lovely walk in the snow around the loch, and Minerva relaxed enough to take Moody's elbow when he offered it as they traversed some icy patches.

When they returned to Minerva's quarters, they found Malcolm still engrossed in his book.

"You missed an exciting snowball fight," Minerva said to him, stripping off her gloves and warming her hands by the fire.

"Really?" asked Malcolm.

"Yes. Alastor demonstrated some basic defensive skills to some of your schoolmates," said Minerva.

"I'm sorry I missed it," said Malcolm. "Oh, Mum, one of the elves dropped off a message for you while you were out. It's on the table."

Minerva opened the note:

*Minerva,*

*I will be out visiting a friend this morning but plan to be back in my office after lunch. Please come see me then, and we will talk.*

*Albus*

When she looked up, she saw Alastor peering at her. She folded the note and put it in her robe pocket.

She said, "I need to meet with Professor Dumbledore for a bit this afternoon. Maybe the two of you can have a game of chess or two then."

"Better yet," said Alastor, "Malcolm and I can work on his defensive skills some more. I never did finish showing you the various charms to protect your wand," he said to Malcolm.

"The Burning Charm works great, though," said Malcolm. "I used it when Yax...I mean, I used it during a fight recently."

"Have you been fighting, lad?" enquired Alastor. "That's not like you."

"No, it's not like him," Minerva interjected. "But he was set upon by a bunch of thugs on the Hogwarts Express, so he had to defend himself."

"A group, you say?" said Alastor.

"Yeah, but it wasn't a big thing . . ." said Malcolm, and Minerva realised he was embarrassed.

"No," she said, "and he's fine, Alastor."

"I can see that," Alastor said. "But were you able to fight them off? Use any of what we've worked on?"

"Some," said Malcolm. "The wandless hex deflection you showed me was great, but one of them managed to Petrify me anyway."

Minerva hoped he wouldn't mention the invisibility. She had no idea if Alastor knew anything about the Dumbledore family's unusual talent, but she wouldn't put it past him. Alastor knew a lot about esoteric magic, it seemed, and the last thing Minerva wanted to add to her worries today was Alastor making the connection between Albus and her son.

Alastor said, "Ah, that happens to the best of us, Malcolm. Especially when you've got more than one opponent firing at you."

"Yeah, well . . . I made a stupid mistake. I turned my back on them. I thought the fight was over."

"You were trying to diffuse the situation," said Minerva. "A fight among schoolboys is a different proposition from a duel with a Dark wizard."

"Aye, but it's still good policy not to turn your back on a Slytherin," said Alastor.

"How do you know they were Slytherins?" asked Malcolm.

"Who else would gang up on a Gryffindor?"

Minerva interrupted. "Alastor, I'll thank you not to fill my son's head with paranoia about Slytherin."

"Ah, sorry, Minerva. I forgot it was Malcolm's dad's House. I'll keep me mouth shut about it in future."

"Thank you," she said.

After lunch in the Great Hall, Malcolm and Alastor went off to find a disused classroom in which to work on duelling skills. Before they left, Alastor kissed Minerva's forehead and whispered, "Good luck with your meeting, love."

Minerva's footfalls sounded terribly loud to her as she walked the corridor leading to the entrance to the Headmaster's office. For perhaps the first time in her life, she was unprepared...she had no idea of what she might say to Albus. "I'm sorry" just didn't seem adequate, nor was it especially accurate. She was...she had long been...unhappy at having deceived him, but faced with the same choices, knowing what she now knew, she wasn't sure she would act differently.

From the moment of his birth, Malcolm had been everything to her. Minerva had kept her son like a beacon in her mind, guiding every step she had taken, every choice she had made since he'd been given to her by whatever power governed these things. And if some of those choices had been wrong, they'd nevertheless led them here, to this time and place, to safety. Malcolm was healthy. He was happy. He was whole. She held that in her heart like a talisman as she approached Albus' office and whatever he might have to say to her.

The gargoyle guarding his office seemed to be expecting her, as he said, "Enter, Professor McGonagall," and the stone entryway parted as soon as she stepped in front of it.

The inner door stood open when she arrived at the top of the spiral staircase, and Albus was standing in the middle of the room, hands folded behind his back, and Minerva felt like a student being called on the carpet for some infraction of rules, which, she supposed, in a way she was. Except the infraction was seventeen years behind her.

She took a hesitant few steps in, searching his face for any sign of what he might be feeling.

He only said, "Minerva."

"How angry are you?"

"Pretty bloody angry."

She nodded.

"You weren't ever to know," she said.

"And that makes it all right?"

"No. Of course not. I just mean that I never intended it to hurt you...or affect you in any way."

"Yet you brought him here."

"Yes. It was best for him."

"Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

"You wouldn't have. Except for this . . . accident of nature."

"That is immaterial. I know now," he said.

"Yes. You know now." She hesitated, then asked, "And how do you feel about it? Other than angry?"

He closed his eyes for a moment and said, "I'm not sure."

He looked at her, and a grimace of pain flitted briefly across his features. He said, "I cannot be a father, Minerva."

"I would never ask that. Malcolm is my responsibility."

"No!" Albus said sharply, startling her. "He is also my responsibility. You made sure of that."

"I never meant..."

She had never heard him shout before, and the sound shook her as the thunder used to do when it rolled off the hills near her childhood home.

"Do you think your actions have no impact on others, Minerva? Do you? Because I can tell you from bitter experience that they most assuredly do. Whether or not you intend them."

She had no answer.

He continued, more calmly now: "Regardless of your *admirable* intentions, Minerva, Malcolm is very much my responsibility. You cannot wave your wand and absolve me of it simply because you'd have it so."

"I intend to make no defence, Albus," she said. "All I can say is that I expect nothing from you with regard to Malcolm. He knows nothing of any of this."

"He believes Gerald Macnair to be his father?" Albus asked.

"Yes."

"Did Macnair believe it?"

"To the best of my knowledge, he did," Minerva answered. "I believe . . . I believe my mother suspects that Gerald was not Malcolm's father. But she's never given any indication that she knows who is."

Minerva had often wondered if her mother suspected who the father of Minerva's child had been. Minerva had a dim recollection of thinking of him during the desperate hours in which she had been nearly delirious with the pain of childbirth...thinking he might somehow rescue her with his strong magic when she had been certain she must die of it. She knew she had screamed aloud at the end, but had she spoken his name? On that point, her memory was an unreliable reporter.

"You could have come to me, Minerva. When things started going wrong. You could have trusted me with the truth...even after Malcolm. I would have helped you both. I think that is what hurts the most. That you didn't trust me. Did you think I would turn you both away?"

"I didn't want charity."

"No. You said as much the night you asked me to bed you. You wouldn't take my money. You were too proud. But later, Minerva? Was it really better to live with Macnair . . . to subject yourself and your son . . . our son . . . to his madness?"

"Gerald wasn't mad."

"No? Was he a good husband, then? A good father?"

"No. But I felt I couldn't turn to you. I thought you would hate me for what I had done."

"I would not have hated you, Minerva."

"And now, Albus? Do you hate me now?"

"No. But I don't know if I can trust you."

Oh, how that hurt! But it was no more than she deserved.

Albus had turned and was pacing away from her.

"What will you do?" she asked his back.

"Do?" he asked, turning to her again. "Nothing, Minerva. I cannot do anything. I cannot change what's done, and I cannot change how I feel about Malcolm."

"And how is that?"

"I care for him. He is a good boy . . . and he is your son, which makes him dear to me. But I don't love him . . . as a father. I cannot."

He put a large hand over his face, and she realised with horror that he was weeping. She had caused this man, who had been nothing but good to her, such terrible pain; she hadn't considered, even in her most fearful imaginings about his discovering the truth about Malcolm, that he would flay himself with guilt over being unable to love his son.

She could only watch as he wept.

After a minute or two, he gathered his composure. She conjured a handkerchief and handed it to him. He dried his eyes, and then, to her surprise, he gave a sharp laugh. "Funny, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"All I've done . . . all the trials I've faced over the years . . . and this . . . situation has me completely unmanned."

"Children have a way of doing that," she said. She forced herself to add: "Do you want us to go?"

"No. I cannot pretend that I didn't consider sending you both away. But I found that contemplating that was more painful than the idea of seeing you both every day. You are very important to me, Minerva. Perhaps more than I realised."

"And I've hurt you terribly."

"Yes."

"For that, I am truly sorry. Will you ever forgive me?"

"I imagine so. In time."

"And Malcolm?" It hurt her to ask, to cause him more pain, but she had to know.

"What about him?" Albus asked.

"Will you be able to . . . stand him? As before? Be his friend?"

"I don't know, Minerva. I don't think it can be as before. Before I felt . . . avuncular, perhaps. Now . . . I just don't know how to feel . . ." he trailed off, shaking his head.

"Then maybe it would be best if we went..."

"Don't. If you go, things will never be settled between us. And I have too much unfinished business already. I don't want you . . . or Malcolm . . . to be another on a long list of regrets."

"All right."

After a few moments, he said, "I wish . . . Minerva, I wish you had felt able to be honest with me. When you came to me with your . . . request."

"I wish that, too, Albus. But if I had asked you outright, would you have done it?"

"No."

"Then I can't regret it," she said.

"No. You made that clear in your letter." The resentment in his voice stung like salt water hitting an open wound.

She said, "And you, Albus? Do you wish it had never happened?"

He seemed at a loss for words for a moment, then he said, "I cannot wish the fault undone, the issue of it being so proper."

"Shakespeare."

"Yes."

"Which play is it?" she asked. "I can't remember."

"*King Lear*," he said. "Another old fool."

She said, "He was betrayed. By people he loved and trusted."

"But not all. He reconciled with Cordelia in the end."

Minerva said, "She was the fool, I always thought. Too proud to heave her heart into her mouth. Look where it led them."

"Yes. But I am hopeful, Minerva, that we will have a happier ending than did Lear and Cordelia."

"Will we?"

"I'm sure of it."

Albus stepped toward her, and for a moment she wasn't certain what he was going to do, but he only dabbed at the tears that had crawled down her cheeks with the handkerchief she had conjured to dry his own.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He Vanished the handkerchief, saying, "Now. Let's have no more tears for today. Either of us."

"All right."

Albus turned and went to the window, looking out across the snow-covered grounds.

"It's lovely, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, it is."

After another moment, Albus asked, "He is happy, isn't he? Malcolm?"

She smiled. "Yes. I think so."

"Does he miss his . . . does he miss Gerald?"

"He doesn't say. I think . . . I think he's afraid to mention him to me."

Albus turned and looked at her quizzically, and she said, "Our life in France was difficult. He saw . . . more than a child should have to."

"I see."

She was glad that Albus didn't ask more about it. She wasn't ready to tell him the rest of it, although she would, in time. And then, she thought, she might lose him forever. But she didn't think she could bear it just yet.

"And Alastor," he said, "do he and Malcolm get on?"

"Very well. Alastor is surprisingly good with children," she said.

"Is he?"

"Yes." She relayed the story of the morning's snowball fight, relieved to be talking about something ordinary again.

Albus laughed...and she thought she'd never heard a more beautiful sound. Perhaps they would come out all right in the end.

Growing serious again, Albus asked, "And does he make you happy?"

"He does."

"I'm glad," he said. "Oh! I nearly forgot." He crossed to his desk and retrieved a small package from one of the drawers. "Your Christmas present," he said, holding it out to her.

"I . . . I didn't bring yours," she stammered, "I didn't think . . ."

He waved his hands, saying, "No matter."

"Shall I open it?"

"By all means."

She pulled the string holding the small parcel shut, and the paper unfolded itself to reveal an envelope upon which was emblazoned dozens of tiny black and white birds. When she opened the envelope she found two tickets, also bedecked in black and white birds.

"Tickets to the Magpies?" she asked, astonished.

"Yes. For next season. Home games, of course. I thought perhaps you and Alastor might enjoy them . . . or you and Malcolm, assuming he stays in Britain after leaving Hogwarts."

"Thank you, Albus. This is a very generous gift."

"You're most welcome," he said. "Now . . . go enjoy your holiday. You'll be visiting your parents tomorrow and overnight, won't you?"

"Yes, if it's still convenient."

"Of course." He walked her to the door, and before she stepped through it, she turned to him, saying, "Happy Christmas, Albus."

"Happy Christmas, Minerva."

## Chapter Twenty-Five

*Chapter 25 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

16 August 1963

Alastor stood and wiped the tears from his eyes while Minerva silently conjured a handkerchief so he could wipe his mouth.

Gods, how he hated to puke!

Apparition had always made him sick to his stomach, but he'd learned not to show it for fear of being seen as weak in front of his Auror mates, and he could usually manage to keep his lunch safely inside him, even for fairly long hops around Britain. But Apparating across a large body of water was an entirely different matter. He had a trans-Channel licence, of course, but he hadn't used it much. He let those other sods...the ones who were panting to move up in Magical Law Enforcement...take the occasional international assignments. Alastor Moody was content to fight Dark wizards in his own backyard; Merlin knew there were enough of 'em about, even without a fearless leader to get them riled up and organised.

Yet here he was, depositing his morning kippers into the Cherbourg dust.

Minerva silently Vanished the mess he had made, and after a few minutes she asked, "Are you feeling better?"

"Yeah. It always affects me like this," he admitted. "I'll be good as new in a minute."

Minerva looked no worse for the long hop, and Alastor tried not to feel resentful that a woman who couldn't weigh any more than eight stone soaking wet had a stronger stomach than an Auror who tipped the scales at almost thirteen.

When he felt more in control of his upper digestive system, he said, "I reckon I'm ready now," and Minerva gave him a small smile.

Offering her arm, she said, "I'll just take us to an alley I know in Paris. Malcolm's going to meet us there."

Sure enough, as soon as Alastor got his bearings, Minerva's son was there, clapping him warmly on the back and directing them to a bistro in le Quartier des Mages, Paris' slightly larger equivalent of Diagon Alley.

"My flat isn't too large," Malcolm said apologetically, "so I thought we'd lunch here."

Alastor didn't care much for French food...a bit too nancy for his taste, he found...but Minerva ate with a gusto he'd rarely seen back home.

As they ate, Minerva interrogated Malcolm about his apprenticeship until her son put up an exasperated hand.

"Mum, slow down; I've only just started with Maître Legrasse. He barely even lets me near the cauldron yet."

"Well, what *does* he have you working on?" Minerva enquired.

"He's got a new de-aging potion he's testing out," Malcolm said. "He's the guinea pig. And I help him record the results in the log."

"De-aging?" Minerva said, wrinkling her nose. "I'll never understand the quest for eternal youth. There's so much you potioners could be doing, and it seems as if half of you are hard at work trying to find ways to make us all more attractive to one another."

Malcolm gave a good-natured shrug. "I just do what he tells me, Mum. You know how it is to be an apprentice." He lowered his voice so that Minerva and Alastor had to lean in to hear him properly. "But this potion isn't just cosmetic. Maître Legrasse is hoping that this will actually reverse some of the oxidative stress on cells, not just mask it superficially. I'm pretty excited about it, actually."

Minerva appeared relieved. "Well, that's fine then," she said, and tucked into her Tarte Tatin with a vigour that brought a smile to Alastor's face.

They all repaired to Malcolm's tiny flat...more of a garret, it was...in Montmartre. Malcolm was obviously proud of it; his Transfiguration skills had clearly helped him make it more liveable, and Minerva and Alastor made the requisite noises of approval. Alastor laughed when Minerva cast a few cleaning spells when Malcolm went to the loo.

The group went to dinner...in a small Muggle restaurant in the neighbourhood this time...before Minerva and Alastor bade Malcolm goodnight and went back to their hotel in le Quartier des Mages.

Minerva was clearly pleased to see how well her son had settled in to life as an apprentice potioner in Paris, and Alastor allowed himself to be pleased along with her, although he couldn't fathom why anyone would want to spend two years studying potions. Especially given Malcolm's prowess with a wand...the boy would have made one hell of an Auror, but Alastor supposed it would have given Minerva a heart attack to have her son join her lover in such a dangerous profession. And the boy seemed content.

The next day, Minerva went to have brunch with Malcolm and his master, Eustache Legrasse, and Alastor begged off, claiming a desire to do a bit of research into his French relatives. He didn't like lying to Minerva, but no good could come of her knowing exactly what he was up to at this juncture. He'd tell her about it if anything came of his research, and she'd surely understand why he'd kept it quiet.

It was a frustrating morning for Alastor, whose French could most charitably be described as rudimentary. After some back-and-forth with the clerk at the Bibliothèque Magique, he finally sat down at a splintery carrel with a stack of old newspapers.

After two hours of painstakingly reviewing several weeks' worth of *Le Sorcier Libre*, he found what he was looking for. Or thought he had.

On the front page below the fold of the 18 September 1956 edition was a small picture of Gerald and Minerva on what must have been their wedding day. Macnair wore a loopy grin as he was clapped on the back by several arms. Minerva's smile...more like a grimace, really...didn't change over the few seconds' worth of motion in the photo.

Below the picture was another photo; this one of an impressively-robed and moustachioed wizard nodding soberly at the camera. The caption read: *Le Chevalier Petrus Berquier*. Alastor hated him on sight.

He managed to get what he thought was the gist of the headline...this Berquier berk was being questioned in Macnair's disappearance...but gave up on the accompanying article. Alastor spent another ninety minutes going through the remaining newspapers, finding only one more story that mentioned Berquier and Macnair.

The desk clerk was impatient with Alastor's lousy French, but he finally managed to convey to her what he needed, and she made him understand that the charmed parchment would cost three *Sous* per sheet. When the transaction had been conducted, and Alastor drew his wand to begin magically copying his pages to the parchment, the witch made a hissing sound that Alastor had previously associated with angry cats. He looked at her questioningly, and she pointed to a sign that read: "*Defense de Jeter des Sorts dans le Salon des Livres!!*"

Alastor gave her a helpless shrug, and she frowned and pointed again. He got it after a moment...no spellcasting in the main library...and groped for his phrasebook French.

"Okay, okay," he said. "Um . . . où?"

The woman pointed to the left, saying, "*Dans le couloir là . . . deuxième porte*."

"Yeah, okay, thanks . . . er . . . *merçi*."

As he turned away, he heard the witch mutter, "*Espèce d'idiot Anglais* . . ."

Now *that* he understood clearly.

"That's *Irish idiot* to you, yeh great, fecking cow," he said through gritted teeth, although he knew the bitch couldn't hear him.

There was a short queue to get into the door marked "*Salon de Magie-Copie*", and Alastor got in the back of it, hoping the room would turn out to be what he needed.

When his turn came, the attendant was fairly helpful, letting Alastor know in passable English that he had to supply his own parchment...Alastor held up his recent purchase...and that he could cast the copying spell himself, or that, for an extra two *Sous* per page, the attendant could do it for him.

Alastor chose the first option, and when he was done, he took the opportunity to ask the man for directions to the men's. The fellow told him in pleasant English, tipped his cap, and wished him "*bon après-midi*," and Alastor's faith in French civil servants was partly restored.

Shrinking the copied parchments, Alastor slipped them into his cloak pocket and headed back to the hotel to meet Minerva and Malcolm for the sightseeing Minerva insisted he partake of.

After seeing Notre Dame and La Madeleine, Minerva proclaimed herself famished, and the three slipped into a bistro for an early dinner.

As she was putting out the lamp that evening in the hotel, Minerva asked Alastor, "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"No, not really," said Alastor, forestalling any further discussion by asking Minerva, "What did you think of Legrasse?"

"I don't know exactly," she replied. "He's rather quiet when the topic isn't potions. Although he was quite complimentary of Malcolm."

"I'm sure he was," said Alastor. "He's lucky to get such a bright lad, and I'm sure he knows he had a lot of competition."

"Yes," agreed Minerva.

Alastor said, "I was surprised Malcolm chose potions over Transfiguration."

"I imagine he wanted to avoid following too closely in his mother's footsteps. Besides, you can't deny that potions is potentially a more lucrative field," Minerva remarked.

"True," said Alastor. "But were you disappointed?"

"No. Not as long as he's happy with what he's doing, and he seems so at the moment."

"What about Dumbledore? After all those private lessons, he mustn't have been too chuffed about Malcolm's deciding against taking Madam Marchbanks' offer."

"Well, the lessons weren't all about Transfiguration. Albus helped Malcolm with a number of things."

"Really? What kinds of things?"

"Oh, this and that. Things Malcolm was especially interested in," Minerva said. "As a favour to me."

"That was good of him," said Alastor.

"Mmm," was Minerva's only response, and Alastor suddenly wondered if the quarrel she had had with Dumbledore had been about Malcolm. That would certainly explain how upset she had been. She and Alastor hadn't spoken of it again, and Minerva seemed to have recovered from whatever had happened, so he didn't bring it up again. But he couldn't help wondering.

The three spent the following day at the Louvre and the Musée d'Orsay until Alastor declared he couldn't stand to look at one more fuzzy old Muggle painting. Malcolm was rather insistent that they return to the same bistro they had lunched in the day Alastor and Minerva had arrived, which both Alastor and Minerva found somewhat tiresome, but Alastor was fatigued enough from meandering about the museums that he helped Malcolm argue his mother down.

The reason for Malcolm's enthusiasm for the tiny wizarding establishment shortly became evident in the form of the petite blonde waitress who came to take their order.

"Ah, Malcolm!" she cried when she arrived at the table, "Tu m'as manqué hier." She blushed (most attractively, in Alastor's estimation) when she saw the look Minerva gave her.

"Oh, je suis désolée, madame . . . monsieur," the girl said with a quick curtsey.

"That's all right, Eliane." Turning to his mother, Malcolm said, "Mum, this is Eliane Géroux. Eliane, this is my mother, Minerva McGonagall and her friend, Alastor Moody."

"I am very 'appy to meet you, Madame McGonagall, Monsieur Moody," Eliane said, bobbing another curtsey.

"The pleasure is all ours, Miss Géroux," said Alastor. "You're a friend of Malcolm's, I take it?"

"Yes, she is," Malcolm said quickly, and Alastor didn't fail to see Minerva's raised eyebrow.

Eliane said, "*Oui*, but now I am meant to be working," giving Malcolm an apologetic smile. "So, may I take your orders?"

The orders duly made, Eliane hurried off to the kitchen.

Alastor decided to see how long it would take Minerva to begin the inquisition. She managed to wait until Eliane had brought the wine and disappeared once again, Malcolm watching her walk away rather than attending to what Alastor had been telling him about the latest exploits of the Ministry's most hapless Auror, John Dawlish.

"Did you meet this . . . Eliane here at the restaurant?" Minerva enquired as soon as the girl's shapely behind disappeared behind the kitchen doors.

"Hmm? Oh . . . yes," said Malcolm, turning his attention back to the table. "It was the first day of my apprenticeship and I was absolutely certain it would be my last. I'd mucked up a potion, you see . . . a minor one, but still . . . quite embarrassing it was," he confessed. "I came in here for a spot of lunch, and I guess I looked so pathetic that Eliane took pity on me. She brought me a glass of the house wine, and when I said I hadn't ordered it, she said, 'C'est cadeau'...it's on the house."

"She told me I looked like I needed cheering up." When he noticed the look Minerva was giving him...and Alastor could barely contain his laughter at the sight...Malcolm said, "Oh, Mum . . . it wasn't like that, honestly. She was just being kind."

"Anyway," he continued, "I um . . . I ended up eating dinner here the next day . . . I had stayed late at the lab, and she was just about to leave, so I . . . I invited her to sit down with me. There was nobody else in the place, so she did. She asked me what I had been so sad about, and when I told her, she didn't laugh at me. She was just . . . really sympathetic. It turns out she's working here...it's her aunt's place, by the way...and she's working here until she can earn enough money to do a *Laurea magistrale* in magical astronomy at the University of Bologna."

Alastor asked, "*Laurea magistrale*?"

"Yes. It's their equivalent of a mastery," Malcolm answered. "The less magically-dependent disciplines are integrated into small magical colleges within the big Muggle universities," he explained. "The Italians are big on magical-Muggle relations."

"They would be," remarked Minerva drily.

At that moment, Eliane reappeared with their meals, so the discussion of her merits was curtailed.

When they got back to the hotel, Minerva was quieter than usual, and Alastor couldn't resist goading her, just a little.

"So Malcolm's got himself a little French girlfriend."

Minerva turned with tightly pursed lips. "I'm sure it's nothing serious," she said and went back to brushing out her hair.

"I don't know, Minerva . . . you know what they say about these French girls...oh, la la!"

This time, when she turned, she gave him the full weight of the McGonagall glare.

"Oh, come on, Minerva," he said. "The boy has a right to a little relaxation . . . a little companionship."

"Yes, I know," said Minerva. "But . . . she's a waitress . . ."

*Well, well, well!*

He said, "Look out, Minerva . . . your pure blood is showing."

"Now, that's not fair!" she said. "It has nothing to do with that."

"Oh? Then what does it have to do with?" he enquired gently.

She looked flustered for a moment, then said, "It's . . . it's just . . ." Her shoulders slumped. "Oh, gods, Alastor . . . you're right. I didn't realise it . . . but you're right. There's no reason it should bother me that she's a waitress . . . it isn't as if she's got no ambition."

Alastor went to her and put his hands on her shoulders. "It's all right, love. We all have our prejudices. The important thing is that we recognise them when they start to trip us up."

Minerva put her arms around him, saying, "And just how did you get to be so wise, Alastor Brendan Moody?"

"I've chosen me women well," he said. "It tends to rub off."

"I just hope Malcolm's chosen well," she said with a sigh.

"Ah, don't be so worried, lass. It isn't as if he's marrying the girl." As he said it, Alastor made a mental note to himself to find out if Malcolm knew any contraceptive charms. Although he wouldn't have been surprised if old Dumbledore had had that talk with Malcolm, just as he had with Alastor. Maybe that was one of the "this and that" he'd helped the boy with. The thought gave Alastor a momentary pang of . . . well, jealousy, not to put too fine a point on it. He couldn't help feeling a bit fatherly toward the boy, and the notion of Dumbledore doing a father's duty made Alastor feel like he had a few stones in the pit of his belly.

Maybe he should have married Minerva after all.

As they settled down into bed, he thought, *Maybe when I find out what happened to Macnair.*

Maybe then, she'd feel free enough to say yes if he proposed.

Maybe then, he'd feel free enough to ask.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

*Chapter 26 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**14 November 1963**

Minerva had to concentrate on keeping her pace merely brisk. It wouldn't do for the Deputy Headmistress to be seen breaking the school rule against running in the hallways. Once she was through the massive doors and down the stone steps, she glanced around and, seeing nobody, popped into her Animagus form and sprinted down the path to the Apparition point just beyond the gates.

When she arrived in London a moment later, she didn't even look around to make sure there were no Muggles about before walking through the window of the dilapidated department store and into the reception area of St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries.

Striding up to the Welcome Witch, who was using her wand to change the colour of her fingernails from aggressive red to lurid pink, Minerva asked, "Alastor Moody's room?"

The witch put down her wand with a barely concealed sigh and took her time looking down the roster of patients.

"Fourth floor, room fifteen."

"Thank you," Minerva threw over her shoulder as the witch called after her, "But it's a secure room! You'll need clearance..."

There was a young wizard wearing the dark green robes of a junior-level Auror standing guard outside the room.

"Sorry, Professor," he said when she asked him to lower the wards for her. "You can't go in. Not without special clearance." The fellow looked embarrassed, and she recalled that he had been in her N.E.W.T. class about four years back.

"Mr Shacklebolt, you know perfectly well who I am. I am not here to harm Auror Moody; I simply would like to visit him."

"Sorry, Professor," he said again. "Ministry policy. After an Auror's wounded by a suspected Dark wizard, no one gets in to see him without permission from the office."

She drew herself up to her full height and let the weight of her glare fall on the hapless young man. "Mr Shacklebolt," she began in her sternest tone, but she was interrupted by a loud voice from within.

"Oh, let 'er in, Shacklebolt. I'll take the heat if it turns out she's Mulciber in disguise."

"You can't take the heat if you're dead, Moody," the young man called back through the door.

"Just let 'er in. I've got me wand back; I can defend meself."

Kingsley Shacklebolt turned back to his former teacher, who looked at him, an eyebrow raised expectantly. "Well?" she said.

Shacklebolt sighed, then used his wand to lift the wards on the door.

"Thank you," Minerva said as she sailed past him into the room.

She couldn't help the gasp that escaped her when she saw Alastor. There was a mess of raw meat where the right side of his previously bulbous nose-tip had been. The same side of his face was now bisected by an angry red cicatrice that ran from under the bandage that covered his right eye down to the corner of his mouth. The outside half of his cheek was far whiter than living flesh should have been, while the section between the scar and his nose...or what was left of it...looked as if it had been cooked too long under a tropical sun.

It was a moment before she realised his wand was pointing at her.

"Where was the last place I shagged you?" he demanded.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Where?"

She felt her face grow hot "Your flat, two weeks ago."

"Yeah, but where?"

"The sitting-room floor," she said with as much dignity as she could muster. Merlin, she hoped young Shacklebolt wasn't listening. But he probably was.

Alastor lowered his wand and grinned at her, a rather terrifying sight as things stood; she thought for a moment that his face was coming apart.

"And a right good shag it was, too," he said.

When she didn't reply, he said, "Jaysus, Maria, 'n Joseph, I must look bad. I didn't even get the McGonagall glare out of you for that."

"You look . . . as well as can be expected."

"Ah, lass. You've never been a liar before. Come over here. I can't see you properly."

She moved to the left side of the bed, Summoning a chair to follow her, and sat, reaching out to put a tentative hand on his chest. "Are you in pain?" she asked.

"Nah. Not much. They've got me on a few potions. But I think it's more to keep me quiet than to ease my pain...a man's like to go mad in here."

"I came as soon as I heard, Alastor. Albus only just..."

"I know, love, I know. The office likes to keep it quiet when one of us gets hurt. Seeing as you're not . . . well, you're not officially my next of kin, they didn't . . . but you're here now," he said taking her hand in his and giving it a squeeze. "It was good of Dumbledore to let you know."

She had been sitting at the small desk in her quarters when she was startled by a flash from her fireplace. She was even more shocked when Albus uncrouched and stepped out, brushing the ashes from his royal blue robes. He almost never used the Hogwarts Floo to contact her.

He'd told her quickly and without preliminaries that he had come straight from the Ministry after learning that Alastor Moody had been gravely injured in an attack several days previously.

"Go, Minerva," he'd urged her. "Don't worry about dinner or your patrols; I'll have someone cover them. Owl me if you'll need me to take your classes tomorrow."

Minerva hadn't even stopped to thank him...an oversight she'd rectify the moment she returned to Hogwarts, she told herself...but snatched up her cloak and left him standing in her sitting room.

He hadn't told her anything of Alastor's condition, so she'd been unprepared for what had greeted her once she'd gotten to Mungo's.

"How badly are you hurt?" she finally asked.

"Not too bad, considering," he answered. "My face took the brunt of it, as you can see. But everything's in working order. 'Cept me eye. Couldn't save that."

"Oh, Alastor . . ." she said.

"Don't give me 'oh, Alastor,' Minerva. They're going to fit me up with a magical replacement soon as the wound closes up. From what I hear, it'll be better than the original. I'll be able to see through thin walls. Maybe even clothes, eh?" He waggled his remaining eyebrow suggestively, and her heart nearly broke.

"None of that, now, love," he said when he saw the tears standing in the corners of her eyes. "It isn't much loss. I wasn't ever much to look at . . ."

"You're beautiful, Alastor," she said, running her hand down the unharmed side of his face. He turned his head to kiss her palm.

"No, love, I'm not," he said quietly. "I'll have scars for the rest of my life. Ever seen an old Auror? They end up looking like jigsaw puzzles with a couple of pieces gone missing."

"I don't care, Alastor, just as long as you live to be an old Auror."

"Yeah, well . . ." he said, clearly embarrassed by her unwonted show of emotion.

Changing the subject a bit, she asked, "Can you tell me what happened?"

Alastor gave her the short version: one of the many Dark wizards he'd helped put in Azkaban had been released after a ten-year stretch. As soon as he was free, Gordon Mulciber had gone looking for Alastor Moody and had caught up with him outside Ballycastle, where the Auror had gone to investigate one of the incidents of Muggle-baiting that occurred sporadically around the area. He'd been alone...it was a fairly routine investigation...and Mulciber had been on him the moment he'd stepped into the house where the alleged incident had occurred.

"A set-up," Alastor said.

"You mean Mulciber was responsible for the Muggle incident?" asked Minerva.

"Him, or one of his friends. They knew I'd be the one got the assignment since I know the area best of anyone in the department."

It was only thanks to Alastor's legendary reflexes that the severing hex had only taken his eye and part of his nose rather than his entire head. At least, that was the conclusion Minerva drew later when she learnt more about the incident from Albus, who heard the story from the head of MLE.

As she was standing to go, with a promise to come back the next day with decent food and some reading material, Alastor caught her hand.

"They haven't caught him yet, Minerva. Mulciber. I want you to be extra careful. Keep those estimable wits about you. People know we're together. It's possible Mulciber might try to get at me through you."

"I'll be careful, Alastor. Try not to worry." She bent down to kiss him but hesitated, not knowing if it would hurt his injured face. He answered the question by reaching up and pulling her to his lips.

"I love you, Minerva," he said quietly.

She smiled at him, saying, "Get well."

"Yes, Professor."

It wasn't until she was safely back in her quarters than she broke down in grateful sobs.

## 2 December 1963

Albus was surprised when the little barn owl dropped the note bearing Alastor Moody's name into his hands. He'd never had any correspondence with the Auror before, and he couldn't imagine why Moody was now requesting a meeting...a "quick, quiet meeting, maybe in the Hog's Head?"

When Albus arrived at the tavern the following day, Aberforth acknowledged him with a bow of his head and gestured upstairs, indicating Moody had already arrived and was waiting in one of the small, private rooms above the Hog's Head bar.

"Dumbledore," Moody said, standing when Albus entered the room, "thanks for coming."

It was a shock to see Moody's face; there was angry scarring down the right side and patches of hair were absent from his scalp on the same side. His nose appeared to be missing a significant chunk. But the most arresting feature was the electric blue magical eye that was darting left and right independent of its natural mate. Albus had heard a bit about Moody's injuries from Minerva, but he hadn't been prepared for the dramatic change in the Auror's appearance.

"It's good to see you, Alastor," Dumbledore said without betraying his shock. "Are you adjusting well to the prosthesis?" he asked, indicating the magical eye.

"Aye," said Moody. "Took some getting used to, but now I think I like it better than the old eye. I can get three-sixty-degree vision if I work it right. Damn useful."

"Indeed," said Dumbledore.

"It isn't much to look at though," Moody added quietly.

"You'll become used to it."

"Isn't me so much I'm worried about," Moody said. Then he changed the subject quickly.

"I won't keep you long, Dumbledore; I know yer a busy man, so I'll come right to the point. What do you know about Gerald Macnair's disappearance?"

Albus was surprised again. He had rather expected the subject of their meeting to be something to do with Minerva, but he hadn't counted on this. He felt uncomfortable for a moment with both Alastor's good eye and his magical one peering at him.

"No more than what little was said of it at the time," he replied.

"Minerva's never told you about it?"

"No, other than a few oblique references to her circumstances at the time. She doesn't like to speak of it, I think," Dumbledore said.

"No, she doesn't," Moody agreed. "She's not told me much, either. But I've done some digging..."

Dumbledore interrupted, "Alastor, perhaps you ought to discuss this with her."

"Yeah, I know," Moody said, and for a moment Albus thought he discerned a slight flush on the good side of his face. "But I don't want to upset her."

"Then why bring all this up?" Albus was truly curious. Why would Moody want to stir up a subject that would indubitably upset Minerva and possibly cause a rift between them?

"If I tell you, will you keep it to yourself?" Alastor asked, peering at Albus even more intently. It was no wonder Moody was such a successful interrogator. His penetrating gaze...even altered as it was...was a formidable weapon.

Albus considered. It was no small thing, he thought, to promise secrecy, although Merlin knew, he'd required it often enough of others. If Alastor was nosing around in Minerva's business and had discovered something that she hadn't elected to share, what would be the consequences if she were to discover that Albus knew about it?

Their relationship had recovered, more or less, from Albus's astounding discovery of Malcolm's paternity. They'd tiptoed around one another for several months and had finally settled back into a friendship that was only slightly strained. Neither had known quite how to proceed regarding Malcolm, and for a time, each had studiously avoided mentioning the boy, although Albus knew Minerva was desperately curious about his private tutoring sessions with her son and what the two talked about. Albus was slightly ashamed at being unable to bring himself to volunteer the information, and he didn't care to examine whether it was because he was protecting Malcolm's privacy or because he was punishing Minerva.

For the most part, Malcolm and Albus had simply worked on controlling the boy's invisibility, Albus carefully avoiding any more personal exchanges. They'd had an uncomfortable discussion when, one evening, Malcolm had appeared to be unusually distracted. After some gently probing questions from Albus, Malcolm had confessed to being distressed about wanting to end his relationship with Miss Nott before leaving school. The boy had felt bad about "leading her on," as he put it, to believe it was to be a "long-term" romance. Albus had lectured him on the importance of being honest with the girl, and he had forced himself to ask if there were any reason Annabel might have a claim on Malcolm. He was relieved that the boy appeared to be shocked at his implication, and he didn't ask if it was because Malcolm hadn't slept with the girl or because he had been careful when doing so. He had no desire to discuss the matter with Malcolm further...ironic, he had later thought, given how the young man himself had been conceived.

Once Malcolm had left school, it had become easier between Albus and Minerva, and eventually he had felt comfortable enquiring about the young man's progress in his apprenticeship. Minerva, he thought, was relieved at his interest, and began to share some of Malcolm's letters with Albus.

They'd even gotten to the point where they could speculate together on the seriousness of Malcolm's intentions toward his French girlfriend. From his letters...which were liberally sprinkled with mentions of "Eliane"...Albus suspected they were quite serious indeed, while Minerva maintained a pronounced scepticism on the point.

Alastor nudged Albus out of his thoughts. "Well, Professor? Can you keep a confidence?"

Albus made a decision. "Yes."

"I'm looking into Macnair's disappearance because I want to marry Minerva."

Albus said nothing for a few moments. This information was not entirely surprising, but he still wasn't certain what Moody was playing at by involving him in his pre-nuptial investigations.

"That is fine news indeed, Alastor. But what has Macnair to do with anything? As far as I recall, he's been declared dead, so there would be no legal impediment to your marriage."

"It isn't the legal end so much, Professor. But we both know of cases where someone has been declared dead then waltzed back into town to cause trouble."

It had been before Albus's time on the Wizengamot, but he'd heard enough about it from Elphias Doge, who'd sat on the case. A witch, apparently unhappy in her arranged marriage, had disappeared one night, leaving her husband and small children behind. The witch had been declared dead after a year, and the wizard had subsequently remarried. When the witch reappeared some two years later, demanding custody of her children, the former husband had refused. The sorry tale had ended with the witch killing the new wife and children and cursing the husband to madness.

Albus said, "I doubt Macnair is going to reappear, Alastor. In all honesty, I must tell you that I believe it is likely he is truly dead, given his difficulties with creditors."

"That's what I thought," said Moody. "Until I found this." He pulled a sheaf of parchment from his robe pocket and handed it to Dumbledore.

Albus looked at him questioningly as he took it. He said, "This appears to be a collection of news clippings."

"It is. Dunno if you read French, but..."

"I do."

"Then you'll have an easier road understanding it than I did."

Albus looked through the clippings for a few minutes. Putting them down on the table, he said, "So it appears this Berquier fellow was taken for questioning in the matter but later released."

"Yeah. And that's all the papers have about it. I looked through every bloody copy for a year following, but there wasn't anything else."

"Wasn't there?"

"Don't you think that's odd?"

"I don't know. Is it?"

"Look, this Berquier sod, he was an important man, right? *Chevalier de l'Ordre d' Auberon* and all? Sits on the French watchamacallit . . . *Conseil des Sorciers*?"

"Evidently."

"So he gets pulled in for questioning...story makes the papers...and then nothing? No mention of it but a paragraph a week later saying he was released?"

"So?"

"So someone pulled some strings to keep it all quiet." Alastor shrugged. "That's not so surprising. Happens all the time. But it made me wonder what came of the investigation. So I tried to find out. Guess what?"

"What?"

"Records are sealed. I went to their *Palais de Justice Magique* after I got out of Mungo's...I'm on leave until the new year..." Alastor explained, indicating his eye. "And they tried to tell me they couldn't give me the records."

It was suddenly clear to Albus why Alastor had wanted to meet with him.

"Alastor, I can do nothing."

Moody pounced. "You've got as much pull as the Minister...probably more, when it comes down to it. You sit on the International Confederation . . . you know people. You could get those records and no one would bat an eye at you. Just tell 'em we're trying to close the books on Macnair...that's true enough; they don't need to know it isn't exactly the Ministry doing the closing."

"I cannot involve myself in this," Albus said.

"Come off it, Professor. You involve yourself in lots of things that aren't, strictly speaking, your business. You don't even need to do it yourself; just write to someone and let 'em know they should let me have the records."

"And how would you read them, Alastor? You don't speak French."

"I could copy 'em and bring 'em back here for you to translate. That way, it'd just be between you and me."

Albus said nothing for a moment, and Alastor, with his interrogator's sense, moved in for the kill. "I'm not asking for me, Professor. It's Minerva. I want her to have a sense of security. I want her to know that, when I get down on me knees and ask her to be my wife, it'll be forever and there'll be nothing to come between us. She deserves that."

Albus naturally understood that Moody was attempting to manipulate him, and yet, the man had a point. Alastor couldn't know it, of course, but Albus had his own reasons for wanting Minerva to be happy, to be secure. Despite what she had said about it, Albus felt responsible for her. Regardless of the way it had happened, he had altered the course of her life, for better or worse, and it weighed on him. Perhaps . . . perhaps helping Moody close the Macnair chapter on her life would not be a terrible thing. What was that phrase from the Christian Bible? *The truth will set you free*. Albus had his doubts about that, but perhaps, in this case, it would prove accurate.

"All right," Albus said finally. "I will make a private request to the commandant of the Maréchaussées Magiques to allow you to see the records. I cannot promise that he will accede, however . . ."

"Ah, thanks, Professor," Alastor said.

It was just before Christmas that Alastor got Dumbledore's note letting him know that access to the records had been arranged. They wouldn't send copies, however, so he would have to look at them at the *Palais*, so one Tuesday, he made the nauseating trip to back to Paris.

The *Palais de Justice Magique* was hidden directly under the Louvre. As Alastor passed by the Code of Hammurabi and through the door of the public toilet marked *Hors Service* and into the magical elevator that would take him down to the third level, where the records were kept, he felt a familiar thrum of excitement. It was the same sensation he got when he was closing in on a suspected Dark wizard.

Five minutes after presenting the records clerk with his letter, signed by none other than the *Ministre de la Justice Magique* himself, Alastor had in his hands a red folder about a half-inch thick. The clerk, no doubt impressed by Alastor's apparent acquaintance with his boss, or perhaps frightened by his appearance, offered him the use of a small table in the office, and Alastor sat for forty-five minutes making copies of the documents, forcing himself to work the spell mechanically, avoiding any attempt to read the papers.

The moment he was back in London, he owed Dumbledore and arranged to meet him to hand off the copies he had made of the copies...you couldn't be too careful...for translation.

Five frustrating days later...Alastor's French really wasn't very good, so he'd been able to make little sense of the jargony French while he waited...the professor handed him the translated work. When Alastor pressed him for a capsule summary, Dumbledore demurred.

"It is better, Alastor, if you read the report for yourself. I wouldn't want to bias any of your conclusions, even inadvertently."

What the hell did that mean?

But Alastor didn't waste much time wondering. He took the report back to his flat, made himself a cup of tea, and began to read.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

*Chapter 27 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**30 December 1963**

There was a handwritten note just inside the front page of the document Albus had given Alastor:

*I have rearranged the exhibits into chronological order; you'll find they make more sense that way. Do not rush to any judgements.*

...A

### INTERROGATION REPORT

**Case No.:** 56C-234

**Date of Report:** 17 September 1956

**Interrogator:** Maurice Séverin

**Subject Name:** Berquier, Petrus Henri

**Domicile:** 460 Av. de la Bourdonnais, Paris

**Occupation:** Conseiller de Magie, Conseil des Sorciers de l'Etat Magique

**Date of Birth:** 1920-04-19

**Marital Status:** Married

**Spouse:** Berquier, Celestine Josée (née Pascal)

**Children:** Berquier, Henri Marc & Berquier, Roland Christophe

**Cause for Detention:**

Chevalier Berquier is summoned for questioning in the matter of the disappearance of Gerald Findlach Macnair, magical resident of Paris.

Macnair was reported missing by his wife, Minerva Macnair, on 13 September 1956, 72 hours after she reports having last seen him. A search of the Macnair residence at 345 Rue des Cinq-Diamants, Paris on 15 September uncovered a pair of letters to Macnair bearing the signature of Ch Petrus Berquier (exhibits 1.1 and 1.2), dated two days and one day (respectively) prior to Macnair's alleged disappearance.

The tone of one of the letters was judged sufficiently threatening to warrant bringing Ch Berquier to the Palais de Justice Magique for questioning.

#### Interrogation

Subject states that he was not personally acquainted with Gerald Macnair, but that his elder son, Henri (aged 15 years), received regular instruction from Mme Macnair at her home in the subject of Transfiguration between approximately September 1955 and September 1956.

When asked why the lessons were discontinued, subject replies that such matters are under the direction of his wife, Celestine, and that the interrogator "must ask her if [he] wish[es] to know her reasons."

Subject denies having met or corresponded with Gerald Macnair until he received a letter from Macnair on 8 September 1956 requesting a meeting. He acknowledges subsequently writing and sending the letters (exhibits 1.1 and 1.2) that were found at the Macnair residence. He denies any further correspondence with Macnair.

Subject reports that the topic of Macnair's letters to him was "a matter of personal concern" between them. He declines to elaborate further. When asked about the requested meeting referred to in the first letter (confirmed by subject as exhibit 1.1), subject replies that he declined it. Subject further alleges that the "dire consequences" he refers to in his second letter to Macnair (confirmed by subject as exhibit 1.2) consisted solely of legal action and implied no threat to Macnair's physical or magical safety.

Subject denies any other contact with Macnair after sending the second letter on or about 9 September 1956. When asked if he found it strange that Macnair never contacted him again, subject responds that he is "not in the habit of trying to predict the behaviour of madmen."

Subject denies any knowledge of Macnair's fate or current whereabouts.

Subject was released with instructions not to leave the country without permission of the Maréchaussée.

#### INTERROGATION REPORT

**Case No.:** 56C-234

**Date of Report:** 19 September 1956

**Interrogator:** Maurice Séverin

**Subject Name:** Berquier, Petrus Henri

**Domicile:** 460 Av. de la Bourdonnais, Paris

**Occupation:** Conseiller de Magie, Conseil des Sorciers de l'État Magique

**Date of Birth:** 1920-04-19

**Marital Status:** Married

**Spouse:** Berquier, Celestine Josée (née Pascal)

**Children:** Berquier, Henri Marc & Berquier, Roland Christophe

**Cause for Detention:**

Chevalier Berquier is summoned for questioning in the matter of the disappearance of Gerald Findlach Macnair, magical resident of Paris.

Evidence acquired (exhibits 2.1 and 2.2) in a search of the Berquier residence at 460 Av. de la Bourdonnais, Paris conducted on 17 September 1956 suggest a hostile relationship arose between subject and Gerald Macnair (listed as missing 13 September 1956) in the week prior to his disappearance.

The close temporal relationship between these events is judged sufficient cause to detain subject for questioning.

#### Interrogation

Subject denies any knowledge of the whereabouts of Gerald Findlach Macnair.

When asked if allegations made by Gerald Findlach Macnair in his second letter to the subject (see exhibit 2.2, dated 9 September 1956 and confirmed by subject as having been received by him on or about the same day) are accurate, subject replies that "there is no proof."

Subject reports that, to the best of his knowledge, Macnair never carried out any of the threats made in the same letter. When asked what he believes to be the reason Macnair did not follow through on these threats, subject responds that he "imagine[s] it to be because the man has disappeared."

Subject denies any knowledge of what might have caused Gerald Macnair to disappear.

When asked to elaborate on the "dire consequences" subject referred to in his reply (see exhibit 1.2) to Macnair's second letter, subject describes them as: "exposure to public ridicule; close official scrutiny of any and all of Macnair's business dealings; possible expulsion from the French magical community as an 'undesirable' element," and "other pressures as may be brought to bear by a man of some importance upon a man of none."

Subject denies any further contact with Gerald Macnair and denies any knowledge of Macnair's whereabouts or fate.

Subject declines to produce his wand for examination without an order of the Conseiller Judiciaire.

Subject was released with instructions not to leave the country without permission of the Maréchaussee.

**SUBPOENA DUCES TECUM**

**[RESCINDED 56-09-22]**

**Ref. Case No.:** 56C-234

**Issued to:** Berquier, Petrus Henri, 460 Av. de la Bourdonnais, Paris

**Date:** 21 September 1956

By Augustin Babinaux, Conseiller Judiciaire, on behalf of the Conseil des Sorciers de l' État Magique

TO THE PERSON SUMMONED: You are hereby commanded to make available the item[s] designated and described below:

Item: Wand No. 544367, registered to Berquier, Petrus Henri (2 Jan. 1940)

Description: elm & dragon heartstring; 12 ¾" length

at the Palais de Justice Magique on or before 23 September 1956 to permit a registered agent of the Maréchaussées Magiques to inspect and test it or them according to the procedures outlined in Section 543,5 of the Droit Administratif Magique.

**Signed:** Augustin Babinaux

**EXHIBIT 2.1**

**Ref. Case No.:** 56C-234

*8 September 1956*

*Petrus Berquier*

*460 Av. de la Bourdonnais*

*Paris*

*M Berquier,*

*You do not know me, but I believe you are acquainted with my wife, Minerva Macnair.*

*You and I have matters to discuss that pertain to us both.*

*I will be at the Café Griffon on Tuesday at 4:00. It would be in your best interest to meet with me there.*

Gerald Macnair

**EXHIBIT 1.1**

**Ref. Case No.:** 56C-234

*8 September 1956*

*Gerald Macnair*

*345 Rue des Cinq-Diamants*

*Paris*

*M Macnair,*

*I cannot imagine what you and I could possibly find to discuss.*

*Therefore, I must regretfully decline your invitation to meet.*

*Do not attempt to contact me again.*

P. Berquier, Chevalier de l'Ordre d'Auberon

**EXHIBIT 2.2**

**Ref. Case No.:** 56C-234

*9 September 1956*

*Petrus Berquier*

*460 Av. de la Bourdonnais*

*Paris*

*M Berquier,*

*Perhaps we could discuss the fact that you've been fucking my wife.*

*Or maybe you'd prefer me to discuss it with your wife. Or your colleagues in the Conseil. Or the newspapers. I think they'd be quite interested in the fact that a man being considered as France's next Conseiller de Sécurité spends his Tuesday afternoons with a foreign whore, don't you?*

G. Macnair

## EXHIBIT 1.2

Ref. Case No.: 56C-234

9 September 1956

Gerald Macnair

345 Rue des Cinq-Diamants

Paris

M Macnair,

*If you have concerns about your wife's fidelity, I suggest you take the matter up with her.*

*Accept that our correspondence is at an end, as you shall receive no reply to any future attempt you might make to contact me, which I must strongly advise against.*

*I further strongly advise you not to repeat your slander to anyone. If you do, you will suffer the direst consequences.*

*Believe this.*

P. Berquier, Chevalier de l'Ordre d'Auberon

Alastor's tea sat cold and untouched on the table. He fished for a cigarette in his shirt pocket, and his hands trembled enough as he raised his wand that it took him several tries to light it. He inhaled the smoke deeply but barely registered its strange, smooth bitterness as he continued to stare at the parchment in front of him.

He had expected something like this with regard to Berquier...some dirty dealings that overlapped with Macnair's...and that Berquier would have wanted to keep his name out of. If you had asked Alastor for his theory before reading the report, he would have replied that he thought it likely Berquier had some shady side-business in moneylending; it wasn't entirely unusual for an aristocratic pure-blood to look for opportunities to increase his wealth without the shame of actually having to go to work for it.

Macnair, Alastor would have guessed, had availed himself of Berquier's fiduciary help and had neglected to pay back what he had borrowed. Which had led to the inevitable penalty. Alastor would have put even Galleons on whether or not Berquier actually knew what had happened to Gerald Macnair; most pure-blood "businessmen" with that kind of sideline preferred to keep their own hands clean of any violence; they left such unpleasantness to their hired thugs and asked no questions about it. But a few Alastor could name actually enjoyed getting down into the real work of their entrepreneurial endeavours.

Before reading the report, Alastor wouldn't have made any guesses as to which sort of businessman Chevalier Petrus Berquier was. That, at least, was clear enough now. Berquier was of the lily-white hands persuasion.

But the rest of it?

Minerva and Berquier? He would never have believed it...still wasn't sure *hedid* believe it. Aside from the fact that he'd never have pegged Minerva as the type of woman to put horns her husband...not even when that husband was a berk like Gerald Macnair...Berquier was clearly a smug little prick who thought the sun shone out of his arse. Had she really taken up with him?

*Think, Alastor.*

By the time he was able to force his way through the shock of that discovery to focus on the real question at hand, his head was enveloped in a smoky, blue haze and his cigarette had burnt nearly down to his fingertips.

The heat of it snapped him out of his thoughts, and he flicked the butt angrily to the floor and crushed it underfoot.

*The important question, boyo, isn't whether she was having it off with Berquier. It's what, if anything, it had to do with Macnair's disappearance.*

The report looked pretty damning for Berquier. Gerald Macnair had disappeared without a trace anyone had been able to find the same week he'd tried to blackmail an important, wealthy, and politically connected wizard. That wizard hadn't taken the bait and had made some unspecified but serious-sounding threats of his own.

But had he killed Macnair?

It was still possible that Macnair had been killed by creditors who had nothing to do with Berquier. Or that he was still alive and in hiding, either from those creditors or from the chevalier.

Alastor doubted either of those scenarios painted the true picture.

If one of Macnair's more tenacious creditors had found the man, there would have been a body, and it would have been more conspicuously dead. Petty terrorism was one of the key tools in moneylenders' arsenals, after all. When people knew what happened to deadbeats, they did their damndest not to become one.

Moreover, if it was Macnair's creditors, why hadn't they gone after Minerva? The usual progression of such cases, in Alastor's experience, was to start the deadbeat off with a little hex, something painful, but not completely disabling. Various types of Burning Charms were popular, as was the *Castrato* Curse among the real hardcases. If that didn't succeed in persuading the debtor to meet his financial responsibilities, a wizard in the moneylending business might then turn his attention to his wayward client's loved ones. And Alastor knew from Malcolm that Macnair had done business with such people. A man whose wife or child bore the scars of a *Fundocutem* curse was generally well motivated to rob Peter to pay the Paul who had ordered it cast. A man who was dead could not be motivated to do much of anything.

And even if Macnair had paid the ultimate penalty for defaulting on a debt, unless Minerva had subsequently found a way to pay it off, chances were she'd be just as dead as her feckless husband.

The general failure to find a living Gerald Macnair suggested to Alastor that there was none to be found. He couldn't swear to it, but he suspected Macnair wasn't nearly smart enough to evade discovery for very long.

All of which supported the conclusion to which the interrogation reports had pointed: Berquier had had Macnair killed to keep him from revealing his affair with Minerva and banjaxing his political ambitions.

Alastor wanted...Gods, how he wanted!...to avoid the question that led to. But it was futile. He was an Auror to the bones, and the question could not be ignored; it pressed itself to the forefront of his mind, and there it simmered, making Alastor's heart gallop and his palms sweat.

*Did she know anything about it?*

This time, when Alastor tried to light his cigarette, he couldn't get the tip of his wand anywhere near it.

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter 28 of 48

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**1 January 1964**

Something was bothering Alastor.

They'd arrived separately at Amelia's Shepherd's Bush townhouse for her annual "Hair-of-the-Dog" party, and Alastor had greeted Minerva as usual, kissing her absently on the cheek and squeezing her shoulders a bit brusquely, as he always did when they met in public.

But he gave her none of his usual light-hearted teasing...in fact, he didn't volunteer more than a few words to anyone...and he only seemed to be half-listening to any conversations he found himself in.

*Is it his eye?* she wondered.

He'd been nervous about it with her at first, making jokes and self-deprecating remarks that she knew masked his apprehension about her reaction to his changed visage. She thought...she *hoped*...she'd put his fears on that score to rest. After he had healed, and his wounds weren't so pointed a reminder of the dangers of his profession, Minerva hadn't found his face difficult or unpleasant to look at, as he'd seemed to fear she would. She was quite sure she'd never shied away from it, even when the cuts that bisected his cheek and the missing chunk of his nose had been new and raw. The eye had unnerved her a bit, but only because, at times, it moved independently of Alastor's remaining natural one, and Minerva knew that it meant he was edgy and scanning for danger, something that he'd always done, even when they were alone (which had always bothered her, truth to tell). The magical eye simply made it more obvious.

She'd thought Alastor had become mostly at ease with the changes to his appearance, but then again, they'd not been at such a large social gathering since his injury.

But if it was his changed appearance that was bothering him, why did his eyes never quite meet hers when she tried to catch them?

*This is going to be a long afternoon*, Minerva sighed to herself as she surveyed the room. She and Amelia were talking with Millicent Bagnold about the Harpies' disappointing showing in their last few matches...ordinarily an interesting topic, but Minerva was anxious to get Alastor alone to try to find out what was eating him.

She spied him standing in the far corner with Rufus Scrimgeour and a young woman. *Helga? Hermia? Jones*. She excused herself from Amelia and Milly and went to stand next to Alastor, who was obviously not quite listening as Miss Jones asked the two older Aurors what they thought of the new regulations prohibiting MLE interrogators from using Veritaserum to elicit confessions from suspects.

Minerva put a gentle hand on Alastor's arm, leaning in to say in his ear, "I'm going to get something to drink. Would you like anything?"

"No, thanks," he replied without looking at her.

She went to the drinks table and asked the house-elf serving for a glass of orange juice, wondering from whom Amelia had borrowed the elf. Or maybe she was a freed elf, Minerva thought. Elgar had once told her that some of them hired themselves out in exchange for food and shelter on a temporary basis.

"With or without vodka?" the elf asked, taking up three large pieces of fruit and placing them in front of her.

"Without, please," Minerva replied. She watched, fascinated, as the elf snapped her long, spindly fingers, and the oranges split themselves down the middle. The halves began to twist themselves on the reamer so quickly that within ten seconds, the elf was handing Minerva her glass of juice. Minerva had always envied Elgar his dexterity in handling kitchen implements; she'd never gotten very good at chopping or other cutting charms back when they'd been in France, and Elgar had relegated her to more mundane tasks like stirring and managing the heat on the cooker.

On her way back to the corner where Alastor was standing, now nodding absently at something Scrimgeour was saying, she was accosted by Griselda Marchbanks.

"Well, Minerva! Where have you been hiding all these months? Don't tell me Albus has got you so bogged down you can't even slip away for tea once in a while."

"I am sorry, Griselda. Things have been a bit busy," Minerva replied. "I have four students who are in grave danger of failing their O.W.L.s outright, I'm sorry to say. So I've been giving extra lessons on weekends. And I have a student who's beginning Animagus training with me."

"Really? Anyone I should be looking at?" asked a surprised Griselda.

"I don't think she'd be your sort of apprentice," Minerva replied. "Miss Skeeter has a natural gift for Transfiguration, but no real appreciation of its nuances. She's really only interested in what can be applied practically right now. She's a bit . . ."

"Crass?"

"That's not quite the word I'd use, but something like it, maybe. Anyway, she begged and begged me for the Animagus lessons, and I finally agreed. I think her greatest gifts lie in the art of persuasion," Minerva said with a laugh. "Frankly, though, I don't really think she'll stick with it. She has her eye on too many other things."

"Shame. Decent apprentices are hard to come by," remarked Griselda. "Speaking of which, how's Malcolm?"

"He's well. Enjoying Paris, I think," said Minerva.

"I'll bet he is," said Griselda with a smirk. "You tell him from me that I'm still brassed off at him for throwing away all that talent to become a glorified cauldron-washer, but if he wants to come crawling back out of that Froggy Potions lab, I might be able to see my way clear to forgiving him. Out of the goodness of my heart, you understand."

"I'll tell him."

"And I'll tell Bathilda you're coming for tea Sunday next," Griselda said firmly, "and to hell with those brats you're teaching. If they don't know which end of a wand to stick down their skivvies and which to hold by their fifth year, they never will."

Minerva knew better than to argue with her, so she said, "Yes, Madam Marchbanks. Where is Bathilda, anyway? I thought she'd be here."

"She found something *important* in the Muggle library, of all places," Griselda said with affectionate disgust. "Wants to get in there when it's closed so she can make some magical copies without being seen. Said she'd be along when she was done, but I wouldn't count on it. You know how she is."

"I do," said Minerva.

"You'd better go rescue your man there," said Griselda, crooking her chin at the corner where Alastor stood, still with his colleague, both of them evidently deserted by the fetching Miss Jones. "He looks like he's been dancing with a Dementor. Can't blame him; I spent five minutes talking to that Scrimgeour git and it seemed like five hours."

As Minerva started back toward Alastor and Scrimgeour, Griselda called after her, "Two o'clock Sunday. Bring Alastor, if you like."

Alastor looked up at the sound of his name and gave the approaching Minerva a smile that didn't quite reach his good eye.

Coming up to the two men, Minerva said. "Mr Scrimgeour, I'm sorry to interrupt, but Alastor, didn't you want a word with Barty Crouch? I saw him over near the drinks table, but he was making noises about leaving, so if you want to catch him, you'd better go." She gave Scrimgeour an apologetic smile.

Scrimgeour nodded, saying, "Of course. Good to talk to you, Moody. Maybe we can..."

"Yeah, thanks, Scrimgeour," Alastor said as Minerva drew him away toward the narrow entry hall. "Thanks, Minerva. I don't think I could've stood another minute of Rufus' blather."

"Are you all right, Alastor?" Minerva asked as they passed through the door to the empty hallway.

"Fine, yeah."

"You seem distracted."

"Do I?" he said. "Well, there's a lot on my plate at work, what with having been out for six weeks."

"Is that all it is?"

"Sure," he answered. Then after a moment: "What do you say we get out of here? Go back to my flat where we can have a little privacy."

Now, *that* was more like him.

Except there was no suggestive wink, no wicked gleam in his eyes.

*Eye.*

"That sounds very nice," she said. "Let's just find Amelia and say our goodbyes, all right?"

When they arrived at Alastor's flat, he seemed nervous and tetchy...well, tetchier than normal, anyway...so Minerva decided to grab the Vipertooth by the horns.

"Will you tell me now what's really bothering you?"

He met her eyes for the first time that afternoon. He seemed to be wavering, unsure of something, and a shiver of fear shot through her. Searching her face for a few moments, Alastor then turned without a word and disappeared into his bedroom, leaving Minerva standing there, unsure if she was meant to follow or not.

He returned a few moments later holding a red folder, which he held out to her, and suddenly and irrationally, she wanted to do anything but touch it.

They stood there for a few moments, making an almost theatrical tableau, Alastor with his arm outstretched bearing the accusatory folder, Minerva recoiling, until she finally took it.

She didn't open it, however.

"What is this?" she asked.

"I got it from France. It's about Gerald. I think you should read what's in it, then we should talk."

*Gerald.*

Minerva felt her knees trying to turn to water. "May I . . ." she started, then had to clear her throat. "May I sit down?" Her voice sounded a pitch higher than normal in her ears.

"Of course," Alastor replied, looking at her quizzically. She didn't move...felt as if she *couldn't* move...so Alastor took her gently by the hand and led her to the table, holding out a tatty straight-backed chair for her.

Minerva sat, put the folder on the table, opened it, and looked at the first page. She received her second shock of the day when she recognised Albus' handwriting in the note that prefaced the contents. Her chest constricted tightly, and for a moment, she was absurdly relieved to believe that she was having a heart attack. The moment passed, though, and she was forced to turn the wretched page.

She read silently and quickly, white noise growing inside her head as she turned each leaf. It rose to a shriek when she came to the first letter from Gerald to Monsieur Berquier. She willed it back down, hoping she had not betrayed her distress to Alastor, but afraid that the heat she could feel in her cheeks had done the job. Not that he'd need to see her flush to know she was upset. She could feel him peering at her with that piercing Auror's stare, made all the more discomfiting by the way the formerly tetchy eye was now focused intently on her.

Finally, she closed the back cover and forced herself to look at him.

"Is it true?" he asked.

"Which part?"

"About you and Berquier, for starters."

"Yes," she said. "Are you shocked?"

"Surprised, yes. I wouldn't have thought you'd . . . " He startled her by shaking his head violently, like a dog shaking the water from his fur after a dip in a creek. "No. Look . . . it's not for me to judge, Minerva. I know your marriage was shite. If you . . . if you found a bit of comfort somewhere else, I can't..."

"No," she interrupted, and he looked at her with a confusion she'd rarely seen on his face before.

"It wasn't like that," she said.

"How was it, Minerva?" he enquired softly. Then: "You don't have to tell me. You don't owe me any explanations . . . about that. I just . . . I'd like to understand . . . what was going on with you."

"It was money."

His confusion was back, and for a horrifying moment, she thought she might laugh.

He said, "I don't understand . . ."

"He gave me money. To sleep with him," she answered. She couldn't quite help adding drily, "Do you understand now?"

She could see perfectly well that he did.

"Gods, Minerva," he said. "Why?"

His question...his *stupid* question...made her suddenly angry, and the relief that came when it overpowered her fear was like manna in the desert, and she clutched at it.

"Why do you think? We were destitute. Gerald's creditors were getting impatient. I had lost so many pupils . . . and I had a son to feed and protect."

"Oh, Minerva . . ." he began, and reached for her hands, but she felt she would scream if he touched her, so she snatched them away.

"I don't need your pity, Alastor," she spat.

His look of hurt sapped her sudden fury for just a moment. "I'm sorry," she said, although her flat tone didn't do much to sell the idea.

"Don't be," he said. "You did what you felt you had to do. There's no shame in that."

This time, she did laugh. "That's easy to say, Alastor. Not quite so easy to believe when you're sitting there looking as if I've told you I've come down with the pox."

"It's . . . it's a shock, Minerva. That's all."

His feeble protest brought the anger flooding back, and she took refuge in it

She said, "What? To find out the woman you love was a prostitute?"

"Don't say that."

"Why not? It's the truth, isn't it?"

"Minerva..."

"Isn't it?"

"I suppose, technically..."

"Not just technically, Alastor. Legally, too. Don't forget legally . . . You, of all people, should know that."

She was waspish now, stinging him with the truth . . . the relentless, ugly truth. It was cruel, but she couldn't help it. There was bitter wormwood, years of it, built up within her, and none of it was this man's fault . . . this man whose only sin was loving her . . . yet she wanted to scourge him with it, so she went on.

". . . a person who engages in sexual intercourse for money is a prostitute. Technically and legally. The moment he laid his coin on the table . . . the moment I picked it up and put it in my pocket, I was a prostitute." Her voice was high and fast, and it felt as if her tongue belonged to someone else.

"I told him I'd rather be a whore than a debtor, and I turned out to be both in the end, isn't it funny?" Her long-ago conversation with Albus had sprung suddenly into her head, and the words had come tumbling out of her mouth before she could stop them.

Alastor barked, "Minerva, stop!" He took her roughly by the shoulders and shook her. Her teeth clicked together and she bit her tongue, the bright, crystalline pain of it bringing her to her senses.

*What am I doing?*

He saw the change and drew her into his arms, pressing her head to his shoulder.

"It's all right, love. It's all right," he soothed.

The panic that had overtaken her died down a little as she listened to his steady breathing.

*Enjoy it now, Minerva. You won't have the chance again.*

She lifted her head reluctantly after a minute and said, "Is it?"

"Is it what?"

"All right?"

"Yes. Yes, it is."

But of course, it wasn't. Nothing was all right. Nothing at all. It hadn't been all right since the day she'd signed her name to that god-damned marriage contract.

She pulled out of his arms and dabbed at her eyes with her sleeve; she didn't have the strength to conjure a handkerchief.

"He was the only one," she said. "Not that it really matters . . ."

"Minerva, you don't have to explain."

But she wanted to. Everything between them was going to end today; she knew it, and she wanted him to have the truth of it before he left her. She was done with lies and

half-truths.

"Let me tell you, Alastor."

"All right, Alastor said.

She sat for a few moments, trying to tame the horses that seemed to have taken up residence in her chest. Then she spoke:

"Petrus Berquier was the father of one of my pupils."

Alastor nodded. Right; he'd have read that in the interrogation report.

"I'd only met him a few times, when I spoke with him and his wife about Henri's progress. He never said more than a few words. So I was very surprised when he called for Henri one day after the lesson. It was usually a house-elf, and Celestine once or twice, who'd collect him. He asked to speak with me privately, and naturally, I assumed it was something about Henri."

"But it wasn't," said Alastor, and she smiled to herself at his no-doubt unconscious interrogator's trick of leading the suspect to the story.

"No. He was very direct, but in a French sort of way," she said.

Alastor nodded as if he understood.

"He told me he found me very attractive and that he knew of our financial situation. And he said that he would be prepared to help us if I would enter into a personal arrangement with him. That's how he put it: a 'personal arrangement'. I pretended not to understand what he was talking about, but I did, of course. And he knew it. He told me he was a busy man and didn't have the time or inclination for what he called 'the traditional pursuits'. Which I knew meant he didn't want to take the traditional mistress. I imagine he wanted to make it clear that the arrangement would not include any emotional entanglements.

"I was shocked, but I suppose I shouldn't have been. It's hardly a secret that wealthy wizards have been taking mistresses since Merlin was in short pants. It was just my understanding that they didn't usually select the wives of their fellow pure-bloods for the honour. But later it began to make a kind of sense. Given my position, I was hardly likely to tell anyone about it, was I? And secrecy was particularly important to Petrus Berquier, with his political ambitions."

"I'm sure it was," Alastor said.

"Anyway, I turned him down then. Politely. I couldn't afford to lose Henri as a pupil, and I didn't want to make an enemy of Petrus Berquier. Most of my other pupils came from the same social circles. He accepted my refusal with good grace.

"Then, less than a month later, I had my first visit from one of Gerald's creditors. They didn't do anything, but they were quite emphatic about being paid and very specific about what might happen if they were not. I gave them several pieces of jewellery, which took care of most of what Gerald owed them. Two days after that, Gerald came home drunk, railing about his mother's sapphire earrings...he must have heard about what I'd done from one of his . . . associates. I was teaching, and when I went to try to calm him, he became belligerent. Unfortunately, my pupil came out to see what was keeping me just as Gerald called me a . . . colourful name and pushed me...I was trying to steer him into another room, farther from the salon in which I taught...and he pushed me away. I don't think he was really trying to hurt me, but he used some force, and I hit the wall, which bloodied my lip. The girl saw it and, quite understandably, reported it to her parents, who promptly withdrew her from lessons. Word travels fast in Paris, and within the week, I had lost three more pupils. Which meant that I would have to choose between paying for the roof over our heads or the food in our mouths.

"So I sent an owl to Chevalier Berquier at his office to tell him I wanted to accept his offer, if it was still open. It was.

"We met once a week at a flat he kept...for just this kind of thing, I imagine. We never spoke about money. I suppose he would have considered it beneath him. But it was generous. We would spend an hour . . . perhaps two . . . in the flat, then he would go. The money was always waiting for me in an envelope before I even got to the flat, and we never referred to it.

"It continued for about five months until one day I received an owl telling me that Henri would no longer be coming for lessons. It was signed 'Celestine Berquier'. That note was followed a few minutes later by another thanking me for my help and wishing me all the best. It was signed by Petrus Berquier, and I knew it meant our arrangement was at an end, too. The envelope also contained eight five-hundred-*Livre* notes.

"Four thousand *Livres*?" Alastor said. "Back then, that had to be . . . what . . . twenty-five , thirty Galleons?"

"Thirty-four."

At Alastor's raised eyebrows, she said, "As I told you, Monsieur Berquier was generous. His . . . parting gift paid off Gerald's creditors. The three pupils that remained to me would pay for our rent and food."

She set her chin and looked intently at Alastor's face. "I had to feed my son. I don't regret it."

"I never said you should, Minerva," he answered. "I'm just . . ."

"What?"

"I'm just sorry you had to do that." Minerva saw his eyes widen slightly, as if he were remembering something, then he said, "Did he ever . . . did he hurt you?"

"Hurt me? No."

The idea was almost comical to Minerva, and she wondered for a moment what had prompted the question.

She said, "No, he was never less than courteous. It wasn't . . . it wasn't terrible, if that's what you're worried about. He never asked me to do anything that was abhorrent to me."

In fact, it hadn't been much different from sex with Gerald. The only difference had been that Monsieur Berquier had occasionally wanted to take her from behind. But he'd never held her down as Gerald had done, and for that, she'd been thankful. No, he'd never hurt her, but he'd never been concerned about her pleasure, either. Not that she'd expected him to be. She'd been quite clear on her role in the arrangement.

Alastor's visage relaxed . . . a little.

That's why she was surprised by what he asked next.

"Minerva . . . did Berquier kill Gerald?"

She'd known as she read the report that Alastor would get to the question eventually, but she felt the white noise begin to gallop through her head anyway, and she found she couldn't speak.

Alastor's concerned face appeared close to hers...too close...and she pulled away.

"Minerva?"

"No."

Alastor obviously mistook her distress.

"I know it's hard to fathom, but the blackmail . . . the timing . . . it all fits . . ."

"No."

His eyes...both natural and artificial...were fixed on her face as if transfixed there. "Minerva . . . did you know anything about it?"

"I . . . I knew nothing about the blackmail. Until just now."

She saw Alastor's entire body relax, as if it were a marionette whose too-taut strings had been lengthened, and it sent a piercing pain through her.

He said, "I'm sorry, Minerva . . . I had to ask . . ."

"I know you did. You wouldn't be Alastor Moody if you hadn't asked."

Words began to pour out of him in his relief. "And I'm sorry I dredged all this up. Sorry I didn't tell you about it. I just wanted to find out about Gerald. I didn't tell you because I didn't want to upset you if I couldn't discover anything . . . or if it turned out that something . . . really terrible had happened to him. I wanted the chance to . . . to edit the details, if you take my meaning. It wasn't right, though. I know that now. Screw it, I knew it then. But I didn't want to take the chance of hurting you."

"It doesn't matter," she said, and she was only mildly surprised to realise that it didn't. Had things been otherwise, Minerva would have been angry...*no**furious*...at his going behind her back, even if he'd done it out of love and concern. But she found she hadn't the energy for that kind of anger now. Too many other emotions were buffeting her about.

"Minerva," he said, taking her hands across the table. "Now that you know, I'd like to follow through on this. Find out what really happened to Macnair. Help you close the books on it, so to speak."

"It isn't necessary," she said, carefully and deliberately taking her hands out of his again.

"Maybe not, but now that I have a lead, a solid lead, I can..."

"You don't."

"I don't what?"

"Have a solid lead."

"Minerva, I can understand it if you don't want to believe that Berquier had anything to do with Gerald's de...disappearance. But the evidence, the circumstantial evidence anyway, is right here in this report. Don't you want to know the truth? If Berquier had anything to do with it, he should be brought to justice. He had the investigation stopped and the records sealed. These rich, pure-blood bastards think they can get away with anything. They..."

"Petrus Berquier didn't kill Gerald."

"You don't know that, Minerva. If he was blackmailing..."

"I do know."

"How?"

"Because I did."

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**Author's Note** In 1956, thirty-four Galleons would have equalled 170 pounds sterling, or 342 U.S. dollars. In 2012 currency, that would equal 3,482 pounds sterling, or 3,100 U.S. dollars.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

*Chapter 29 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**1 January 1964**

For a moment, the world swam, grey and swampy, in front of Alastor's eyes.

He'd considered the possibility that Minerva had killed Macnair...he couldn't not, Auror that he was...but he'd never believed it. Not in his heart, which, coincidentally, seemed to be the organ that had taken the blow a moment ago.

"You killed him?" he asked, rendered temporarily gormless in his shock.

It was far from the first time he'd heard this kind of confession before, but his brain seemed stuck, and his mouth unable to do anything but repeat her words.

"It wasn't what I intended, but I did it nevertheless," she said, and he recognised by the calm she projected and that others might find strange...but not a seasoned Auror...that the confession was true. Most criminals were glad, at least on some level, when the truth was finally out there. At least until the real fun started in Azkaban.

It was this last thought that shook Alastor out of his stupor.

"Minerva," he said, "I don't want you to say any more. Not right now. I'm . . . it's . . . I'm an Auror. You should be talking to someone who can advise you of your interests."

"Who better than you, Alastor? You love me...or at least, you did...and you understand the law."

"Minerva, I don't..."

"I want you to be the one to hear it, Alastor. Please."

This was a bad idea. A terrible idea. If he took her confession, he had to report it. His oath required it. He'd never broken his oath...never even considered it...but how could he do it? How could he turn her in when he loved her so?

Back in 1942, when he was in his final year of Auror training, he'd needed a way to blow off the steam that built up during that year of nearly unbearable pressure, and he'd found it in a most unlikely place: the Muggle cinema. And his favourites were the American detective pictures. He'd been to see *The Maltese Falcon* four times, sitting in the dark theatre surrounded by Muggles, mesmerised by Humphrey Bogart's sad-sack gumshoe, flawed, but ultimately incorruptible and hard as dragon's stones, an image that Alastor had, consciously or not, cultivated for himself.

The final scene of the picture now came back to him: Bogart in hard-case mode, telling Mary Astor: *Maybe I'll have some rotten nights after I've sent you over, but that'll pass.*"

At the time, Alastor's heart had swelled at the line, at the rightness...the righteousness...of it. *Of course* Bogart was going to turn her in. *Of course* it was the right thing to do. Only a patsy would let a dame get away with murder.

Now, he cringed inwardly at how easy it had seemed to him back then, sitting in the dark, with the notion of sending the woman one loved to prison nothing more than a titillating abstract idea.

Suddenly, he wanted to hex Humphrey Bogart's bollocks off.

He heard himself say, "All right. Tell me about it."

"I'm not sure I can talk about it. But I can show you."

"Show me?"

"Yes. In Albus' Pensieve."

"Albus has a Pensieve?"

"Yes."

Alastor was surprised enough by this news to forget his troubles for just a moment. Pensieves were incredibly rare and valuable; as far as Alastor knew, there were only six, maybe seven known to exist. Even the Ministry had never been able to get hold of one, as families that had them tended to hold onto them. Alastor wondered how Dumbledore had come by his.

Minerva said, "But please, Alastor, keep that to yourself. If the Ministry gets wind of it, they'll want it."

No doubt they would. A Pensieve would be really useful for interrogation and for interviewing witnesses to crimes. Alastor wondered why Dumbledore didn't want the Ministry to have one.

Alastor's attention snapped back to the problem at hand. "Minerva, are you certain you want to do this? To bring Dumbledore into it?"

She said, "He knows this much"...she tapped the report cover..."I think I'd like him to know the rest."

"All right."

They left the flat and Apparated to the front gates of Hogwarts.

Albus was in his office, but they had to wait while he finished his meeting, the gargoyle informed them. Alastor and Minerva stood at the entryway in silence, and when the doors rumbled open to emit a blonde wizard in ornate robes, Alastor tensed as the man stopped to acknowledge Minerva.

"Professor McGonagall, it's always a pleasure," he said, taking her hand and kissing it.

"Mr Malfoy," she returned. "I didn't know you were coming to Hogwarts today, or I'd have arranged for tea."

Alastor marvelled at her poise. He didn't think he could manage to put two coherent words together. Then again, she'd had seven years living with this knowledge; for Alastor it was still new and raw.

*Seven years of playing everyone for saps. You're good at it now, angel.* It was Bogart's voice Alastor heard in his head.

*Shut up,* Alastor told it.

"No matter, dear lady," Malfoy said with an oily smile. "I just had a bit of urgent business to take up with the Headmaster."

"Perhaps next time, then," Minerva said.

"Without fail," Malfoy said, and swept away without a glance at Alastor.

Dumbledore appeared on the spiral staircase a moment later, saying, "Come up, come up. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, but Abraxas and I were nearly finished."

To his credit, when they got to his office, the Headmaster didn't play dumb.

Seeing the red folder in Alastor's hand, he said to Minerva, "I imagine you're terribly angry with us."

"No," she said. "I'm not angry. Alastor and I have talked about what's in the report. I've already explained to Alastor about Petrus Berquier, and I'd like you to know the truth too."

Dumbledore looked from her to Alastor, and Alastor had to turn his eyes away.

"If that is what you truly want, Minerva," he said.

Minerva told him, "What you read in the report was true. Petrus Berquier was my lover. What isn't in there is the fact that I did it for the money he gave me. What also isn't in there is what happened to Gerald. I'd like to show you . . . both of you. May we use your Pensieve?"

Alastor had to give the old wizard credit. He betrayed no reaction to Minerva's statement other than to say, "Of course."

He crossed the room to what Alastor thought was a small table covered with a blue velvet cloth. When Dumbledore removed the cloth, the table turned out to be a stone pedestal with a concave surface. He then opened one of the mahogany cabinets that flanked the pedestal and withdrew a large stone basin, carved around the rim with what Alastor knew to be Runes.

Despite everything that was happening, Alastor felt a frisson of excitement when he saw the Pensieve. He'd never seen one before and likely never would again. It looked very old, but of course, Alastor had no real way to judge its age.

Dumbledore placed the Pensieve on the pedestal and drew his wand. Waving it in a complicated pattern over the Pensieve, he chanted *Accipe memoriam, mutata memoriam incarnata, aperi memoriam!*"

Curious, Alastor approached the Pensieve and saw the surface begin to shimmer with a pale gold light, as if it held a candle somehow suspended in water.

"The Pensieve is ready to receive the memory," Dumbledore said, turning to Minerva, who was still standing near the door.

She hesitated just a moment, then crossed to join the two wizards at the Pensieve. She withdrew her wand and closed her eyes for a few moments. Putting the tip to her temple, she opened her eyes, and Alastor could tell she was looking deep within herself, into the past, rather than at anything in the room with them now. As she moved her wand, a thin, silvery strand of vapour began to stretch between the wand and her head. It drew itself out, thinning, then thickening again, until it formed a ribbon about an inch thick and maybe twenty-four inches long. The ribbon seemed to pulse as if it were a living thing. Minerva opened her eyes and looked questioningly at Dumbledore, who nodded. She gave her wand a slight twitch, and the memory-strand came away from her temple. Pointing the wand toward the Pensieve, she intoned, "*Loquere, memoria!*"

The surface of the Pensieve rippled and began to swirl, and a moment later, the memory-strand was sucked into the vortex.

Dumbledore gave the contents of the Pensieve a swirl with his wand, and the gold glow dissipated, leaving a nearly translucent green shimmer at its surface. Alastor thought he could see shapes through it, but he couldn't make out what they were.

"The memory is ready," Dumbledore said. "Minerva, are you certain you wish to do this?"

"Quite certain."

"Very well," he said. "Alastor, this will be easier if you take my hand."

Alastor did, and when Dumbledore bent down to touch his face to the surface of the Pensieve, Alastor followed suit.

He felt himself falling forward, but Dumbledore's firm hand over his kept him from shouting or flailing about.

After a moment, he felt the firmness of the ground beneath his feet, and when he opened his eyes, they were standing in a small room illuminated by the light shining in from a large, half-glazed window set in the wall behind them, although Alastor noticed that he and Dumbledore cast no shadows.

Sitting behind a small, many-drawered desk, quill in hand, was Minerva. Her head was bowed low over her work, but after a moment, she looked up at a noise from outside the room, and Alastor peered at her.

Although this Minerva was more than seven years younger than the Minerva Alastor knew, she looked a decade older. Her face was drawn, the skin taut and pale as the moon, but without a trace of its luminosity. Her mouth was set in a thin line that Alastor recognised, but this Minerva's eyes, ringed with dark purple shadows, held no happiness to soften her grim expression. Her cheekbones were so prominent that she looked nearly skeletal, and when Alastor's eyes travelled lower, he saw that her collarbones jutted out like handles. Her gown gaped a little in front, and he caught a glimpse of the shadow of her ribs under its edge, making his heart ache. She was so thin!

The door opened, and a man who could only be Gerald Macnair stood in the doorway, leaning too casually against its frame.

"Going over the accounts, Minerva?" he said. The elided "t" in "accounts" told Alastor that he'd had more than a little to drink.

"Yes," Minerva said. "I'll be finished in a few minutes."

"Then you'll be going out."

"Yes."

"To visit your friend . . . what's her name again?"

"Madame Plançon."

"Right, Madame Plançon."

Minerva bent her head over her parchment again, but Macnair still stood there staring at her.

He said, "She's still unwell?"

"That's right," Minerva said without looking up. "Elgar can make you some lunch when he's back from the market. We didn't expect you home so soon, or I'm sure he would have left something for you." There was a pause, and Minerva put down her quill and looked at Macnair. "Or I could get something together for you now, if you're hungry," she said, standing.

"That's very kind of you, Minerva. Very . . . wife-like."

Minerva stood looking at Macnair for a moment, and Alastor had the feeling she was preparing herself for what was to come.

"I'll just see to it, then . . ." she said, moving out from behind the desk.

Macnair stepped in front of her, blocking her way, saying, "Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

Alastor was impressed with the way she looked him right in the face as she asked, "Find out what?"

"About you and that Berquier bastard."

Minerva said nothing, nor did she attempt to leave the room. It was almost as if she were resigned to what was obviously going to happen, and Alastor wanted to shout at her to go, to run, before it was too late.

Macnair was saying, "I'm curious, Minerva, how did you manage it? With the Trace? A Ministry owl can cross the Channel in a matter of hours; I should have got word the same day you first let him stick his cock in you."

Minerva's reddening face was the only indication that she was upset. Her voice, when she spoke, was calm and quiet.

"I managed it exactly the same way you did, Gerald. Or rather, the way your father managed it for you. A few Galleons in the right hands, and the charm fails, doesn't it? That trick isn't supposed to work for witches, I know, but lo and behold, our gold is just as yellow as wizards'."

Alastor recognised that her even tone combined with the mocking words was meant to wrong-foot Macnair, and it worked just as Alastor, the seasoned interrogator, knew it would.

Macnair was practically spitting. "You spent our money on bribes so you could fuck that . . . that..."

"*Our* money, Gerald? No, I didn't spend *our* money. I spent *my* money. *Your* money was gone years ago. And there's never been any*us*, so there's never been any *ours*, wouldn't you agree?"

"You fucking cunt."

"As you say," she said. "Now if you'll get out of my road, I'll get out of yours."

She stepped to the side and around Macnair, who seemed too stunned to move, and for a moment, Alastor thought she'd pulled it off. But just as she reached the doorway, Macnair grabbed her by the arm and swung her back around, and in a move that surprised Alastor with its almost balletic grace, he backhanded her in the face, his fist closed and cruel in its accuracy despite the man's inebriation.

Alastor shouted and surged forward, trying to get to Macnair, but the hands he attempted to lay on the bastard passed straight through, and the *Petrificus Totalus* he'd fired simultaneously from his hip streaked through his target and dissipated in faint blue shards of light.

"Alastor!" said Albus. "Stop it. You can't help her."

Dumbledore was right, of course, so Alastor fell in back beside him, breathing heavily, murder in his heart.

Minerva had her hand to her face, and blood was beginning to spill out from between her fingers. When she moved her hand away from her face, Alastor could see that her nose was badly broken; it was canted oddly to the left like in one of those daft paintings they'd seen together at the Louvre.

"I wonder if the chevalier will want you now that I've reorganised your face. Shall we go ask him?" Macnair said, grasping her arm again. She pulled away, but he took her shoulders between both hands and began to shake her, and Alastor remembered doing the same thing only an hour or so ago, when she had become nearly hysterical. He thought he might vomit.

He watched Minerva's hand creep down toward her hip, and he knew she was going for her wand.

A moment later, Macnair was thrown backwards and hit the wall with an almost comical *Ooof!*"

A grin crossed his face, and for a second, Alastor could see the handsome young man he must have been before indolence had rendered him pudgy and drink had painted gin-blossoms across his cheeks.

Macnair said, "Nice work, Minerva. Are you going to Petrify me like you did my father? You know, I believed you then. My father said you were a whore, but I said, 'no,' and I let you and your father turn me against my family. I should have listened to my dad." He started to get up, and Minerva brandished her wand at him, one hand again at her ruined nose. She sounded as if she were speaking through cotton when she said, "Don't move."

Once on his feet, Macnair put his hands up in surrender, the incongruous smile still plastered on his face. "I'm not going to do anything else to you, Minerva. So put your wand down and run off to your lover. Let him pay for the Healer to fix your face for you."

When she hesitated, he continued, "But when you come back, I will be gone. And so will Malcolm. I'll take him from school, and you'll never see him again."

She said, "I won't let you do that." But the way her angry flush suddenly drained away told Alastor that Macnair's threat had hit the mark.

"How are you going to stop me? I'm his father; the law says I have every right to take my son wherever I see fit, even if his mother doesn't like it."

"No, you have no right."

"I do, and you know it. The father almost always gets preference. And once everyone finds out what a whore you are, what do you think your chances of getting him back are?"

"He isn't your son."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Malcolm isn't your son, Gerald. There's no part of you in him, thank the gods."

Macnair blinked stupidly a few times.

"You're lying," he said.

"I'm not. I was already pregnant when we married. Gods, but you are thick! Did you really think a baby born more than a month before time would be fat and healthy as Malcolm was? Or that any son of yours would grow to be so tall at only eleven years old? Or be even half-competent at magic?"

It took a moment for this to sink in, but once understanding dawned on Macnair's face, it was suffused with red fury. He howled, "You bitch!" as he lunged at Minerva, who stepped out of the way just before he could tackle her.

He fell into a heap at her feet, but before she could get away, he threw his arms around her legs, pulling her to the ground next to him, sending her wand flying from her hand to clatter to the floor near the desk.

She kicked at him as he clawed his way up her legs, tearing her skirt. He threw himself on top of her, pinning her to the floor, and closed his hands around her throat, roaring in incoherent rage. Then there was a muffled *pop*, and Minerva disappeared. Alastor heard a hissing sound and saw Macnair roll over, clawing at his face, which now wore what looked to be a grey, fur-covered mask.

The cat...for that's what it was...gave an ear-splitting screech and launched herself off of Macnair and scabbled across the floor to the desk, where she changed back into Minerva. Her voice was only a raspy whisper as she said, "*Accio* wand!"

Macnair had risen to his feet, dabbing at the bloody stripes crisscrossing his face, when she said, "Don't come any closer. Let me pass."

Macnair stood his ground and said, "Don't worry, Minerva. I wouldn't touch you again if you were Helen of fucking Troy. But *will* take your son. By the time you get through the paperwork to have him declared a bastard, where do you think we'll be?"

The two stood staring at one another for a few moments, and Alastor watched Macnair's eyes, wondering if he was going to attack Minerva again. Then there was a flash of white light and a *whoosh* and Macnair was gone.

*Where's the body?*

Alastor looked to Minerva, who was staring at the spot where Macnair had stood, her wand still outstretched. He followed her eyes to the floor, where there was a large brown rat shivering and twisting this way and that as if trying to figure out just why he was being followed by a tail.

The rat froze after a moment, then gave a squeak and scurried out the open door.

Minerva lowered her wand and, leaning against the desk, sank slowly to the floor. She was still staring at the spot where the rat had been, her eyes hollow and unblinking.

The room blurred and greyed out for a few moments, then cleared again, and Alastor could tell it was later in the day because the light coming from the window had stretched out, throwing the desk into long shadow.

Minerva still sat trembling on the floor.

A voice from the doorway said, "Mistress?"

Alastor turned and saw Elgar, his oversized eyes dark with concern. He hurried to Minerva and took her face between his hands, and Alastor felt relief wash over him as if the elf's tender hands were cradling his injured face rather than hers.

Elgar seemed to understand that Minerva was in shock, for he spoke softly and slowly despite his obvious agitation. "Mistress, you is hurt. Can you tell Elgar if it is just your face and neck, or is there other injuries?"

Minerva's eyes regained some of their life at the sound of Elgar's voice. She seemed to focus and looked at the elf's face. "Just my nose, I think," she whispered. "And this . . ." her hands fluttered to her throat, the skin of which was marred by ugly purple bruises where Macnair's fingers had pressed hard into the pale flesh.

"Elgar will try to fix it, with Mistress' permission."

"Yes," she said. Elgar passed his fingers gently over the bruises, and they faded, leaving only a slight lividity where they'd been. When the elf placed the tips of his fingers on her damaged nose, Minerva flinched and drew in a hissing breath.

"Elgar is sorry, Mistress. This may hurt a bit, but you must keep still."

There was a crunching sound and Minerva howled in pain, making Alastor's balls creep up into his abdominal cavity. He'd broken his nose on several occasions (before losing a large chunk of it, that is), and he well remembered how much it hurt to have it fixed.

Elgar was dabbing at the fresh blood that was running from Minerva's nose...straighter now, but still noticeably misshapen...saying, "There now, does that feel any better, Mistress?"

"Yes, thank you, Elgar." Her voice was closer to normal now, although it was still weak and papery.

"You will need to have a Healer finish fixing your nose, Mistress. Elgar did what he could, but..."

"It's fine, Elgar. It feels much better now."

"Who has harmed you, Mistress?" said the elf, allowing his distress to come through now that he had seen to his mistress' most immediate needs.

"Master Gerald."

It was then that Alastor discovered that house-elves had blue blood, because Elgar, in his fury, turned a dusky shade that Alastor had never seen before.

"Is he gone? Elgar will help you ward the house against him so he cannot come back."

"No. There's no need. But Elgar . . ."

"Yes, Mistress?"

"Will you search around the house to see if you can find a brown rat?"

"A rat, Mistress?"

"Yes."

The elf was silent for a few moments, then he said, "And what does Mistress wish me to do with this rat if I finds him?"

"Just . . . put him in a box. Keep him safe. Under no circumstances should you harm him."

"Very good, Mistress," Elgar said. "I will look for this . . . rat. But first, Elgar would like to help Mistress to her bed."

Minerva got to her feet, saying, "No, that isn't necessary, Elgar. But I have to send an urgent message to someone. Perhaps you could deliver it, then come back and search for the rat?"

"Of course, Mistress."

Minerva went behind the desk and opened a drawer, removing a small sheet of parchment. She took a quill and wrote a few lines on the parchment, then sealed it.

Handing it to Elgar, she said, "Please deliver this to the Chevalier Berquier at 76 Rue d'Artois. If he asks, tell him I have been unavoidably detained and that he shouldn't expect me today. The note gives my apologies. There will be no reply, so you may come straight back."

"Very good, Mistress." Elgar took the note and popped out.

The room greyed out again, and Alastor felt himself being pulled upwards as if falling in reverse. When he felt his feet on Dumbledore's floor again, he ran his hands

roughly over his face as if to clear his head.

Minerva was standing halfway across the room, looking at him.

"We never found Gerald," she said. "And now you know about me. Both of you."

Alastor glanced at Dumbledore beside him. He was regarding Minerva with a look that Alastor couldn't quite read. Alastor expected him to say something, but he remained silent.

So Alastor said, "You didn't kill him, Minerva."

"I Transfigured him. Which amounts to the same thing," she answered.

"Not necessarily," Alastor said.

*Damn you, Dumbledore, help me here!*

"Really? And how long do you suppose a house-bred rat would last in the gutters of Paris?" she asked.

"Aye, but he wasn't just a rat. He still had his mind. If he was canny, he might've..."

"Did Gerald Macnair strike you as a canny sort of man, Alastor?" There was no edge to her voice now, just resignation, and it frightened him.

"No," he said. "He didn't strike me as much of a man at all, so his becoming a rat wasn't any great loss."

"Alastor," Dumbledore interjected, "this is no joking matter."

"It was no joke, Dumbledore," Alastor said. Crossing to Minerva, he said, "You didn't kill him. You could have, but you didn't. He was threatening you. Christ, he'd already broken your nose, he..."

"I could have Petrified him instead. Petrified him, then left. He'd still be alive."

"Maybe. Maybe not. How long d'ye reckon he'd have stayed ahead of his creditors without you paying them off?"

"I don't know," she admitted.

"Well, I do," Alastor said. "I've seen it a dozen times, Minerva. The kind of men Macnair owed money to . . . they'd have killed him eventually. But chances are, they'd have hurt you first. You and Malcolm. To try to get him to pay."

Alastor wasn't quite sure who he was trying to convince, Minerva or himself. But what he'd said was true.

"That's not what I was thinking when I did it," Minerva said.

"What were you thinking?" Alastor asked.

"I was thinking about Malcolm. And about Gerald taking him away from me."

She suddenly buried her face in her hands and gave a great, shuddering sob, a sound he'd never heard from her before, even on the one occasion when he'd seen her weep.

He put his arms around her and held her, and in that moment he knew he would not turn her in to the Ministry.

Whatever she'd done, she'd paid for it. And her crime wasn't so great, he reasoned. Yes, Transfiguring someone without their permission was a serious offence, as was filing a false report, but, by the gods, Macnair had had far worse coming to him, and what the hell else was she supposed to do? She had her boy to protect. And she hadn't killed Macnair, had she? She could have, but she didn't. Hell, she didn't even intend to Transfigure him, probably. It just . . . happened. Transfiguration was what she did best, so it was only natural that she'd used it under stress rather than another spell. And if the bastard had had the sense to stay, she certainly would have Transfigured him back.

Alastor told himself all these quite reasonable things as he held her, but a tiny part of him was still speaking in Bogart's voice, telling him they were just excuses for letting her get away with it, and excuses were for patsies and saps.

He shut the voice up by thinking about Malcolm. Malcolm Macnair who wasn't, in fact, Malcolm Macnair, if what Minerva had said in the memory was accurate and not just calculated to trip Macnair up. Alastor thought she'd been telling Macnair the truth.

After she'd calmed, he asked, "Minerva . . . was it true, what you told him? About Malcolm?"

She looked up into his face and he forced himself not to look away.

"Yes," she said. "He was not Malcolm's father."

"I see," Alastor said.

"Do you?"

"Yeah," Alastor said, nodding slowly. "I think I do. You got pregnant just before marrying him, and my guess is you did it on purpose. You're too canny to be that careless. You didn't want Macnair's children. That's not hard to understand."

Alastor found that he wasn't especially shocked by this revelation. He'd had twitches of intuition that something about Malcolm wasn't as it seemed, and he supposed he'd wondered before now if maybe Macnair wasn't the boy's da. It hadn't been a conscious thought, but it had been there, maybe, somewhere deeper, in that place in Alastor's mind where he stashed those niggling sorts of ideas that might distract him from whatever question was at hand, but that he sensed might be important. That place was essential to Alastor's success as an Auror; the thoughts he stored there had often proved to be the key that unlocked an investigation. His fellow Aurors ragged him about it sometimes, how he'd suddenly get a "hunch" that turned out to be spot-on. But with Malcolm . . . he had just left it on the shelf. Now he wished he'd done the same with his bloody itchy thoughts about Macnair's disappearance. But it was too late for those kinds of regrets now, and he might as well have all of it.

"Will you tell me . . ." Alastor cursed himself for his reluctance to ask his question, but he finally said, "Will you tell me who Malcolm's father was?"

He saw her glance at Dumbledore.

*Dumbledore knows who he is*, Alastor thought with surprise. *Did he organise it?* A disturbing thought, but Alastor wouldn't put it past the man.

When he saw Dumbledore nod his head briefly at her, though, then the truth struck him with the force of a curse.

"It was you!" he cried at the older wizard before he could stop himself.

"Yes," Dumbledore said.

"Jaysus," Alastor muttered to himself. Somehow, this felt worse to him, or almost worse, than the discovery that Minerva had Transfigured her husband into a rat.

"I'm sorry, Alastor," Minerva said.

"You owe me no apology, Minerva." She didn't, it was true; they'd not even known one another back then, but why did he feel so god-damned angry?

*You're not angry, boyo, you're scared. And jealous, which is the same thing. He's the great Albus Dumbledore, and he shagged your girl. Who wouldn't be jealous?*

"I mean I'm sorry for not telling you," Minerva said. "I told no one. Even Albus didn't know until recently."

"But you were lovers?" he asked. He wanted it full in the face *(when you're slapped, you'll take it and like it)*, Bogart was telling him), but what he got wasn't quite what he expected.

"No," Minerva said "Not exactly. I tricked Albus into sleeping with me."

"Come again?" Alastor said, wondering with dread if she was now going to reveal that she had Imperiused Dumbledore and forced him to impregnate her. Would that even work?

Alastor saw her questioning look at Dumbledore and his slight nod. Then she told him a tale that was at once shocking and banal. Alastor was relieved to know it had been nothing more than a lie and a bit of potion work behind Malcolm's conception, but he was astounded that this woman he thought he knew had been so devious at eighteen. By the gods, it had taken some stones for her to dupe Albus Dumbledore like that! And him! What the hell had the man been thinking? Or had he been doing his thinking with his cock? That wouldn't have surprised Alastor had it been almost anyone else, but one, this was Albus fecking Dumbledore they were talking about, and two, Alastor'd always heard that the man liked wizards. Rumours only, but still . . . Alastor had found during his career that most rumours carried a bit of the truth with them.

He wasn't about to question the old wizard, though. Leastways, not today. So he asked the other question that had occurred to him as he'd listened to Minerva's tale.

"Does Malcolm know?"

"No," Minerva said.

"Are you going to tell him?"

"I don't know," said Minerva.

"You should," Alastor said.

"Maybe," she said. "I'll need to think about it."

There were a few moments in which everyone was silent, waiting for someone else to make the next move.

Minerva broke the stalemate by asking, "What are you going to do, Alastor?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you want me to go with you to the Ministry? Give them my confession? I will, if that's what you want."

"No. That's not what I want."

"What do you want, Alastor."

*I want things to go back to the way they were before. I want to get down on my knees and ask you to be my wife. I want to go to Diagon Alley and blow a year's worth of my salary and yours on a pair of rings. I want . . .*

"To love you, Minerva. That's all."

"You . . . you still want me? After everything you've found out? Can you live with it?"

Alastor looked at Dumbledore, whose face was still impassive, those damnably blue eyes drilling into Alastor.

Turning back to Minerva, Alastor said, "Yes."

He was reasonably sure it was the truth.

## Chapter Thirty

*Chapter 30 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

Molly adjusted her robe once again before stepping through the door of the cottage. It was too tight around the middle already, and she was only three months gone.

Arthur grasped her hand suddenly, stopping her.

"Are we doing the right thing?" he asked, his voice low and tight with anxiety.

"Yes," she said.

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

They'd been over it a dozen times, Arthur arguing that she had no business joining a dangerous underground organization in her condition, Molly adamant that her condition had nothing to do with it. He was frightened, she knew that. Not for himself, but for her and their little family.

A familiar, almost painful love welled up inside her for the boy she had married right out of Hogwarts, the one who had grown into a man before her eyes, who wanted to do a husband's job and protect his wife and children from the terrifying things that were beginning to happen around them.

She kissed him quickly, saying, "If you want to leave, you can. I'm sure Auntie Muriel would be glad to have you take Bill and Charlie. And I won't think any less of you."

"You know that's not it," he said.

"*Shh*," she said, putting her fingers to his lips. "I know. But you're right that it's foolish for both of us to join. The boys...and this little one," she added, patting her belly, "are going to need one of us at least. And I have to do this."

"Because of Ginevra."

Molly stayed silent for a moment. She still didn't trust her voice not to crack when she thought about her dearest friend's death.

"Yes," she whispered.

Arthur took her hand and squeezed it. "She's the last person who'd want you to put yourself in danger, Mols."

The warm feeling she'd had for her husband vanished. She pulled her hand away and wiped roughly at the tears that had formed in the corners of her eyes.

Turning away from him, she said, "Let's go in."

The dining room of Professor Jones's small home was already nearly full, with witches and wizards pressing themselves back against the walls to make way for the new arrivals. Looking around the room, Molly recognised a few of the faces: Gideon, of course...he gave her a little wave when she looked in his direction...and Emmeline were standing across from her. There was Caradoc Dearborn, whom she knew by sight. She'd had a crush on him during her third and fourth years...just like half the girls at Hogwarts...thanks to his prowess at Quidditch, but she'd never really met him. She felt just a little guilty at the faint, half-remembered shiver of desire that went through her when she spied him.

Standing across the room from her was Eamon Jones, who'd been her Defence teacher in her sixth-year N.E.W.T. class. She'd been sad when he left abruptly to care for his father, who'd apparently come over funny and been declared insane after inexplicably cursing three members of the Wizengamot during a routine budget meeting. Molly was pleased to see Professor Jones again, and thrilled a little when he smiled and bowed his head slightly, recognising her. There were days when it felt as if the Molly who'd been top of her class in Defence, Transfiguration, and Charms was just a dream she'd had in between Charlie's feedings.

She spied Arthur's old friend, Benjy Fenwick, standing next to a tall witch at the far end of the table. "Wotcha, Molly!" he called to her, and she smiled back.

"Here, madam, take my seat," said a voice from behind her. She turned to see an elderly man struggling to rise from his chair, and a voice on her other side said, "Sit down, Bones. She can have my place."

Molly turned again to look into the unforgettable face of Alastor Moody, who was holding out a chair for her. She'd never seen his prosthetic eye close up before, although she'd seen him from time to time when he came to Hogwarts to visit Professor Dumbledore. Or that's what everyone pretended. Molly had a suspicion that it wasn't the Headmaster Moody had been visiting on those occasional weekends and holidays. The other students had whispered and giggled whenever he came around, and called him "Mad-Eye", which had infuriated her. He seemed a decent man, and he was a hero, two things which should have earned him the respect of his juniors, she thought. Even if he was a bit scary looking, what with the eye and the nose, and all those scars.

"I'm fine where I am, Auror Moody, but thank you," she said.

"Take the chair, please," he said. "Me da would roll over in his grave if he knew I'd let a woman with child stand while I sat."

She was startled. "How did you..."

His good eye looked down at her hands, which had fluttered reflexively to her belly.

"Way you were protecting your middle when you came in," he said. "It wasn't your figure," he added, and she was startled to realise that he must have been watching her...had probably been watching everybody as they came in. Even as he spoke to her, the fake eye was scanning the room, moving independently of the one that was fixed on Molly. As the magical eye whirled around to rest on her bosom for just a moment, it occurred to her that Moody might be able to see through her robes. She suddenly felt self-conscious and sat down in the proffered chair, folding her fingers demurely in her lap.

"Thank you," she said, and Moody moved to stand behind her next to Arthur, who put a hand on her shoulder.

The room hushed when Professor Dumbledore came in, Professor McGonagall following in his wake, and Molly thought she heard a soft grunt from one of the men behind her. She was surprised to see her old Head of House at the meeting. A secret, not-strictly-authorised group wasn't something Molly would have expected Professor McGonagall to have any part of. Then again, it was Professor Dumbledore's group, and she was his Deputy. And Alastor Moody was in it.

"I'm sorry to keep everyone waiting," Dumbledore said, moving to the head of the table. "Dedalus, might I ask you to give Minerva your seat?" he said to a short wizard with wild grey hair who was seated just to his right. "She has agreed to take the minutes and will need the table. Thank you." The wizard stood and Professor McGonagall took his chair.

"Let us start with introductions," said Dumbledore. "Many of you already know one another, but some faces may be unfamiliar to the younger members of the group." His eyes rested briefly on Molly, and he gave her the slightest hint of a smile.

When everyone in the room had dutifully recited his or her name, Dumbledore got down to business.

"Thank you all for coming down to Abercynon. I do apologize to those of you for whom the trip may have been difficult"...he glanced at a young woman who'd introduced herself as "Figg", Molly recalled..."but Eamon was kind enough to lend his home, which is Unplottable. We may have cause to be grateful for that in due course."

"Only benefit of being the son of a disgraced Minister for Magic," said Professor Jones, and a nervous chuckle went around the room.

Dumbledore ignored it and continued: "You all know why we are here. Each of us has his own reasons for electing to join this group, but we all share a common purpose: to quell the Darkness that threatens to take hold of our world. It will not be easy, and it will not win you any friends. The anti-Muggle sentiment that fuels this movement goes far beyond the ideology of a small group of terrorists. It pervades our society at the highest levels, and while it may not drive decent men to do evil, too often it allows them to ignore it in others. We have seen some unfortunate examples of this lately."

"Too bloody right!" said Caradoc, and a murmur went around the table.

Molly's fists began to clench in her lap as she remembered the farce that had been Crispian Goyle's trial. It was no "accident" that had killed her dearest friend. Goyle had done it because Ginevra DiFillipis was a Muggle-born, and he could. His best mate's father sat on the Wizengamot, and his aunt had the ear...among other things, it was whispered...of the Undersecretary to the Minister. But there was no one to speak for Ginevra. Her parents weren't even allowed at the trial. Molly had tried to visit them in the aftermath of Ginevra's death, but they were so lost and bewildered by what had happened to their only daughter that it was nearly impossible to have a conversation with them. They just kept asking Molly to explain, over and over again, how a *necklace* could kill a strong, healthy twenty-four-year-old woman. Molly was ashamed that she hadn't been back to visit them since.

Dumbledore held up a large hand to quiet the group. "I will warn you now," he said, "that vigilantism won't be tolerated. Vengeance must not be our purpose. It would only serve as a distraction. Which brings me to the first order of business: we must define our immediate aims."

The meeting went on for two hours, and by the end of it, Molly's bladder was nearly bursting. Fortunately, Dumbledore called the meeting adjourned just as she began to think she might not make it to the toilet before pissing herself.

As the group began to break up, Molly pushed her way past Arthur, who was chatting near the doorway with Benjy. She whispered, "Loo," in his ear, but when she got out into the hallway, she saw four people in a queue that could only be for the bathroom.

She got in the back of it, her weight shifting uneasily from one foot to the other. Miss Figg came to stand behind her and said quietly, "I have it on good authority that there's another one upstairs." Molly gave her a grateful smile and hurried up to find it.

Five minutes later she was slightly lighter and considerably more comfortable. As she moved down the dark hallway toward the staircase, she was stopped by the sound of voices from a room whose door was slightly ajar.

"...what he was thinking, dragging you along."

Alastor Moody's voice, Molly thought, and he sounded angry.

"He didn't. I *am* capable of making my own decisions, thank you very much."

That was definitely Professor McGonagall's angry brogue. Molly didn't intend to eavesdrop, but she couldn't help being curious, and she didn't want to embarrass the pair by letting them know they were being overheard.

She shrank back, meaning to go back into the bathroom until the coast was clear, when Moody said, "Well, I won't have it. You're to stay out of it, do you understand me?"

That stopped Molly mid-step. She couldn't have imagined anyone talking that way to Professor McGonagall, and she both wanted and didn't want to hear the inevitable explosion.

Instead, there was a short silence, then she heard a floorboard creak and Moody's voice saying, "Minerva, please . . ."

He sounded plaintive this time.

Professor McGonagall's voice was calmer than Molly would have expected. "You've no right to forbid me to do anything. Do you understand *me*, Alastor Moody? You aren't my father. Nor my husband."

"Not fer lack o' tryin'."

"Let's not hash that over again..."

"You're the one brought it up."

"Well, I'm sorry," Professor McGonagall said. "But to the subject at hand, *I will* be part of this. I *am* part of it, whether I'm officially in the Order or not."

"Yeah, but I'm just askin' you...don't make a target of yerself. It's enough that people know you're Dumbledore's right hand and my . . . whatever you want to call what we are to each other."

"Lover?"

Professor McGonagall sounded amused.

*So the rumours are true*, Molly thought. She wasn't surprised in the least, but it gave her an odd feeling in the pit of her belly to hear Professor McGonagall say it just like that.

Moody said, "Yes, damn it. And doesn't that give me some right to ask you not to do this?"

"Yes," she said, so quietly that Molly almost missed it. "You have the right to ask, Alastor. You always have that right."

"And you have the right to disregard it, is that what you're saying?"

"Not to disregard it, no. But I've thought about it. And I simply can't sit by and let others do this without me. Not when I can help. I understand your feelings, and I love you for them, but this is something I must do for myself."

Molly smiled at that.

"Why?" asked Moody.

"Because this pure-blood mania harms people. And not just Muggles and Muggle-borns. The mess I managed to make of my life had its roots in exactly the kind of prejudice and elitism that reduces witches to bargaining chips and broodmares."

*Mess? Professor McGonagall? And what was that about broodmares?* Molly's hands went unconsciously to her belly again.

She knew she should move quietly through the hall and down the stairs, but somehow she found herself still rooted to her spot near the bathroom door.

She almost didn't hear what Moody said next, so quiet was his voice.

"So your life's a mess, is it?"

"You know I don't mean it that way."

"I'm not sure what you mean these days, Minerva."

The door began to open wider, and Molly quickly turned to make as if she were shutting the bathroom door behind her as Moody stepped out into the hallway.

He looked over at her and crooked her a sad smile, and Molly felt as if he knew she'd been eavesdropping. She could feel herself blushing, but Moody didn't say anything. He just trudged heavily down the hall and disappeared down the stairwell.

Molly wondered if Professor McGonagall would come after him, but she didn't, so after a few moments, Molly followed Moody down the stairs.

All evening, as she tried in vain to soothe a fussy Charlie to sleep, Molly thought about what Professor McGonagall had said.

She didn't tell Arthur what she'd overheard, but later that night, when they lay whispering in bed in their tiny flat, she told him the same thing she'd heard Professor McGonagall tell Moody: that she needed to be part of the fight against evil because it didn't just hurt people like Ginevra DiFillipis.

"It'll hurt our boys too," she said. "And this one. Especially if she's a girl." Molly patted her belly.

"What do you mean, Mols?" Arthur asked.

She turned over in bed and put a hand on his chest. "You and I are lucky. Our families didn't care who we married. But my parents were in an arranged marriage. Were yours?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"This pure-blood rot, it'll send things backwards. If they have their way, they'll make laws governing who can and can't marry. Maybe even force pure-blood witches to marry pure-blood wizards."

"That's ridiculous," said Arthur.

"No, it isn't. That's how it was only what, a hundred years ago? Do you want little Ginny to have to marry some Nott or Malfoy instead of a boy she might really love just because she has the right blood and that git Lucius wants a grandson with a pristine pedigree?"

"Little Ginny?"

"That's what I want to call her," said Molly, feeling a little defensive. "If it's a girl."

She relaxed when Arthur said, "Ginny". I like it." Molly could hear the smile in his voice. "Especially since my grandfather fully expects it to be 'Percy' if it's a boy."

After a moment, he added, "And our Ginny can marry whomever she likes. Or no one at all. We'll make sure of it."

Molly moved her body up against his and kissed his mouth.

"Do you suppose it'd wake Charlie if we were to fool around?" she asked.

His hand moved to her breast and began to toy with her nipple. "Not if you can manage to be quiet this time."

"Yes," she breathed. "I'll be quiet as a Puffskein."

/\*\*\*/

Albus Dumbledore sat by the fire in his quarters smoking a long pipe. He always felt a bit of a traitor, preferring Balkan Sobranie to the English wizarding blends sold in Diagon Alley, but there it was. He'd only ever taken one Muggle lover, but that one had left indelible traces.

The meeting had gone well. And he'd been surprised by the number of people there, especially the young folks. It warmed Albus's old heart to realise that they cared passionately about the plight of Muggles and Muggle-borns despite that fact that most of them were too young to remember the previous war and the pangs that accompanied the birth of their new, "modern" wizarding society. That there was a subtle but distinct backlash now was no surprise. Most of the Wizengamot was still old-guard, and old prejudices died hard, no matter the lip-service paid to progressive ideals. But their children . . . ah, they were the battleground now, and Albus intended to give no quarter.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock. When he opened the door, he was surprised to see Minerva standing there.

"I have the minutes from the meeting," she said. "May I come in?"

"Of course, my dear," said Albus, "but I didn't expect the minutes this evening."

"I had some time," she said, handing him a roll of parchment. She went over to the fire, holding her hands out in front of it to warm them.

He put the parchment on the table and said, "I thought you'd be staying in London tonight. Pomona is watching your House."

"I know. But my plans changed."

"I see," he said, searching her face, but there was nothing to see.

He said, "Well, since you're here, maybe you'd fancy a game of chess?"

Her features lifted at that, and he knew he'd been right not to press her about the reason for her unexpected appearance in his quarters. She wanted his company, and she'd get around to telling him about whatever was troubling her in her own time, if at all. That was the pattern of their friendship, and it seemed to work. Minerva was a different woman from the one who'd calmly bamboozled Albus into fathering her son thirty years ago, but in some respects, she remained very much the same.

They played, and he could tell her mind wasn't entirely on the game. That was part of the pattern too. Minerva McGonagall's emotions were almost never less than carefully masked, but they could often be sussed out by looking at the way she moved her pieces around the chessboard. An aggressive opening gambit was a declaration of anger, though not always at Albus. Timid game play, with her queen too carefully guarded, announced doubt or trepidation. Careless, distracted moves told Albus that she was conflicted or distressed.

As her rook fell to an obvious move of Albus's knight, he knew it was the latter.

Twenty-two minutes later, Minerva's white king removed his crown and set it down before Albus's bishop, and she sighed in what sounded to Albus like relief.

"Are you quite well, my dear?" he asked.

She turned back to him from the window she'd been staring out of. "I'm sorry?"

"I asked if you were well. I got the impression that your mind wasn't on the game."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I suppose I wasn't exactly a challenging opponent this evening."

"Somewhat less challenging than usual," he said. "Is there something on your mind?"

She sighed again. "Nothing and everything."

"Would a cup of tea help?" he asked.

"A cup of tea always helps," she replied, and he went to get the tea things himself rather than summoning a house-elf. He thought she might want the time to make up her mind to unburden herself and busied himself with fetching and warming the water and measuring the tea into the pot.

When the tea had steeped, he poured out, and she took her cup, warming her hands on it for a moment before taking a sip. As she gazed into the fire, Albus stayed silent, considering her face. At forty-eight, she was better looking than she had been at thirty, he thought. Still slim and angular in her features, she no longer seemed as hard. Her face had largely lost its wariness, and the near-grimace that had been a seemingly permanent fixture when she'd first come back to Hogwarts was far less often in evidence. She was as pale as ever, but not drawn, and the frown-lines that had been so striking on a thirty-year-old woman had recently been joined by fine wrinkles around her eyes that hinted that in the intervening years, smiling had also been part of her repertoire of facial expressions. Lately, though, Albus had again caught sight of the old grimace, and it worried him.

She turned back to him, and he put his cup down, ready to listen to whatever she chose to say.

She took another sip of her tea and said, "Alastor doesn't want me in the Order."

"Oh?"

"It's too dangerous, he says."

"He has a point."

"I can take care of myself, Albus."

"Of course. But I understand his concern. He's seen what the kind of men we're fighting are capable of."

"That's just it," she said. "He's seen too much, I think. He's always been touchy, but lately . . ." She shook her head. "Lately he's been almost impossible. Always looking over his shoulder. He doesn't even relax when we're alone. It's almost as if . . ."

The grimace made an appearance on her face, and she looked away from Albus again.

When she turned back to face him, her face was blotched with pink.

She swallowed audibly and said, "It's as if he expects me to curse him."

Albus frowned. "I'm sure that's not it."

"Can you blame him?"

She didn't often refer to what she'd done to her husband, but Albus knew it still weighed on her heavily.

Alastor's reaction to Minerva's confession had been more or less as Albus had expected it would be. Albus had been quite sure Alastor wouldn't turn her in, even if Moody himself hadn't been at first. What she had done was . . . surprising, yes, but hardly unforgiveable. In fact, Albus had been immensely relieved when he had discovered that she had only Transfigured Macnair rather than killed him and covered it up.

The familiar electric sensation of guilt pinged at him for a moment when he thought of what he had done, but he had become adept at shaking it off. If she ever found out about the Legilimency, she might never forgive him...possibly with reason...but he had needed to be sure.

The idea that Minerva might have murdered Macnair had crossed Albus's mind more than once as the years had passed with no word of what had become of him. Albus had pushed such thoughts forcefully aside. He had ultimately come to the same conclusion Alastor had: that Macnair had likely been killed by his creditors. And like Alastor, Albus had been puzzled by the lack of a body. But eventually, he had packed his concerns away as he and Minerva had settled into their friendship, and they hadn't arisen again, even when he'd discovered her deception about Malcolm.

Until Alastor had brought him that report.

What he had read in it had been more than surprising. And it had once again stirred up the idea that Minerva had perhaps had something to do with Macnair's disappearance. Albus hadn't believed her a murderer...not really...but he had to be certain.

So he had looked into her mind. He saw everything she'd later shown to Alastor and him, but more than that, he'd seen her desperation and her absolute certainty that the people most important to her would revile her once they'd discovered her secrets.

And Albus had felt ashamed of his doubts.

When Minerva had shown them the memory, Albus had been reassured by Alastor's reaction, but now it seemed that like many secrets, the ones Minerva had kept had worked like a Dark and subtle philtre, slowly poisoning her relationship with Moody.

He felt unutterably sad for both of them.

"Alastor is not afraid of you, Minerva," he said.

"No," she said. "He's afraid of himself."

Yes, Albus thought, with some surprise. *That's it precisely.*

# Chapter Thirty-One

*Chapter 31 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**15 August 1974**

Jaysus, but it was hot.

Alastor thrust two fingers under the collar of his Muggle shirt and tugged it away from the sticky skin of his neck.

Across the room, Robards was looking bored and uncomfortable, and Alastor could see his hand moving nervously from the table to his side, where Alastor knew his wand was hidden under the Muggle jacket. He caught Robards's eye and shook his head imperceptibly.

No cooling charms. He'd been very clear about that. The Muggles would notice, even if they didn't see him cast. These endless surveillance gigs were the bane of every Auror's professional life, and this pub was one of the worst. Smelly, cramped . . . the place didn't even have a decent bitter. Which was just as well, Alastor supposed. He could only nurse his drink along so far before he'd have to order another, and at least the pixie piss they served here wouldn't get him tight.

But it was so fucking *hot*.

Alastor looked over at his partner again. He looked like he was about to fall asleep. If he did, Alastor would chew him up one side and down the other. This mission might be tedious, but it was important. He'd followed bloody Fletcher's tracks all over the country, and he'd finally gotten a break when one of his contacts heard a rumour that Fletcher was hiding in plain sight, in rooms over a Muggle workman's bar in Bethnal Green.

If Alastor nabbed Otho Fletcher, not only would they put a notorious smuggler of Dark objects in Azkaban, but they might also be able to get something on the LeStrange boys, too. Enough to convince Ackerley to put them under surveillance, anyway.

A drop of sweat rolled into Alastor's good eye. It stung, and he swore, blotting at it with a dirty napkin. He blotted the other eye too, for good measure. Gods, but he hated the non-magical prosthesis! He felt naked without his magical eye, but it would have stood out too much, so it was sitting in a pouch in his pocket, doing no one any good.

Never mind. He was twice the man with a wand, even with half the eyes, compared with any Dark wizard. But Alastor would have liked the three-sixty vision his magical eye gave him. Robards was a decent lad, but very green, and Alastor didn't know if he'd be able to spot Fletcher if the bastard was Glamoured up.

Alastor half expected to see Robards's chin hitting his chest when he took a glance at him, but the young man was still awake, and Alastor saw him rub his eyes roughly to keep himself that way.

Good man. He'd make a passable Auror yet. Better than passable, if Alastor had his way. He'd requested Gawain Robards right out of training; it was one of the perks of being the senior field-Auror that he had his pick of the new recruits.

Alastor seemed to be in perpetual need of a new partner. None of the other senior Aurors wanted to work with him anymore. Too rigid, they complained. Always trying to take control, insisting everything be done exactly by the book when everyone knew that the best Aurors took the rules more as guidelines that could be discarded when the situation called for it. Well, bugger them. Lazy, that's what they were, always wanting to take shortcuts. Alastor would take a new Auror anytime. Gave him a chance to train 'em right, and they needed it, now that Amelia Bones had been bumped upstairs to be Deputy to the Head of Magical Law Enforcement. Since she'd left the training programme, the quality of recruits had taken a definite nosedive, in Alastor's not-so-humble opinion.

But Robards had something, and Alastor aimed to bring it out and shine it up.

He heard the doors behind him open, and looked over at his young partner, who was now alert. Alastor could see Robards's eyes follow the new arrivals, two men in dungarees and workman's shirts, who walked into Alastor's line of vision and stood at the short bar.

When Robards glanced over at him, Alastor picked up his drink, downed the last of it, got up, and went to the bar.

"Oi, there!" he called to the barman, who had served the two new arrivals and gone back to drying freshly-washed glasses with a rag.

"'Nother Watney's?" the man asked, stepping over to Alastor.

"Yeah, thanks."

Instead of taking his drink immediately back to the table, he took a few sips at the bar, surreptitiously studying the men standing next to him. He concentrated to see if he could sense anything magical about them, but there was nothing.

Satisfied that neither of the two was Fletcher, he took up his beer and went back to his seat near the door, signalling to Robards with a quick shake of his head that their quarry hadn't just walked in.

An hour and two more Watney's later, Alastor was almost ready to pack it in. No one else had come in, and it would start to look suspicious if he and Robards stayed much longer. Besides, Alastor wasn't entirely convinced that Robards could take much more to drink without getting pissed, which would make him a liability if anything were actually to happen. Alastor was about to signal to the young man that it was time to go, when he heard the door open again.

He saw Robards's eyes narrow as he looked at the newcomer, and Alastor's hand tensed but didn't move from the table. The man walked over to the bar, and as he did, Alastor thought he felt the slight *thrum* of magic as he went past. He caught Robards's eye and winked, which was the signal to stay ready. Robards's hand went to his side, and Alastor swivelled around in his chair. The man was talking quietly to the barkeep, leaning slightly on the bar. He was in a Muggle suit, which pricked up Alastor's suspicions even further. This was a workingman's bar, and in the three days he'd sussed it out, he'd never once seen a toff come in.

Alastor got up and went over to them. Deliberately slurring his words, he put his half-full glass down on the bar and said, "Be a mate an' get me a fresh one. Thissun's gone flat."

The man turned toward him, and the bottom fell out of Alastor's world.

It was Gerald Macnair.

Alastor didn't know how, but it was him, looking almost exactly as he had in those photos that had accompanied the French newspaper stories about his disappearance.

Alastor's hand went swiftly and automatically for his wand, but Macnair must have been anticipating it, because he was drawing too, and suddenly, they were duelling. Macnair managed to deflect Alastor's first Stunner; it rebounded and hit the floor near the bar, scorching the dirty wood. Alastor dodged Macnair's spell and fired again, but Macnair dropped to the floor and rolled under it. The mirror on the wall exploded in a shower of glass, and Alastor was dimly aware of Robards firing his own spells at Macnair, who, surprisingly, deflected those too.

Spells went back and forth, rebounding everywhere. If only he had his magical eye on, he could see exactly what Robards was doing, but as it was, Alastor was a little afraid of being hit by friendly fire, so he shouted at his partner, "I've got this! Cover the Muggles!"

He dodged a green jet of light, and when he heard the explosion hit the wall behind him, he realised that Macnair was duelling to kill. He fired a Stunner back, and it was rebounded, hitting Alastor in the right arm. He'd had his protection ready, so only the arm went numb, and Alastor was able to transfer his wand to his left hand before it even hit the ground.

Which was a damn good thing, because Macnair fired another *Avada Kedavra* at Alastor, who deflected it, deliberately absorbing some of its energy with his right shoulder, and he couldn't help screaming when the bone shattered.

Through his momentarily blurred vision, he saw Macnair leap agilely onto the bar and drop down behind it.

*Excellent. He's hemmed himself in.*

It was an amateur's mistake, and Alastor smiled, despite the pain in his arm.

He dropped down and crawled on his knees to the end of the bar. He took a second to glance around the room and saw Robards standing over the three Muggle men, who were huddled in a corner booth, eyes wide and jaws slack. Robards made as if to go to the other end of the bar, but Alastor shook his head. He Disillusioned himself and climbed, quietly but with some difficulty, on top of the bar, gesturing with his good arm at the far corner of the room.

Robards frowned, but fortunately, he caught on quickly and aimed his wand at the place Alastor had indicated. He looked at Alastor, who nodded.

Robards fired, and there was a small explosion when his spell hit the table in the corner.

The diversion almost worked...when Alastor looked over the edge of the bar, Macnair's wand was pointed in the direction of the explosion, but when Alastor edged further out to point his wand at Macnair, a shadow fell across the floor, and Macnair looked up in time to roll out of the way of Alastor's hex.

Alastor dropped down onto the floor next to him, his long experience helping him to ignore the explosion of pain in his broken shoulder, and Macnair kicked at him, missing his face by less than an inch. Before he could get his wand into position, however, Alastor landed his *Petrificus Totalus*.

Macnair instantly went still, and Alastor scrambled over to him, his movement hampered by his bad arm and the fact that he still held his wand at the ready in his good hand, in the unlikely-but-possible event that Macnair had some facility with wandless and wordless magic.

But he wasn't moving, except for the rise and fall of his respiration.

Transferring his wand carefully to his right hand, which by now had recovered enough to hold it, Alastor grabbed Macnair's shoulder and pulled him over onto his back. His face was fixed in an expression of fury, and suddenly it was superimposed in Alastor's mind with an image of Macnair sneering at Minerva . . . calling her a whore . . . hitting her . . . telling her she'd not see Malcolm again . . .

"*Crucio!*"

The spell was vomited forth from Alastor's mouth, and he could feel something like fire moving through his injured arm. Macnair's body jerked, coming off the floor and landing again with a dull thud, and Alastor's heart sang along with the sound.

He cast again, and Macnair's arms and legs jerked violently, despite his Petrification, and the acrid smell of urine filled Alastor's nose.

"*Crucio!*"

It felt so good...as if he were suddenly taking in lungfulls of air after having been underwater too long.

"*Crucio!*"

Gods, it was good! The sound of Macnair hitting the floor each time was bliss . . . it was like Honeydukes' best chocolate . . . like strong firewhisky . . . like orgasm . . .

"Moody . . ."

Minerva's drawn face . . .

"*Crucio!*"

"Moody!"

Minerva's bloodied nose . . .

"*Crucio!*"

"Moody, stop!"

Minerva's dead body . . .

"*Crucio!*"

"Shit, Moody, you're going to kill him!"

Pain ripped through Alastor's arm as someone grabbed it, directing it away from the body on the floor.

He howled and struck out at his tormentor, who let go the bad arm and, impossibly, pointed his wand straight at Alastor's face.

"Moody, relax! Don't make me hex you!"

"Wha . . ."

The toxic haze of fury and pain and pleasure began to clear as Alastor looked at the face of the man who'd grabbed him. Slowly, the image of Gerald Macnair's sneer faded from his mind, and Alastor found himself looking into the concerned face of his young partner.

"Robards?"

"Yeah, it's me. Give me your wand."

"Nothing doing, Robards, I..."

"Moody. The bad guy's down. You're injured. You're . . . you're not yourself. Give me your wand."

"The Muggles..."

"They're fine. I've Petrified them, and the clean-up crew will be here in a few minutes to take care of everything else."

*I lost control.*

*Jaysus, did I kill him?*

Alastor took a deep, shuddering breath, and Robards put a hand on his good arm to help him stand.

Alastor shook it off, jarring his injured shoulder again. Instead of screaming, he growled, "Get off, Robards, I'm no invalid!"

Robards backed away and busied himself by kneeling down to check on Macnair.

"He's alive," Robards said, after running a basic diagnostic. "But he's going to need Mungo's."

"Filth."

"Who is he?" Robards asked.

"Gerald Macnair."

"He someone MLE wanted?"

"Nah. MLE thought he was dead." To cover the tremor in his voice, Alastor spat, "Bastard."

Alastor knelt down next to Robards, who was tending to Macnair's eyes, spelling them shut so that his corneas wouldn't dry out too much.

When Robards moved out of the way, Alastor forced himself to look into the face that had made guest appearances in his nightmares for the past ten years.

And nearly pissed himself.

He knew that face, but it wasn't Gerald Macnair.

It was his brother, Walden.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

*Chapter 32 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

### Chapter Thirty-Two

**21 September 1974**

The flat was dark.

Minerva frowned and put her hand on her wand.

Alastor might simply have fallen asleep waiting for her, although at least a few candles should still be burning, and she would have expected him to wait up. She always waited for him when he was late...waited and tried not to worry, tried not let visions of him lying broken and alone in a field somewhere take up ominous residence in her thoughts. The idea that Alastor Moody had been relaxed enough to have gone to sleep before she arrived...more than two and a half hours later than he'd have expected her...was laughable.

Hand still on her wand, she touched the knob, and the familiar warmth passed through her as the wards shifted to permit her to enter. She stepped into the dark hallway, debating leaving the lights off, but she decided that if anyone was lurking in the shadows to attack her, he or she already knew Minerva was there, so she called out, "Alastor?" before lighting the candles with a flick of her wrist.

There was no answer, and a chill went through her.

*Ridiculous*, she chided herself. *He's just gone out.*

At half past ten?

*To the pub, then.*

But Alastor never went to the pub. Other than a pint or two on a weekend afternoon or a glass of wine with dinner, he didn't drink except when work or social obligation demanded it.

Until recently, anyway.

She had no idea what he'd been doing with his days since he'd been suspended from duty, but she couldn't help noticing the flask that had appeared at his side the one time she'd convinced him to go out for a walk with her. He wanted her to notice it, she thought; it was a challenge, to see what she might say about it. But she'd said nothing. Instead, she listened to his rages and, increasingly and more disturbingly, his black Irish silences, thankful when August had wound to a close and she could return to Hogwarts accompanied by a pang of guilt at leaving him to his own devices in a small flat with little but brooding and drinking to occupy his time.

He wasn't telling her the full story of his suspension, she knew that. He'd admitted to "going a little hard" on a suspect, but he hadn't told her why, and it worried her. "Mistaken identity" was all he'd said before he'd gone on a tear about how no other Auror had ever gotten so much as an official reprimand for using excessive force on a wizard suspected of illegal activity.

Minerva could have asked Amelia for more information...what kind of force he'd used and who the victim had been...but she hadn't. She found she didn't really want to know, and it shamed her.

She hung her cloak on the hook next to the door and went into the dark kitchen. Someone was sitting at the table, very still, silhouetted in the moonlight that came in through the back window. She whipped out her wand at the same moment she lit the candles with a wandless spell.

"Alastor, you scared me. Why are you sitting here in the dark?" she asked, lowering her wand.

"Waiting for you."

She exhaled with relief. Stowing her wand back in its pocket, she went to get a glass and filled it with water to wet her dry mouth. "I'm sorry I'm so late. Last-minute school business." She took a sip of the water, then moved to his chair and kissed him quickly on the side of the head before taking a seat across from him.

He said nothing, just sat watching her drink her water.

When she put the glass down, he said, "You've hidden things from me before, Minerva. Plenty. But that's the first time you've ever lied to my face. I'd stake my life on it."

Despite the water she'd just had, her mouth was dry again, and the creeping sensation of guilt picked at her chest.

There was no use denying it. Not when Senior Auror Alastor Moody was peering at her, both eyes focused on her face. For the first time ever, she wished his magical eye would roll around in his head, scanning for danger, as it usually did.

She said, "I'm sorry. I didn't want you to worry. I was..."

"I know where you were."

The guilt tightened into anger.

"How?"

He said nothing, so she repeated, "How?"

Silence.

"Alastor, *how did you know where I was?*" She needed him to say it.

"I followed you."

"When?"

"Tonight. When you left the school."

She hadn't seen him, but he must have been standing there all day, waiting for her to emerge from the gates.

"I had to know," he said.

"To know what?"

"What you've been doing. Where you've been going."

"And you didn't trust me?"

"Should I?"

It was like a physical blow to the belly, and she lost her wind for a moment. And when the moment was over, a simple fact presented itself: she had to leave him. It had been buried deep within her for months, but she hadn't wanted to confront it. Now it had burrowed up through her skin, and it could no longer be ignored.

As she pushed her chair back and stood, he stood too, saying, "You can't tell me you're angry *You?* When you've been sneaking off to do things *for him*."

"I've been doing things for the Order."

"Oh, and when almighty Dumbledore asks, you've got to jump, even if I ask you not to, is that it?"

"I'm not having this conversation again, Alastor."

She picked up her glass and carried it to the sink.

"Do you love him?"

She whirled around, and for a terrible moment, she felt like hexing him.

His voice was thin and plaintive when he said, "I wouldn't blame you for it. But I won't have you coming to my bed directly from his."

The glass missed him by a few inches and shattered against the wall.

She stood with her teeth clenched, rigid with the effort of keeping herself in control. She wanted to run at him, to claw at his face, to beat his chest with her fists, or maybe to fall on her knees and beg him to forgive her.

She studied his face, his dear, patchwork face: the silvery lines that told of his courage, the pit at the end of his nose that itched him damnably in the middle of the night, the piercing blue of his remaining eye that so often seemed to see right inside her. She'd looked at that face for thirteen years, seen it torn nearly to pieces, watched it knit together again, but never had it frightened her as it did in this moment. The face he wore now was nearly blank, like a glamour that didn't quite work. There seemed to be nothing behind it.

He took the flask from his pocket, unscrewed the top, and took a long drink.

Finally, she said, "I don't recognise you, Alastor."

"And I never knew you at all, did I? Not really."

And with that, it was over. There was nothing more to say that wouldn't be pointless scourging one another with months'-worth of poison.

She walked out of the kitchen and retrieved her cloak. He didn't follow.

She felt the whisper of his magic as the wards reformed after she'd closed the door and wondered if she'd be able to get through if she turned around to go back in. Her hand got to within an inch of the knob and hovered there a moment before dropping to her side again.

She spun on the spot and Apparated away.

## 5 January 1975

"Come on, Moody. Up and at 'em."

When Alastor opened his eyes, he was greeted by a wave of nausea and the sight of Kingsley Shacklebolt's smooth face too close to his.

"What the...? Budge up, Shacklebolt, or I might decide to puke on you." He pushed against Shacklebolt's broad chest.

Shacklebolt moved back, and Alastor swung his legs over the side of the settee, knocking over a Firewhisky bottle that clanged and sent pain-needles shooting through his head.

He ran a cardboard tongue around his mouth to try to wet it before speaking. "What're you doing here? It's Sunday...we're off."

Panic gripped him. He stood too quickly, and his belly turned over.

"Relax, Moody," said Shacklebolt. "It's still Sunday. You haven't missed any work." He eyed the fallen whiskey bottle and its neighbour. "Yet."

Alastor rubbed his eyes and sat back down. "So why are you here? Something up with the Rutland case?"

"No."

At Alastor's frown, Shacklebolt said, "There's an Order meeting. You're going."

"What do you know about it?"

"A little birdie told me."

*Christ, I hope it wasn't me.*

But it couldn't have been. He'd never let himself get drunk where anyone could see him.

"Who?" he asked.

"Let's just say that you've got a liability."

"Fletcher."

Shacklebolt said nothing, and Moody belched. The taste of stale liquor filled his mouth, and his stomach gave another sickly protest.

He said, "I told Dumbledore. But he thinks Fletcher's safe."

"He's got something on him," said Shacklebolt.

"Everyone's got something on him."

Shacklebolt chuckled.

"So, you joining the Order?" asked Moody.

Shacklebolt looked away and fiddled with the handle of his wand.

"Maybe."

"Good for you. Enjoy the meeting," Alastor said, lying back down.

"Get dressed. You're coming with me."

Alastor wasn't going to any fucking Order meeting ever again. Not after the last time. That first one after Minerva left him had been like a prolonged application of the Cruciatus. Sitting across the room from her, watching her but pretending not to . . . wondering why the hell he had said those things to her.

Scratch that, he knew why he'd said them. It was bloody simple. He'd wanted to hurt her the way he was hurting. He didn't really believe she'd been having it off with Dumbledore. But the worry for her safety, his annoyance at Dumbledore for letting her risk herself...and, yes, his jealousy, he could admit that...had coalesced into a simmering resentment, then exploded into fury when he discovered she'd not been telling him about her "missions." It felt as if she and Dumbledore had a life, a secret life, that he was no part of. And then she'd lied to him directly. That hurt.

He'd told Minerva he was looking forward to his enforced "vacation." "Finally," he'd said, a few days to relax and spend with her. While that hadn't been strictly true, he had

thought it would be better than it was. Minerva would be there with him, and spending the entire week alone together before she had to report back to Hogwarts was an enticing possibility.

But it had turned out to be a nightmare. She'd had work to do...a pile of pre-term paperwork and some project he was sure had to do with the Order but that she'd been evasive about, telling him that it was "Transfiguration research." And there were doubts, growing and festering in the rich, dark soil of unspoken questions.

She'd only asked him once about the incident that had led to his suspension, and he'd mumbled something about mistaken identity, embarrassed, but half hoping she'd press the issue. She hadn't, and that surprised him. No, it *infuriated* him. It was as if she'd given up on him already, just like those sods at the Auror Office who conveniently forgot about thirty years of good work once the great Alastor Moody had shown a moment of weakness. Ah, well. He'd not made many friends there, with his uncompromising principles and his record number of collars, almost twice what Scrimgeour had ever made. No one loved you for showing them up. But Minerva . . . he'd expected her to *care*.

It had only ever happened because he loved her so goddamn much.

And he'd wanted her to ask, so he could tell her.

So he'd taken to having a nip or two of Firewhisky to quiet the voice that said it was because she didn't love him. Then, too quickly, a nip had become a glass, and glass a bottle. He'd always been so careful with drink, but after Minerva was back at Hogwarts and never coming back to the flat, there seemed little point in being careful about much of anything.

Still didn't, truth to tell, but he didn't want the other Aurors to know he'd gone soft, so he kept it well out of the office and did his drinking at night and on days off. It wasn't a problem.

But somehow, Shacklebolt had known.

As soon as he'd been bumped up to full Auror, the young man had angled to be Moody's partner...Christ only knew why...and he didn't seem to care that Moody was no longer at the top of the heap.

He was still standing there looking expectantly at Alastor.

"Bugger off," Alastor said to him.

"I will. Once you get to that meeting."

"Why do you care if I go to some bleedin' meeting or not?"

Shacklebolt scuffed the soles of his shoes against Moody's dirty floor before answering.

"Because I think it'd do you good."

Moody grunted, and Shacklebolt said, "You're still okay at work, Alastor...I'll grant you that, but if you keep on the way you're doing, the time will come when you won't be. You and I aren't exactly best mates, but one thing I do know about you is that you need to work. You need a cause. And I happen to agree with you about the Death-Eater situation. The Ministry is mad to keep ignoring it, and I'm not the only one that thinks so. You working for the Order helps us, and it helps you. You're no good sitting around doing nothing, that's ruddy obvious," he said, nudging one of the Firewhisky bottles with his booted toe.

"Listen, Shacklebolt, there's things you don't..."

"You've got to face her, Moody."

He said sharply, "Oh, and you know about it, do you, Shacklebolt? Expert on women *and* Disillusionment charms, are you?"

"No. But I know a souse when I see one. And you didn't start being one until after Professor McGonagall's picture disappeared from your desk."

Shacklebolt pointed his wand at the dead soldiers and Vanished them.

"It's your choice, Moody. You can sit here and stew in your juices. Show up for work on Monday and go through the motions then come back here and drink yourself into a stupor at night. Or you can come to the meeting and do what you were born to do. It doesn't really matter to me either way, except I don't fancy having to cover for your sorry arse when you finally go down for good."

Shacklebolt looked at his shoes for a moment before continuing. "And it won't matter to Professor McGonagall. You can't change that. But you can change things for yourself. And keep fighting the bad guys. Better than fighting yourself, anyway."

"Get the fuck out of here, Shacklebolt."

The young man nodded, then turned and left.

Alastor shouted after him, "And I'm changin' the wards again, so don't bother coming back! Partner or no!"

One hour and two teaspoonfuls of Hangover Potion later, Alastor found himself shifting from foot to foot on the doorstep of Jones's house.

*Bugger all.*

He banged on the door hard with the heel of his hand. It opened to reveal the startled face of Hestia Jones.

"Moody! I . . . come in."

He said, "Afternoon, Hestia," and pushed past her into the small entryway.

The sitting room was less full than the last time he'd been there, and there were a lot of people Alastor didn't recognise. They all looked up when he entered the room, and he wanted to turn around and run out as fast as he could, but he stood his ground, clearing his throat loudly so they'd know he wasn't trying to sneak in like some slacker. When he looked at Shacklebolt, the young man gave him a subtle and respectful nod of acknowledgement.

"Good to see you again, Alastor," said Dumbledore before continuing with whatever he'd been on about before Alastor arrived.

Minerva was sitting to Dumbledore's right, and she looked at Alastor when he came in, but quickly turned her face back to her notebook.

Jaysus, but he could use a drink!

She was gold and he was the Niffler, but he refused to allow his eyes to be drawn to her during the rest of the meeting.

The meeting was adjourned, and Alastor hung back, having made the decision to speak to her at least, show her he was still alive and kicking, but he was accosted by the

Prewett brothers.

"Great to see you again, Auror Moody!" said one of them...he couldn't tell which. "The Order needs more trained men like you."

The other twin added, "Yeah. Too many housewives here."

"Some of those housewives actually could have become Aurors. Unlike you lot . . ."

Moody turned to see Molly Weasley looking at her brothers with murder in her eyes."

Alastor smiled at her. "It was a sorry day for the Aurors when you decided to get married instead of joining up, Madam Weasley."

"It wasn't exactly her decision, was it Mols?" said one of her brothers, elbowing her in the shoulder. "Little Billy kind of decided it for her."

Molly reddened, and the twins laughed.

Moody said, "I'd watch yerselves, if I were you. Your sister is far better with a wand than either of you lads, if I remember your field-trial scores rightly. Guts count less than brains in a duel. Too much of one without enough of the other will get you killed."

Both Prewett brothers just laughed again, eerily in tandem, and one said, "Reckon he's got us there, Fabe." Offering his hand to Moody, he said, "Glad you're back."

Alastor shook Gideon's hand and was about to speak when Fabian caught sight of someone and stretched a long arm up in a frantic wave, yelling, "Oi! Hold up there, mate!" and the two young men bustled away.

"It *is* good to see you, Auror Moody," said Molly.

"It's 'Alastor' to you."

"And I'm Molly."

"How's Arthur?"

"He's well. He's home with the boys tonight. Percy's got the croup, and I was stuck inside all day, so he told me to come. I needed some adult company."

"I'd expect so," said Alastor.

He saw her glance to her left and followed her eyes to where Minerva was standing close to Dumbledore as he bent near her ear so she could hear him.

When Alastor looked back, Molly was gone. His eyes shifted back to Minerva. She had seen him, and it seemed as if she was going to come over. He took a step toward her, then saw Dumbledore put a hand on her arm. She turned back to the old man, and he bent down to say something to her. She nodded and opened her notebook to make a note. When she closed it and took off her glasses, her eyes found Alastor again, but by then Edgar Bones had gone up to her, and she turned to speak to him. He said something, and she laughed...one of her genuine laughs, Alastor could tell...and she said something that made him laugh in turn.

Alastor just stood there, feeling like a firstie at a Hogwarts ball.

*To hell with it.*

She didn't want to speak to him. Why would she? He'd hurt her, and she'd left him. He should let her get on with it.

He fled before he could change his mind.

And once he was outside, all he wanted to do was go back in and find Minerva . . . apologise for the things he'd said, ask her to come back to the flat so they could talk, and finish the day in bed, worshipping every inch of her.

But no. That was for someone else now. Someone who wasn't a washed-up drunkard with a mug like a shattered mirror.

Shacklebolt caught up with him as he trudged down the path to the un-warded part of the garden to Apparate.

"Look, Moody . . ."

"What?"

"I've decided not to join."

Alastor nodded.

Shacklebolt said, "Dumbledore says we need friendlies inside the Ministry, and anyway . . ." He scuffed the toe of his boot in the dirt. "I've just made full Auror status. I don't want to..."

"You don't owe me any explanations," said Alastor. "Can't say I blame you."

"So are we square, then?"

"Yeah. We're square."

Shacklebolt's face relaxed, and Alastor started walking again.

He called over his shoulder, "But don't ever pull another stunt like today's. I don't appreciate being ambushed in me own flat."

"Got it. Partner."

Alastor just grunted and Apparated back home.

He lasted four more hours before he had a drink.

# Chapter Thirty-Three

*Chapter 33 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**7 June 1977**

Alastor's sense of Something Not Quite Right had been nudging him all afternoon.

He'd tried to tell the field team leader...that was a laugh!...about it, but Grimsley didn't want to hear it. Promoted to Senior Auror three years previously, during Alastor's enforced leave, Willard Grimsley took his charge to "supervise" Moody particularly seriously.

Why the hell couldn't it have been Scrimgeour? At least *he* was half-way competent, as humiliating as it would be to have an Academy training-mate as his supervisor.

But no. He'd got Grimsley. Who patronised Moody with an "I'll take that under advisement" when Alastor had alerted him that he thought something was off about the job.

Problem was, Alastor couldn't put his finger on it, couldn't articulate it. It was just odd that the Muggles had requested magical security. Normally, they wanted nothing to do with the Ministry of Magic, or so Alastor had always heard. He'd certainly never been deployed at their request before.

He looked up and down the street again. The barricades were in place, the Muggle police were patrolling, and the crowds seemed excited but controlled. There was no sign of magical activity.

Of course, nobody in MLE really believed the DEs would bother with disrupting a Muggle event. Baiting individual Muggles, that was more in their line. Which was why the office had only dispatched four Aurors to monitor the procession, despite the pleas from Parkinson, the poor sod assigned to liaise with the Muggle Ministry.

The energy in the crowd ratcheted up, and Alastor's good eye...the magical one was once again relegated to his pocket...skimmed over them, then turned to look down the street as the throng leant forward against the barricades.

The procession was moving toward them. First came a seemingly endless parade of twats in ornate uniforms, both on horseback and on foot. Then a troop of soldiers in high fur hats came marching along bearing the English flag. Grudgingly, Alastor swept his hat off his head when everyone around him did. A roar rose up from the crowd as the gold coach rolled into view. As it drew nearer, Alastor peered at it.

The sense of something amiss grew. Or maybe it was only the increased excitement of the crowd he sensed.

As the procession reached the square and began the long, slow rounding of the corner where the crowds were the thickest, the noise crescendoed into an almost unbearable scream of collective joy. Later, Alastor would wonder if it was chance or if he'd seen something earlier that registered in his subconscious, but as he scanned the scene, his eye caught on a guardsman marching behind the carriage. The man was a fraction out of step with the others. Not so much that most people would notice, but most people weren't Alastor Moody. His eye followed the guardsman, and Alastor took in the way his arm didn't quite swing up at the same angle as the rest of the soldiers' did.

The sense of foreboding was almost painful now, like a pressure in his head, and Alastor's bones knew that something was very wrong. And he was faced with a dilemma. He had no proof, other than his observation of minute variances in one soldier's stance and his Auror's instinct, but he had the feeling that if he didn't act, something terrible would happen. But if he were wrong . . . there would be a breach of the International Statute on a scale that hadn't occurred since the Magichesky Achranikov had tried and failed to protect the tsar from a magical assassin and had to stage a bombing...which had to be repeated, thanks to a communications glitch...and modify the memories of all the close observers they could find.

*Jaysus, Maria, n' Joseph! That's it.*

That's what this scene reminded him of: the crowds, the carriage, the insufficient magical protections...it was The Liberator's death all over again. The assassination of Alexander II was a case study in Auror training, one of the reading courses that most recruits paid little attention to. It was a textbook example of what not to do.

He looked at the guardsman, and it seemed for a moment that the man was looking right at him. A flicker of recognition clicked, but it was gone before Alastor could get his mind around it.

He made his decision.

He worked his way back a few feet and gave an almighty shove to the man in front of him, who went sprawling through the barricade. The attention of the crowd near Alastor was drawn to the man, and two police officers hurried over. Alastor wasted no time. He Disillusioned himself and Apparated on the spot, landing a foot away from the soldier he'd been watching. The man seemed to sense the magical disturbance, because he turned before Alastor grabbed him around the chest with both arms.

There was a moment in which Alastor thought he'd lost hold of him, but then there was the familiar pressing sensation, and darkness, and Alastor's arms were still around his mark.

Alastor aimed for one of the underground holding cells in the Ministry, but just when the pressure and darkness began to let up and light, he was wrenched back into the black. His lungs wouldn't expand, and his heart felt like it was going to explode.

*Bugger! Shite! Bollocks!*

The other wizard was trying to re-direct the Apparition. If he was successful, they'd end up God only knew where. Probably on Voldemort's front doorstep, and then Alastor would be the soup.

He ignored the churning in his belly and the pain in his chest and focussed all his energy on regaining control of the Apparition. He'd only ever had to do it on one previous occasion...almost no one was foolish enough to try to scuttle an Apparition in progress...but it was years ago. Both he and the suspect had come out of it all right back then, but Alastor was under no illusion that it had been anything but luck. That suspect's attempt had been half-arsed, as if he knew it was a terrible idea.

There was no such diffidence with this one. Alastor was being pulled forcefully in a direction he was sure he didn't care to go.

There was no air, and it was fast becoming a question of who'd pass out first.

*I'm god damned if it'll be me.*

His consciousness was funnelling away. Alastor marshalled his last bit of magical energy and concentrated on a single stone in the floor of the Ministry cell...the one with the scorch mark where a supposedly Petrified collar had surprised him by firing a wordless curse...just that stone and nothing else.

There was a burst of light, and his chest expanded. At the same moment, his back hit something hard enough that if he'd had any air left in his lungs, it would have been knocked out of him. Something warm and wet was on top of him, and when he opened his eyes, he saw the Death Eater's eyes only millimetres from his. They were lifeless and staring.

Alastor attempted to roll over and realised that the man's lower half was missing. A second later, he realised that part of him was too.

Pain struck with the ferocity of Fiendfyre. Alastor screamed. A junior staffer burst into the room, wand drawn. She started to say something, then bent over and vomited, the sounds of her retching echoing off the bare stone walls of the holding room, and Alastor knew he was going to die. He didn't mind at all. It would end his agony, and he could finally stop thinking about all the things he'd done wrong. He turned his head and watched as two crimson pools crept toward one another and met to form a shimmering lake. His body began to shake violently, but it didn't bother him. He wasn't living in it anymore.

Alastor had been brought up Catholic, at least until his mam had given up the cross for the bottle, and he tried to remember the prayer for forgiveness, but his brain had gone all funny, so he recited in his mind the only prayer he remembered.

*Hail, Mary . . . full of*

*Full of grace*

*Hail, Mary*

*Full of*

The pain receded, replaced by a welcoming cold.

*Mary*

*Grace*

*Mary. Grace, Mary. Grace. Marygrace. Marygrace. Mary, Mary, Mary*

He lost consciousness when they pulled the dead man off him.

## **9 June 1977**

Malcolm felt a fool.

He'd been standing outside the gates for almost an hour, shivering and shouting, before someone came.

"Bless me, Malcolm Macnair, is it?" Hagrid said, peering through the darkness at Malcolm's face, which was dimly illuminated by the glow from his wand.

"It is. It's good to see you, Hagrid," Malcolm said as Hagrid pulled the huge iron gate open a few feet to admit him.

When he stepped through, Hagrid grasped his arm and shook it until Malcolm thought it might break off.

"Good to see you, too. Sorry to keep you waiting, but I didn't know you were here until I heard you calling. Perffessor McGonagall didn't say you were expected."

"I'm not. She didn't know I was coming."

"Well, a fine surprise it'll be to her."

"I hope so."

They walked toward the main entryway. When they got there, Hagrid said, "If she's not in her office, try the library. If not the library, might be she's in the Headmaster's office. Merlin, but I hope your visit lift her spirits. She's..."

"What?"

"Aw, Malcolm . . . I oughtn't ter have said anything."

"But since you did, how's she been?"

"To be honest, I been worried about her. The last couple of days, she's been . . . well . . . lower than I ever seen her."

Malcolm put his hand on the big man's arm. "Thanks, Hagrid. I'm worried about her too."

"Ta, Malcolm."

He found her in her quarters. When she opened the door, she blanched, and it took a moment before she pulled him into a tight hug.

When she released him, he was struck by the dark circles under her eyes. It had been years since he'd seen them so pronounced.

"Mum..."

"You can put your bag in my room for now," she said, taking his cloak and hanging it on the hook near the door.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"I didn't know I was. I wanted to come as soon as I got your owl, but I only just got away. I had to finish a big order for the Hôpital Magie-Malades before I came."

She put a hand to his cheek. "Goodness, Malcolm, you're like ice! I'll get you some tea."

He didn't want tea, he wanted to talk about Alastor, but fetching tea was his mother's way of keeping order in a world that had gone mad, so he sat down while she retrieved a tea tray that held a teapot, two cups, and a tin of Brodie's. She took the seat next to him and began measuring out the tea into the pot.

Malcolm could wait no longer.

"Mum, how is he?"

"He's . . . he's still unconscious. But they're not sure . . . they don't think..."

The spoon she was using clattered to the tray as her hand flew up to cover her crumpling face. She rose quickly and turned away from Malcolm. This was the first time he'd ever seen her cry, and he felt ashamed and frightened, like the boy who had hidden behind the banister, listening to his father call his mother "a cold, conniving bitch" who deserved "what my mother got." His face grew hot.

He swallowed his fear and went to her, put his hands on her shoulders. She resisted his efforts, but he was stronger, and he forced her to turn to him. She was still covering her face, and he pulled her to him, his long arms enveloping her. She felt insubstantial and bird-like, in his embrace, like a stranger. She'd always seemed so constant, unbreakable. Her solidity had been part of "home" for him...there when he needed it, sure and strong as the stone upon which the Highlands were laid. But now she needed his strength, and he found he could give it.

She pressed her face to his chest, and he rubbed her back.

"Hey. It's okay. He's going to be okay. This is Alastor we're talking about. Do you really think he's going to let some Death Eater Splinch him to death?"

She gave a sound that might have been a laugh or a sob.

Eventually, her shoulders stopped shaking. He guided her over to the settee, one arm still around her, and they sat down.

"When can we see him?" he asked.

"I don't know. They won't admit anyone who isn't family. I tried, but..."

"That's all right. We'll get it arranged. You'll see."

A tartan handkerchief appeared in her fist, and she dabbed at her eyes and nose. She folded it in a neat square and put it back in her pocket.

Her voice was suddenly brisk as she said, "We'll go get you settled in the guest quarters."

"No need, Mum. I'll just stop at the Broomsticks or, worst come to worst, the Hog's Head."

"You'll do no such thing." She stood and smoothed her robes.

"It's fine. I'll just..."

"Please don't argue. I haven't the energy. I imagine you haven't eaten. I'll have Elgar arrange something."

"You shouldn't bother, I had a big lunch."

"Nonsense, you need to eat. Besides, Elgar will want to see you."

"Okay, thanks, Mum."

Forty-five minutes later, they were sitting at the dining table in her quarters with the Headmaster, who had come down shortly after receiving her message that Malcolm was there.

They discussed Alastor's situation, Malcolm's eyes sliding occasionally to his mother's face to gauge the emotional weather there. She seemed calm. Professor Dumbledore's presence was always reassuring, no matter who you were, Malcolm supposed. You felt that nothing truly terrible could ever happen while the Headmaster was around. It kept Malcolm sane whenever he thought about the dangerous work Mum was doing with the Order...or probably doing; she never told him about it.

"I used a bit of pull to have him transferred to a private room this afternoon," Professor Dumbledore said as he poured the wine. "I also spoke with the Healer in charge of his case. You will be permitted to visit him henceforward."

"Thank you, Albus," Mum said.

Elgar popped in with their soup, and as Malcolm smelled it, he allowed himself to relax for the first time since he'd arrived in Britain. When he brought the spoon to his lips, the sweet, verdant flavour of fresh peas enveloped his tongue, and it took him back to childhood with a sudden frisson of remembered pleasure. He'd loved his Scottish summers. He loved Paris too, but it got noisy and cloying when the weather turned warm, and he often found himself longing for Hogsmeade or Morayshire as he made his way through the already-dusty Quartier on a morning's ingredients run. Eliane loved Paris at any time of the year, though. It was in her blood, he supposed.

The conversation lagged while they ate, but once the bowls were cleared away, the talk turned once again to Alastor.

"He's going to need help when he gets out of hospital," said Dumbledore.

"They weren't able to re-attach the leg?" Malcolm asked, glancing at his mother, who shut her eyes briefly.

"Evidently not. He will have a prosthesis, but it will be some time before he's steady enough to use it without aid," Dumbledore said. "Alastor has sisters, has he not?"

"Yes," said Mum. "But they're not especially close. They're both in Ireland, and I think Siobhan's husband is very ill with some kind of wasting disease. Deirdre took over their father's herb business and has expanded it all over Europe."

"A herbologist? I had no idea," said Dumbledore.

Malcolm said, "Well, she doesn't have a degree. But she's excellent. As a matter of fact, I buy all my *Symphytum* from her. It's the best quality I've found anywhere." He grinned at Dumbledore. "Don't tell Professor Slughorn, though."

"Yes, his views on Irish comfrey are somewhat . . . vehement. I'm glad to hear you haven't taken everything your teachers said as gospel."

"Only some teachers, Professor."

There was an odd pause before Professor Dumbledore said, "I believe, Malcolm, that it's high time you call me by my given name."

Mum was quiet during the dinner. Malcolm guessed it was because she was contemplating Alastor's predicament, but you never could tell with Mum. He'd know what she was thinking when she told him, and not before.

When the port had been passed around, Dumbledore offered Malcolm a pipe. Mum wrinkled her nose, and Malcolm laughed.

"Okay, Mum. Point taken. Prof... Albus, thank you for dinner. It was wonderful. I'd forgotten how good the Hogwarts house-elves are."

"Ah, but their efforts cannot compare to the food in France, I think," Dumbledore said.

"The restaurants maybe. But to tell the truth, for a Potions master, I'm a terrible cook."

Dumbledore chuckled and said, "But surely Mademoiselle Giroux has some culinary skill? Didn't you tell me her aunt runs a restaurant?"

"I'm afraid Eliane's time at the restaurant didn't rub off. She's much safer handling a telescope than a sauté pan."

"Ah, yes. I'm given to understand that she is very gifted. When last I saw Headmistress Maxime, she was having great difficulty filling her Astronomy post. She was quite excited to hear that I was acquainted with your Mademoiselle Giroux. She seemed to believe I might exercise some influence."

"With me, certainly," said Malcolm. "But Eliane is pretty unmoveable once she takes a decision."

"Not unlike another lady of our mutual acquaintance, eh?"

"Oh, do stop it," said Mum.

"It is an aspect of your character that I have come to admire, my dear," said Albus.

The Headmaster said his goodnights and left.

Malcolm stayed another five minutes. His mother walked him to the door, and before he went, he said, "I owed Eliane that I'm going to stay on a few more days. Just to make sure Alastor isn't...to make sure he's properly on the mend."

Her jaw tightened for a fleeting moment, then she asked, "How is Eliane?"

"Well."

"I'm surprised she turned down the post at Beauxbatons. I thought she was having trouble getting enough private work."

"Yes. But she didn't want to move to Provence."

"She could still live in Paris and Apparate."

"Yes. I suppose so," Malcolm said. "She just has other ideas."

She laid a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't pry. Eliane's reasons are her business."

"It's all right, Mum." He leant down and kissed her cheek. "Good night."

She returned the kiss. "Good night."

As he lay in the small, too-firm four-poster in the Gryffindor guest quarters, Malcolm thought about Alastor. And his mum.

Their break-up had come as a shock to Malcolm when she'd written to him about it. They'd been together for thirteen years, and though they hadn't married, Malcolm had believed it would be a permanent arrangement. They'd seemed fine the last time they'd visited France the summer before the end. Maybe she'd been a little subdued, but nothing more. And when Malcolm had asked about the Order, he'd sensed tension in the room, and one or the other of them had always changed the subject. He'd assumed it was because they were trying to avoid revealing too much, but now he wondered.

Then, in October, he'd gotten what he thought of as The Letter. It had been odd, beginning with the usual news and ending with a few lines to explain that she and Alastor were "no longer seeing one another" and that she wished him well and hoped Malcolm would stay in touch with him, if he wished. Reading that letter had forced the colour from his face to the point that Eliane had been alarmed.

Once he'd got over the shock, he got angry. Not only had she sprung it on him as if it were a titbit of school gossip, she'd written that last stinging line that told him she had no understanding of what he felt about things.

*If he wished.* Of course he wished! Alastor had been like a father to him...more father than his real one had ever been...and this news was as painful as when she'd told him that his actual father had disappeared.

It had taken two weeks for him to simmer down and write back to her, and another week to muster the courage to write to Alastor, but he finally did, expressing honestly his sorrow at how things had turned out and telling him that he hoped he and Alastor would remain . . . what? He'd settled on the benign-sounding "friends", but he hoped Alastor would read between the lines and understand what Malcolm meant. Every morning when the owl post came, Malcolm had looked through the letters with an anxiety he tried and failed to hide from Eliane.

She'd said, "He will write. He is probably just trying to find the right words. He loves you, you know."

"I know."

Still, it was week before an owl bearing a letter in Alastor's familiar half-print, half-script arrived.

*1 November 1974*

*Dear Malcolm,*

*Thanks for your letter. No one is sorrier than me that your mother and I couldn't make a go of it. It wasn't her fault. I'm just a crazy old bastard, and I don't blame her for not putting up with me any longer. We aren't angry...or at least I'm not...but we haven't exactly been speaking since we went our separate ways. I wish her every happiness, and you can tell her that, if the opportunity comes up and you don't think she'll hex you for it.*

*To answer your question, I'm doing fine. Work's keeping me busy...yes, they let me back in, the buggers. Mostly small jobs and desk work, but eventually they'll need me in the field again when the you-know-whats really come out to play. I have a new partner, and once I kick his arse properly, I think he'll shape up nicely. Everything else is going along all right. I expect your mother would say I've let my hair get too long again, but other than that, I'm taking care of myself, so don't worry yourself over me.*

*You don't have to if you think it'd make her angry, but maybe you could let me know how she is once in a while. Amelia won't talk to me about her, which I guess I can understand.*

*Keep your eyes open and your wand at the ready. The times are getting dark. Constant vigilance, Malcolm.*

*Write again soon. It makes an old man happy.*

*Best,*

*Alastor*

Malcolm had been relieved. He sounded all right, and very much the Alastor Malcolm knew.

As he watched the shadows moving across the walls of the guest room, he wondered if Alastor would be the same when he awoke.

If he awoke.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

*Chapter 34 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**11 June 1977**

In the beginning, there was sound.

Something metallic pinged, and there was pain, sharp at first, then it receded like the tide, and he floated over it.

Then pain again. And then no pain.

And more sound. He thought it would go, like before, but it didn't, and the sound became voices. He knew this, though he didn't know what they were saying. It didn't matter, as long as he could just drift on the sea of no pain.

The voices became words...sounds still meaningless to him, but they *had* meaning, and the meaning taunted him, drawing nearer and flitting away.

He opened his eyes.

Pain! Light!

He shut them again, and the words said, "Here he is. Come on now, Moody. Open up again. Speak to him."

*Moody.* It meant something. Something . . . it was there. Just out of his reach.

A different voice, and more words, their familiarity soothing now instead of maddening. "Alastor? Alastor, can you hear me? Open your eyes."

The terrible light was waiting, but he wanted to see the voice. The soothing one, because it made him feel something, and that something wasn't pain.

He opened his eyes again and shut them. And opened them. And shut them. And opened . . . and this time, the light wasn't so bad, so he let them stay open.

The voice said, "Alastor," and it was a sigh, but it was a name. His name.

He saw shapes. And colour. And the shapes and colour became a face. The lovely, familiar face, all cheekbones and thin lips and pale skin, smiled down at him.

And Alastor was speaking, saying her name, but the face was frowning, and the only sound he heard was a strangled gargle. He was drowning, drowning in the sea of no pain . . . but drowning all the same, and he didn't want it. He wanted to keep looking at her.

Another face came into view and the lovely vision disappeared. A hand came behind Alastor's neck and propped him up. Another hand held a basin under Alastor's chin, and a voice said, "It's mucous, nothing to worry about. Spit."

Alastor did, and when he was done, he tried to speak again, but molten lead flowed through his head, dragging it back down to the pillow.

The lead tide overtook him, and he closed his eyes.

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Alastor woke again two days later. He was disoriented and combative...which both alarmed Minerva and gave her hope...and Malcolm had to help the Healer subdue him long enough to pour a Calming Draught into his mouth. Bile rose in Minerva's throat as the Healer put a hand over Alastor's mouth and held his nostrils shut. Alastor fought and sputtered, eventually swallowing and drawing a gasping breath. Malcolm and the Healer restrained his arms to prevent him from thrashing, and his eye finally drooped and closed, and his breathing slowed. Minerva thought he'd gone back to sleep, but suddenly, the bright blue eye snapped open, blinked a few times, and appeared to focus.

His voice was a sandpapery whisper.

"You dead?"

Minerva gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile and said, "No."

"Good. Wouldn't like that."

*Thank the gods.*

Minerva was no Healer, but she believed that Alastor had escaped the brain damage they had said sometimes occurred after massive blood loss.

She was about to speak to him, but his eye closed again, and she turned to the Healer in helpless alarm.

"Auror Moody, can you hear me?" the Healer asked loudly.

Alastor opened his eye, and Minerva relaxed again.

She made room at Alastor's bedside as the Healer withdrew his wand began to wave it.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Alastor shouted, startling everyone, and the Healer's wand flew from his hand to soar over the bed and clatter to the floor. At the same time, Alastor's right arm shot out, and Minerva knew he was going for his wand.

When it didn't spring into his hand, he shouted, "*Accio* my wand!" When no wand appeared, he roared and struggled to rise, but fell back against the bed with a hoarse howl.

Malcolm and Minerva were next to him, talking over one another, trying to soothe and calm him.

"*Incarcerous!*"

Ropes appeared and bound Alastor's arms to the bedrails.

The shocked, hollow look on Alastor's face would later appear in Minerva's nightmares.

"*Finite*," Alastor said.

Nothing happened.

"*Finite Incantatem!*"

"Don't waste your energy, Auror Moody. You're far too weak to do any more wandless magic," the Healer said. His face was red, and the smarmy smile he'd worn since entering the room had disappeared.

"Lemme up!"

"Not while there is a danger you will harm yourself."

"Isn't me I'm going to harm, you bastard."

The Healer went to the other side of the bed and picked up his wand.

Alastor struggled against the ropes.

"You're going to hurt yourself, Alastor," Minerva said. "If you calm down, I'm sure Healer Spleen will release the bonds."

"How do I know he's a Healer?"

"You're in St Mungo's. He's been caring for you for almost a week."

"And how do I know yer tellin' the truth?"

How could she answer?

Malcolm knelt by Alastor and spoke very quietly. "Alastor, you were injured. They saved your life. Don't you think that if anyone here wanted you dead, you'd already be buried?"

Alastor looked from Malcolm to Minerva.

"Let them help you. As they've done before," Malcolm said.

Alastor's breathing slowed, and at last he said, "Reckon you've got a point." To the Healer, he said, "Get these ropes off."

"Will you allow me to do my tests?" the Healer asked.

"Hah! Sure, why not?" Alastor said. "Now get 'em off."

The Healer stood there, as if considering, and Minerva said, "Please, Healer Spleen. He's fine now. He was only a little disoriented. And when you came at him with the wand..."

"I hardly 'came at him,'" Spleen said, sounding like a petulant child.

Minerva's temper rose, but she kept her voice steady. "No, but you gave him no warning. You can hardly blame him for reacting, after what he's been through."

Spleen's lips pressed together and curved upward in his imitation smile. He gave her no answer and turned back to his patient.

"I'm going to use my wand to do the tests. If you can remain calm, I will remove the ropes, but I will not hesitate to bind you again if you fight."

Alastor nodded once, and Spleen released the bonds.

He approached Alastor, wand drawn, and waited for a moment, as if challenging a tetchy Hippogriff. Alastor didn't move, his eye stony and fixed on Spleen's still-pink face. Spleen proceeded with the exam, waving his wand in arcs and complicated figures around Alastor's head. That completed, he took the chart from the end of Alastor's bed and pulled a self-inking quill from his robe pocket to make notes.

He said, "I need to test your cognitive functioning, so please try to pay attention."

"I'm fine," Alastor said. His glare was less intimidating without anything covering the empty socket where his right eye should have been.

Smile still cemented on his face, Spleen said, "Well, I think you should let me be the judge of your condition~~th~~*mm*?" He drew his wand again, and for a moment, Minerva thought Alastor would refuse, but he said, "Suit yerself."

Spleen took Alastor through a series of tests: of his eye, his ears, and the reflexes in his hands and arms. When he finished, Spleen tucked his wand away and picked up Alastor's chart again.

"My name is Healer Spleen," he said, quill moving rapidly across the parchment. "I'm going to ask you a few questions."

Without looking up from his note-taking, he asked, "Who is Minister for Magic?"

"Millie Bagnold."

Minerva and Malcolm exchanged a smile.

"What's your mother's name?"

"Clara. Was."

"My name is Healer Spleen. What year is it?"

"Nineteen seventy . . . seven."

"Month?"

"Ap... May. Maybe. Dunno."

Minerva tensed.

"I am Healer Spleen. What's the next word in this sentence: Never tickle a sleeping . . . ?"

"Dragon."

"Who is that man over there?" Spleen pointed to Malcolm.

"Malcolm Macnair."

"And this woman?"

"Minerva. Minerva McGonagall." He didn't look at her.

"And who am I?"

Alastor frowned.

Spleen looked up from his notes. "What's my name?"

"Hell if I know! Stop askin' stupid questions!" Alastor's eye closed again, but Minerva knew he hadn't fallen asleep.

She waited for the Healer to reassure him that some memory difficulty was to be expected, but there was silence as he wrote in the chart. He flipped it closed with a decisive *crack* that made Minerva jump, and Alastor's eye popped open again.

Spleen said, "Auror Moody, we have things to discuss."

"So. Discuss," Alastor said. His voice was stronger and his words clearer than when he had first awoken.

"You were very gravely injured."

"No kidding?"

Minerva let a laugh escape her, more out of a hysterical sort of relief than out of amusement. She suppressed it when Spleen looked over at her in irritation.

He cleared his throat and looked back at Alastor.

"We couldn't save your right leg."

Minerva watched Alastor's jaw work as if he were chewing a particularly gristly piece of meat. She bit down hard on her tongue to keep from crying.

The moments clicked agonisingly by, and finally, Alastor raised a shaky hand to scratch at his nose. "Imagine you couldn't find it."

Spleen's smile returned. "Quite. You were badly Splinched."

"Yeah. You might say that." Alastor's personality had re-emerged on the same trajectory as the strength of his voice. "So tell me, Healer . . ." He leant up to read the Healer's badge but gave a sharp hiss and flopped back against the pillow, his teeth clenched.

Spleen said, "I'll order more pain potion for you in a little while."

Alastor turned his head away from them, and when he turned it back, the grimace was gone. Minerva wondered how much effort his strong, even tone cost him when he asked, "When do I get out of here?"

"Oh . . ." Spleen chuckled as if at a small child's antics, and Minerva wanted to hex him.

"It will be quite some time. Probably a matter of weeks."

"No chance. Fix me up with a wooden leg, and I'll be out of yer hair."

"I'm afraid it isn't that simple. You lost nearly fifty percent of your blood volume. Frankly, no one expected you to survive. No patient in my experience has ever lost more than forty percent and lived, never mind neurologically intact."

"Which means?"

"It means that we don't know if your brain is functioning normally," said Spleen. "You have problems with immediate recall, among other difficulties. That could be temporary or permanent. We'll make some more tests over the next few days to be certain. There may be other sequelae that aren't yet apparent. At the very least, you'll be too weak to move for a few weeks. And fitting a prosthesis will be challenging, as you lost the leg above the knee, which makes things more complicated."

"Complicated," Alastor muttered, and the Healer looked at Minerva as if his patient's truculence were her fault.

She came up to the bed and said, "If you need anything, Alastor, I'll..."

Alastor gave a deep groan that Minerva felt in the pit of her belly. His hands groped down his leg to just above where the sheet went abruptly flat.

"What is it?" Minerva asked, alarmed.

"Nothing," Alastor said through gritted teeth.

"Alastor..."

"Nothing, I said!"

Spleen grabbed the sheet covering Alastor's legs, but Alastor held it fast.

"Leave it!"

"Auror Moody, I have to check your leg." He tore the sheet from Alastor's grip and pulled it down.

Minerva caught a glimpse of white bandages, spotted with red before Alastor tugged the sheet back up, shouting, "I said *leave it!*" His face was the colour of congealed oatmeal, and his eye careered around the room, as the magical one usually did, lighting briefly on Minerva, then on his injured leg and darting away.

Spleen had drawn his wand, obviously contemplating restraining his patient once again, but Malcolm stepped toward him, shaking his head in warning. Spleen lowered the wand. He put it in his pocket and took up the chart, pretending to ignore the angry wizard towering over him.

"Just get me some pain potion," Alastor said.

Spleen was scratching notes. "*Mmm, hmm.* As soon as I've..."

Minerva said, "*Now*, Healer Spleen."

Spleen's head snapped up in surprise at her sharp tone. He looked at Malcolm, whose gaze was blue steel. A shiver of primal fear ran through Minerva and blended into a great rush of love for her son.

"*Get it.*" Malcolm said. "Run, in fact."

When the door shut behind the Healer, Alastor, whose fists were clenched into tight balls, said, "Malcolm. How long have you been here?" His cadence was careful and measured.

"Since two days after your injury," Malcolm said. "Mum owled me."

Alastor's eye found Minerva, and she nearly touched his arm, but something in the way he looked at her made her hold back.

"Good of her," he said as if she weren't even there.

Malcolm glanced at his mother. He said, "Yeah. She was really worried, weren't you, Mum? We all were. You gave us a hell of a scare, Alastor."

"I've been in scrapes before."

"But not like this," Minerva said. "You frightened me. Us."

"I'm all right," Alastor said, too loudly.

The Healer came back in with the potion.

"This should help you sleep," he said.

"Bugger that. I'll sign whatever you like, but I'm getting out."

"Once you're stable and you've got some strength back, we can consider it," Spleen said, the tight little smile so wide it reminded Minerva of the exaggerated mouth of a puppet she'd seen once as a child in Inverleith Park.

"I'm stable enough," Alastor said.

The Healer's Punch-and-Judy grin never faded. "Take your potion," he said, and placed the phial on the stand beside the bed, far enough away that Alastor would have to stretch to reach it. "Perhaps you'll be calm enough for me to examine the stump then." He took his quill and made a show of writing a final note on Alastor's chart, then left without another word.

"Bastard," Alastor said. His face was still white.

Minerva retrieved the phial and gave it to Alastor, who took it without meeting her face. He uncorked it and sniffed deeply. Only then did his eye fix on her, as penetrating as always. He swallowed the potion and tossed the empty phial on the floor, where it shattered.

Malcolm said, "Alastor, is there anything we can do for you?"

"Yeah. Get me out of this hellhole."

"As soon as you're well enough. I promise." Malcolm took Alastor's hand. "*I promise.*"

The pain potion must have begun to work its magic, because Alastor made no reply, and his face relaxed. When he fell asleep, Minerva and Malcolm went out into the corridor.

Spleen was coming out of a room a few doors down, and the fury she'd banked bubbled to the surface and threatened to overflow if she didn't give it voice.

"Spleen," she called, striding over to him. "I want a word with you."

She had a word...several words...and by the time she finished, all traces of Spleen's smile had evaporated, and he was stammering apologies and nodding his head in vigorous agreement when she told him that she expected to hear that Senior Auror Alastor Moody had received nothing but the most respectful and compassionate treatment, lest Spleen find himself answering to her, to Malcolm, and to Albus Dumbledore, Auror Moody's dear friend.

Spleen hurried off down the corridor, and Malcolm said, "Well done, Mum," and put an arm around her shoulders.

"Wait here a minute," she said. She opened the door and peeked into Alastor's room. He was sleeping. She slipped in and went to the small cupboard. It was sealed, but a simple spell broke the charm, and the door swung open. She found what she was looking for and debated for a moment before choosing the patch over the magical eye. She carefully slipped it on Alastor, fastening the strap behind his head. He looked less vulnerable, more himself. As she looked at him, her hand reached out, stopped mid-air, and continued on to brush a strand of hair from his damp forehead. On impulse, she leant down and kissed it.

"Sleep well, love," she whispered and slipped back out of the room.

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It was two weeks before they could arrange to take Alastor home.

His strength had improved enough that the Healers had fitted him with a prosthetic leg...an ugly, unwieldy thing with a leather sleeve for his stump and straps that went

around his hips. It squeaked every time the fake knee bent. He still hadn't been able to take a step on it without a crutch, but he refused the pushchair Malcolm had requested from Mungo's.

Healer Spleen insisted that Alastor was still too weak to Apparate or Floo, so he and Malcolm had to take a Muggle taxi to Alastor's flat. Alastor hoped to Christ that there were no Death Eaters watching the flat when Malcolm helped him out of the taxi and up the three steps to the door.

"I hope you don't mind," Malcolm said, "Mum and I couldn't get past your wards, so Auror Shackbolt let us in. We got in some food and tidied up a bit."

Panic sliced through Alastor's chest. Shackbolt could always break through his wards, the only one who ever could. The man had a freakish talent for it. It used to be a game between them, but now it seemed sinister.

"You okay, Alastor?"

"Yeah, fine. You and your mum were here?"

"Yes. Just to get things ready for you. She wanted to come today, but she had something she had to do. I told her I could manage."

Alastor wondered if the "something" Minerva had to do was Order-related. Or maybe she'd taken the hints he'd dropped over the week and decided he wasn't worth the effort anymore. That would be good.

Malcolm drew his wand and removed Kingsley's wards. When the door opened, Alastor tensed, his magical eye darting about, searching for threats behind the walls of the entryway. He was so intent on his perimeter check that he didn't notice when his crutch caught on the threshold. He stepped out into space onto a leg he didn't feel, and for a moment, he was in free fall. A bolt of fire shot up his stump, and he cried out. Fortunately, Malcolm grabbed him, so anyone watching was spared the sight of Senior Auror and Pathetic Crip Alastor Moody falling arse over teakettle.

He stood panting, leaning against Malcolm. The pain subsided, and after he caught his breath, he nodded that he was ready to continue. Malcolm Summoned the crutch, and they went into the flat, the dull thud of the crutch and the faint but shrill squeal of his false knee mocking Alastor with each step.

The tiny sitting room was much cleaner than Alastor remembered.

So she'd seen the empty carry-out tins, the endless bottles of Butterbeer that were the only thing he kept in his cool cupboard because he was afraid if he ran out, he'd turn to something stronger to slake his thirst. Had she also seen the picture that sat on the table by his rumpled bed? Did she guess that sometimes, when his thoughts were so riotous he feared they might burst from his head and become real, he stroked his cock as he looked at her picture, not for the pleasure...it was hardly that, anyway...but to replace thinking with sensation? Sometimes he couldn't even make himself come. He might as well have taken a razor to his arms. Had she seen the picture and known that he beat off looking at it? Or worse, did she guess that he sometimes spoke to the picture?

The thought left him breathless again.

Malcolm saw him falter, and took his arm to lead him to a chair.

"Thanks," Alastor said once he was settled, and Malcolm helped him lift the bum leg to rest on the ottoman Minerva had insisted on buying to keep him from putting his feet up on the tea table. The sturdy blue burlap had worn away over the years to the point where the stuffing peeked through in spots, but he'd been unable to get rid of this, the only item they ever purchased together for the flat.

Malcolm made them tea and sandwiches, which tasted like heaven after the slop they'd given him in Mungo's. His belly full, Alastor realised that he was exhausted. As humiliating as it was, he had to let Malcolm help him hobble to the bathroom and get seated on the bog.

It was hard to balance on the seat, and he kept a hand on the side of the sink. He almost fell off when he reached for the paper.

When he came out, Malcolm had laid out a nightshirt and put a glass of water on the nightstand next to Alastor's bed along with a phial of pain potion and clean pads and gauze for his dressing. Holding out up a tin of something Alastor didn't recognise, Malcolm said, "My apprentice sent this over. It's a topical salve to help relieve the chafing from the prosthesis. I added some Tibetan potentilla to help with phantom pains. It's a little experimental, but I checked with Spleen, and he gave his blessing. Just rub a pea-sized amount into the grafted skin when you change the dressing."

"Great, thanks."

"I'll kip out there on the settee. Yell if you need anything else. Good night, Alastor."

"Good night."

It took Alastor nearly ten minutes to change his clothes and remove the false leg. He wished he had pyjamas; he looked . *incomplete* with just one white, hairy limb sticking out from under the nightshirt.

*Helpless.*

He sat there for a few minutes, using the calming exercises he'd learnt long ago in Auror training...ones he'd rarely had to use in combat...to quiet the madcap beating of his heart.

He took his wand from under his pillow. The cedar was warm in his hand, its power *athrum* that ran not through his hand but through his blood. His heart gradually slowed and steadied its pace, and he turned his attention to his dressing.

The stump was cool, only weeping slightly when he removed the bandage. When he couldn't put it off any longer, he opened Malcolm's salve and applied it. It hurt like a Banshee's wail, and he gritted his teeth to keep the moan from escaping, but after a few minutes, warmth spread over the electrified end of the leg, and it felt better than it had all day. In fact, Alastor decided he'd give the pain potion a miss tonight. It made him sleep too deeply, and you couldn't be too careful. He applied the fresh dressing and fell asleep, wand still in his hand.

He woke three times during the night, certain he heard voices in the room. He sat up in bed each time, trembling and sweating, wand at the ready. When he finally slept again, his dreams were filled with the reds and greens of curse-light and the lifeless eyes of the Death Eater.

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Malcolm had put breakfast on the table when Alastor came thumping in.

After they ate, Malcolm told him, "Mum said she'd be here at ten."

"She's coming here? Today?"

"Well . . . yes. Why?"

"Best not."

"I see." Malcolm spoke softly.

He didn't see. He didn't see at all, and that was fine by Alastor. It was better that way. Better Malcolm should think it was animosity rather than fear. He and Minerva didn't need to be lumbered with a useless old cripple who was prone to hearing things that weren't there. They both had better things to do.

Malcolm said, "She only wants to help. She cares about you."

"Don't need her help."

It sounded harsh and ungrateful, and it was. He was suddenly angry, and he couldn't be grateful that a woman who once loved him now felt sorry enough for him to spend her precious summer days caring for the gimp he'd become.

Malcolm said, "You'll need someone's help."

"Your mum's busy. And you've got your own life. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. Kingsley said he'd look in on me."

"Alastor..."

"I appreciate everything you've done. You bein' here has meant . . . meant a lot. But it's time for you to go home to your girl."

Malcolm shook his head, and Alastor got a sudden glimmer of intuition that Malcolm's troubles weren't all to do with him.

"What?" he asked Malcolm.

"Nothing."

"It's not nothing when you won't look me in the eye. I'm not that ugly."

Malcolm went over to the window and stared out for a few moments. Alastor stayed quiet. If Malcolm wanted to tell him what was bothering him, he would.

Malcolm turned back and said, "It's just that being here has given me time to think."

"Thinking's good," Alastor said. "More people should try it."

"Yeah, well . . . I'm thinking I might like to come back to Scotland."

"Nothing wrong with that. What's Eliane say?"

"I'm not sure . . . I'm not sure I want her to come with me."

Alastor's neutral "oh" belied the heaviness that blossomed in his chest. Malcolm and Eliane had been together for fourteen years. A year longer than he and Minerva had lasted.

"It isn't her fault," Malcolm said.

"Never said it was."

"She wants to get married."

"Not unreasonable after you've been living together for so long. But you don't want to."

"No, it isn't that I don't want to, but she wants to get married because she wants children. Time's running short, she says."

Eliane was only a few years older than Malcolm. So young, Alastor thought, the both of them. Had he and Minerva ever been so young?

Malcolm looked pained. "I shouldn't be bothering you with this."

"Don't be an eejit. Besides, it's good for me to think about someone else's troubles for a change. So, you don't want kids, or you don't want them now?"

Malcolm didn't say anything, and Alastor prodded him. "Answer my question. Do you want kids?"

"What I want or don't want doesn't come into it. I can't have children."

"Come again?"

"Alastor. I know about my family."

*Careful, man.*

He said, "And?"

"Oh, come on, Alastor. My grandfather? His brother? My father? The men in my family go mad. I can't do that to a child. And I can't do it to Eliane. I have to face that."

"Hold on here, Malcolm," Alastor said. "I know all about your great-uncle and your granddad. I've read the case files. Far as I can tell, they were cracked from the time they got out of short pants. You're thirty-what now? Thirty-two? You're not like them."

"You don't know that. My dad..."

"Wasn't mad. I knew your dad at school, not well, but some. And I know what your mother's told me, and he wasn't mad. He was a drunk and maybe a lot of other things, but there was nothing wrong with his head that his own da and Firewhisky didn't put there."

"No," Malcolm said, shaking his head. "I can't accept that. Every single man in my father's family has been violent since my great-grandfather started killing women as a hobby. Maybe even before, I don't know."

"Your Uncle Walden..." Alastor said, clutching at straws.

"Slaughters animals for a living. And Merlin knows what else on his days off."

There was a short silence.

Alastor broke it. "And that's why you've not married Eliane after all this time?"

Malcolm nodded.

"And what's she say about it?"

"She doesn't know. I haven't told her much about my family."

*Secrets. More bloody secrets.*

"Never thought I'd see the day," Alastor said.

"What?"

"That I'd call Malcolm Macnair a coward."

"How anxious would you be to tell the woman you love that every single man in your family ended up a killer?"

"I'd give you good odds she knows already. She never struck me as stupid."

"She's never said anything."

"Did you ever stop to think that it could be she's scared too?"

"Then why..."

"She *knows* you, Malcolm. Like I do. You're not a killer."

"Not now, but..."

"Not now, not ever."

He got up and lumbered over to where Malcolm stood.

"Malcolm," he said, digging his fingers into Malcolm's arm to make him remember. "Listen to me as you've never listened before. You aren't like them."

Malcolm stared at him.

*"You aren't like them."*

He saw that Malcolm didn't believe him.

Alastor released Malcolm's arm. "I think you should talk to your mother."

"I don't want to upset her."

"I don't blame you. But I think she'll be upset if you split with Eliane over this."

"She never..."

"Malcolm. I'm telling you again. Talk to her. Tell her your fears."

*Too many fucking secrets.*

They'd destroyed what Alastor and Minerva could have had, and Alastor was damned if he'd sit back and watch them destroy Malcolm.

He'd almost blurted it out. But the thought of what he might set in motion terrified Alastor, and he'd pulled back at the last moment, only giving Malcolm the pathetic response one gives to a child who's asked a difficult question: *Daddy's busy. Go talk to mummy.*

Opening the Pandora's box of Minerva's past could do as much damage as letting it alone. Merlin only knew how Malcolm would react to the news that the man he'd mourned as his father was a sad mirage. It wasn't Alastor's risk to take.

And somewhere, buried in a secret, shameful place in Alastor's heart, dwelt the fear that, learning the truth, Malcolm would pull away from him, too. Learning that his father, his real father, wasn't a drunken buffoon, but the greatest wizard of the age. A wizard who'd been there throughout his growing-up, guiding and teaching, doing all the things Alastor tried to do, but doing them effortlessly and much better than a man who only had occasional weekends and a week in summer to give to a boy who needed so much more.

A fierce, almost angry love for Malcolm took Alastor by surprise, and he turned away, pretending to get a sip of water, so Malcolm wouldn't see.

*Minerva will tell him.*

It had to be done, the scab ripped open like a wound that festered, and Alastor had plenty of first-hand experience to tell him how painful that would be.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

*Chapter 35 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**2 July 1978**

The door to Minerva's quarters banged open, and she swept through, dropping her bag on the table as she made a beeline for the liquor cabinet to pour herself two fingers of Cardhu. But she couldn't enjoy it; she was still too angry.

She'd kept her temper in check all afternoon, but now it threatened to erupt full force and needed an outlet. She yanked her wand out of its pocket to point it at one of the cushions on her settee. It exploded in a riot of feathers, their indolent fluttering only stoking Minerva's ire. She Transfigured them into needles that hovered in the air, and imagined them pricking Sirius bloody Black until he screamed.

Her fury was stemmed by the image but not scotched.

*I can go one better.*

She Transfigured the crimson velvet of the other cushion into a reasonable approximation of Black's too-handsome face, then sent the needles hurtling through the air to embed themselves in the cushion-cum-portrait. Black's fuzzy smirk changed to a silent scream of horror.

The effort involved in the magic she'd just performed served its purpose, and she felt calm enough to have her drink.

*Those idiots!*

Hadn't Albus's instructions been clear? Of course they had. But as usual, Black and Potter ignored the agreed-upon parameters of the job and broke into the house instead of simply watching it. Bad enough that they'd thus managed to alert the Death Eaters that the Order knew about their latest meeting place, but the dunderheads had also made a typical spectacle of their stupidity and put a pair of Muggle policemen in danger for good measure!

It had taken Minerva all of yesterday and the better part of today to persuade the Ministry not to charge Black and Potter with breaching the International Statute. Albus probably could have sorted it in a few hours, but Minerva was not Albus Dumbledore. She'd been tempted to allow them to warm their cockles with the Dementors in Azkaban until Albus returned from wherever he'd gone, but she didn't know how long that would be, and now that the ranks of the enemy had grown so alarmingly, the Order needed more witches and wizards with quick wands. Even arrogant louts like Sirius Black and James Potter.

And those shirts!

She was supposed to have met Malcolm at her parents' home for an early lunch, then gone on to London with him for matinee *Much Ado About Nothing* at the Aldwych. Instead, she'd sat for three hours in an MLE interrogation room, dodging Barty Crouch's questions about the significance of the golden phoenix emblem those two overgrown children had charmed onto their shirts. What part of "secret organisation" did they not understand?

For them, this war was another game, an excuse for them to put off growing up in favour of behaving like spoilt children they'd been at school. If Lupin had been with them, this latest stunt never would have happened, but as luck would have it, yesterday had been the full moon. Remus was a dose of just what Black and Potter needed, but why he put up with them was an enduring mystery. They clearly didn't give a hang about him, except as the brains of their trio. Had Black even thought once about what it would have meant for their friend had that little sixth-year prank succeeded and Remus had injured or even killed the Snape boy? Of course not. Thank Merlin James had stopped it at the last moment. Too bad he hadn't shown the same good sense yesterday.

Minerva was writing up a report for Albus on the incident when there was a knock at her door. It wasn't the Headmaster; she would have felt the shift in the castle's wards. The only other person in residence at Hogwarts over the summer was Hagrid, and he never came to her quarters.

Alastor's harangues about safety buzzed in her head, and she drew her wand.

"Who is it?"

"It's Malcolm, Mum."

She opened the door, and indeed, there was her son. She couldn't bring herself to challenge him, constant vigilance be damned, so she pulled him into the room and hugged him.

He kissed her cheek, and she said, "You're supposed to be at the theatre."

"I made Gran and Granddad go."

"*Och*, I can't believe you persuaded your grandfather to go to London."

"Gran and I wore him down."

"But why didn't you go? You've been aching to see some good theatre, you said."

"Yes, but it wasn't going to be the same without you, so I thought we might go another time. I'll be here a week."

He put his bag down on the floor next to the coat rack.

"I take it things didn't go well at the Ministry," he said, nodding at the bottle on the table.

"I was rather annoyed at having to be there instead of with my son, whom I haven't seen in four months," Minerva said as she went to pour Malcolm a bit of whiskey.

"It's all right," Malcolm said. "I took the opportunity to visit Alastor."

The warmth that suffused her at hearing his name was as strong as it had ever been, but Minerva was careful not to betray any emotion other than idle curiosity as she handed Malcolm his glass.

"Oh? And how is he keeping?"

"Fine, I guess," Malcolm said. "But he almost hexed me when I got to the door...his wards are . . . well, they're unusual."

"How so?"

"They have some kind of Sticking Charm...you can't move after you hit the third step. So I was standing there like a prat, and he yelled all kinds of questions through the door. I thought I'd passed the test, but when he opened up, his wand was pointing in my face, and he did a bunch of spells I didn't recognise to make sure I wasn't Polyjuiced or Imperiused."

"My gods."

"But other than that, he seemed okay. *Hates* the desk job. He's wasted there. He should be training new Aurors, but . . ."

"Yes. But."

They shared a sad smile, then Malcolm brightened and said, "Oh, you'll laugh at this: he's using his medal as a coaster. It has these awful tea-stains all over Merlin's face."

Minerva did laugh, for the first time that day, and it was good.

They had dinner in her suite, talking about this and that. Malcolm picked at his food, despite the fact that Elgar had brought up some of his favourites. He also drank three glasses of wine, which surprised Minerva.

She watched him poke at his pudding, and the fifth time she saw him slosh his spoon around in it without taking a bite, she spoke.

"Everything all right, lamb?"

He looked up from contemplating his dish. "Sure. Why?"

"You didn't eat much dinner, and now you've barely touched your cream-crowdie. When you've lost your sweet tooth, I know something's wrong."

"No, I'm okay. Thinking about work. We're busy."

"Which is why you've suddenly taken a week off to come visit."

He gave a grim chuckle. "I can't ever put anything past you, can I?"

"Of course not. I'm your mother."

When he didn't volunteer any other information, she asked, "Is it Alastor?"

He reached across the table and took her hand, which was scratching nervously at the tablecloth.

"No, Mum. Alastor's fine. Don't worry."

"I'll stop worrying when I'm dead. In the meantime, you might reassure me by telling me what's troubling you."

"It's nothing important."

She kept silent, waiting for him to go on, and after a minute, he did.

"It's just that I heard that Eliane's seeing someone."

"Oh," she said.

He put down his napkin, stood, and began to pace around the room, his excess of energy providing Minerva with a hint at the depth of his distress.

"I have no right to be upset, I know," he said.

"And when did rights have aught to do with feelings?"

He ignored her comment, saying, "I was the one who ended it. But it still stings, you know?"

She did. She sometimes wondered how she'd feel if Alastor took up with someone else. His injury had delayed the inevitable, but she dreaded the moment when some "helpful" person told her he had been seen out with another witch.

"Yes," she said. "Do you think she's serious about this new fellow?"

"Who knows?" he said, throwing up his hands. "The last time I heard from her was the note she sent on my birthday."

Minerva had been stunned and saddened when Malcolm told her he'd split up with Eliane. Whatever her original misgivings about the young woman her son had evidently fallen in love with, Minerva had come to like her. And Eliane had been very good to Malcolm, providing both an extra wand and much-needed moral support when he'd struck out on his own as a Potioneer, a risky move in a saturated market. They'd never said, but Minerva nursed a suspicion that Eliane had put her own career on hold in order to help him.

When Alastor...and then Albus...had predicted Malcolm and Eliane would marry, she'd pooh-poohed the idea. Years went by, and eventually it made Minerva cross whenever one of them brought it up. Couldn't they leave well-enough alone? In any event, it never happened, and Minerva wondered if it was due to what Malcolm had witnessed of her marriage to Gerald. They never spoke of it, but it must have left scars. Malcolm hadn't told her much about the reason for the break, but Minerva suspected it was more than the vague "growing apart" he'd cited.

She said, "I'm glad you're still friends."

"Friends . . ." he said, as if it were a four-letter word.

"Friends is something, Malcolm."

"I have enough bloody friends!"

His outburst surprised her, but she kept her own temper in check, asking only, "Why are you so angry?"

He stopped his pacing and turned to her.

"Gods, I'm sorry, Mum. I have no cause to be yelling at you."

"It's all right. But I thought it's what you wanted . . . for both of you to move on."

"What I wanted," he repeated, running a hand through his wavy hair in a way that reminded her of her father. "It wasn't what I wanted. But it's what I had to do."

"I don't understand."

"Never mind," he said, and she was about to press him but thought the better of it. Her experience, both as Malcolm's mother and the surrogate to scores of adolescents, told her that providing a firm and silent shoulder to cry on was more likely to result in his sharing his troubles.

Malcolm went over to the fireplace and picked up a photo of the three of them...himself, Minerva, and Alastor...on the last holiday they'd been on before he'd gone off to his apprenticeship in France.

"When did you put this up?" he asked. "I've always loved this picture. You look about twenty. And Alastor was so handsome."

Minerva went and looked over his shoulder. There was Alastor, whole and well, grinning, his solid arm around her. She smiled.

"A few months ago," she said. "I found I needed a reminder of pleasant things."

He put it down.

"It's been hard here, hasn't it?"

She nodded. "The Ministry isn't... Oh, I can't really talk about it."

"Even to me?"

"Albus insists on absolute secrecy. It's safer if nobody knows what they don't need to."

"Mum?" Malcolm said, "What if I come back to Scotland and join the Order officially?"

"No, I don't..."

"I've been thinking about it for a while. I'm well-enough established now that I could start up a new business here in no time."

"It wouldn't be good. For you or the Order."

"But..."

"Hear me out. You know I would love to have you here. But things are getting very bad, and I'm afraid they will get worse before they get better~~if~~ they get better. You have a thriving business and a life in Paris. And the work you're doing there on our behalf is so important if things go badly here. France will be his gateway to the Continent, Albus is certain of it. So we need good witches and wizards on the ground there."

"You'll have them. But we're ready to do more than gather intelligence. We're ready to fight."

"That's good. But let us hope it doesn't become necessary. We can't afford to lose people before they have to die. In the meantime . . ."

"Constant vigilance?"

"Yes."

He nodded, and she took a gamble: "And running away from Eliane won't solve your personal problems."

He let out an exasperated sigh.

"You're right, as usual," he said. "I'm being an idiot."

"Not at all. But Malcolm, if you've changed your mind about Eliane, if you want to be with her..."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because she wants a husband. Children."

"Many people do. Is that not what you want, then?"

"You have no idea how much I want it."

The way his voice broke made Minerva's own throat tight.

Clearing it, she said, "Then why on earth don't you do it?"

He wiped at his eyes with the heels of his hands. "Come on, Mum. It wouldn't be fair."

"How so?"

"Are you really going to pretend you don't know?" he asked.

When she didn't respond, he continued. "How many mad Macnairs do you think I'd father? One? Two? How many is too many?"

There was a roaring in her ears, and her belly attempted to turn over.

*Not now.*

Somehow, she'd convinced herself that Malcolm wouldn't see things the way she had done as a young woman faced with the same dilemma. That worry had been packed away with the last of her wedding silver and Gerald's clothes when she'd fled the horrors of her marriage for the promise of new freedom in her native land. She realised now that her unwillingness to admit the seriousness of Malcolm's feelings for Eliane Giroux had perhaps been another way of avoiding the issue.

He was staring at her, his heavy brows knit in resentment.

With great effort, she forced herself to say, "Not all the Macnairs are mad."

"No. Just about half, by my reckoning."

"Your Aunt Louisa is fine. And Walden."

"Uncle Walden may not be a murderer...yet...but can you look me in the eye and tell me you think he's completely sane?"

A memory of Malcolm and Walden playing together in the nursery at the Macnair manse shook her, and she blinked back tears

"No," she said.

"So now will you admit that it would be wicked for me to marry her?" Malcolm asked. His eyes were so much like Albus's...normally full of warmth and crinkled with what she hoped was habitual happiness, but changeable as the ocean and occasionally frightening in their intensity. They were cold now, two daggers of sea-blue ice piercing her, and she almost took a step backward.

"Why are you so angry with me?"

His fury deflated, and his eyes softened. "Oh, Mum. I'm not. I suppose I'm angry at the world at the moment. Not you."

He looked at the floor, and she knew he was trying to make up his mind to say something else.

"I just wonder . . ."

He stopped again, and shook his head.

"What?"

His face was pained. "Why you married him. You must have known about them. Great-Uncle Finn was sent to Azkaban not too many years before."

"I had no choice."

"What do you mean?"

"Things were quite different back then. I was a pure-blood girl from a good family. I did not get to choose my husband."

"You mean Granddad forced you to marry Father? If you didn't want to, why didn't you refuse?"

A familiar anger gripped her, and she crossed her arms tightly around her body. What did her son...or any of her students...know of difficult choices? They, who had been born into a post-Grindelwald world, with freedoms they enjoyed without understanding how much it had cost. And now there was another war because of it, because so many people failed to understand that, yes, constant vigilance was required to keep those hard-won freedoms for everyone, witch and wizard, pure-blood and Muggle-born.

She said, "You may have read a lot of history, Malcolm, but you don't understand much about how it affected individuals. If I had refused to marry Gerald Macnair, I would have been cut off from my family with no money and no prospects. Nobody would have hired a pure-blood girl who was in disgrace for a decent job. What sort of work do you suppose I would have found if I had not been able to complete my apprenticeship?"

"Granddad wouldn't have just cut you off. He's not like that."

"Not now. He changed when he saw what happened to me. Back then, he thought marriage to Gerald was the best thing for me."

"Didn't he know about the Macnairs?"

She spoke carefully. "I think he didn't delve too deeply into what would have been considered their personal affairs. The match, on the outside, had only advantages for me and for the McGonagall family. He later regretted it."

"Gods," Malcolm said, letting out a breath. After a few moments, he said, "So you never loved my father."

"I came to care for him, Malcolm. And I was sorry for him. He was not an evil person, but he did suffer from the afflictions of being a Macnair. I can't say whether he was mad...I think not...but his upbringing was horrific. And of course, he had problems with drink, which didn't help matters. You know that. But he wasn't like his father. He was simply a weak man."

*And you are not like him.*

Malcolm said firmly, "I cannot marry Eliane."

"Malcolm..."

"I'm decided. I can't risk it. Even if I never go mad, what of our children?"

"You don't know that your children would be like the Macnairs. They would be raised very differently."

"Yes, but that doesn't change things. There's been altogether enough misery on the Macnair account. It should stop with me."

"Oh, my darling..."

"No, Mum. That's all there is to it. But I'm glad we talked about it. It's helped me understand a few things." He went to get his bag. "I should go. It's late. I'm sorry I was cross with you. None of this is your fault. I'm just upset, and I needed to lash out at someone. I'm sorry it was you."

He kissed her cheek. "I love you."

"I love you too." She put a hand on his arm as he turned to go. "We'll talk more tomorrow, all right?"

"Of course. And I'll see about getting more tickets for the play. Good night."

Minerva was unsurprised that sleep eluded her that night. Around two, she rose from her bed and went to her study. She sat at her desk and withdrew parchment and quill. To the parchment, she committed every word she'd ever wanted to tell her son about the things she'd done, the choices she'd made, and why. She read it over several times, stopping in between to fetch a dram of whisky, then took her wand and immolated the letter.

She returned to bed, more settled. She knew what she had to do.

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They had breakfast in her quarters the next morning. Malcolm seemed happier, perhaps at having the wisdom of his decision confirmed.

They played a game of chess, which Minerva lost in record time.

Afterwards, Malcolm said, "I could use some exercise. How about a walk around the lake?"

They had planned to go to London after lunch, then dinner and overnight at Minerva's parents', barring any emergencies. If she wanted to have the dreaded conversation with Malcolm, it was now or never.

Her hands shook as she smoothed her hair, then pulled at her high collar.

Malcolm was Transfiguring his boots into shoes more suitable for hill-walking.

"Wait, Malcolm. There's something I need to discuss with you."

He gave her a questioning look.

"Please, sit down," she said. He looked at her in surprise but did as she asked.

She seated herself across the tea table from him. "Before you make any irrevocable decisions about Eliane, I need to tell you something."

"Yes?"

"I love you very much. Please remember that when I tell you."

He chuckled nervously. "Sure, Mum. Just tell me."

She clutched absently at the folds of her robes. He noticed, and she forced herself to fold her hands calmly in her lap.

"Mum, you're scaring me. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Nothing is wrong. Not with you, at any rate. That's what I need to tell you about."

He waited, searching her face, while she gathered her courage.

*No more lies.*

"Gerald Macnair was not your father."

It was her turn to wait, breath suspended, while he absorbed the information.

"Not my father?" Malcolm frowned in the way he used to when confronting a difficult Transfiguration exercise. "How could he not be my father?"

"Malcolm, think."

He paled, and swallowed audibly. His eyes closed for a moment, then he said, "I see. I was a mistake."

"No! You were *not* a mistake! It was all for you."

"What in Merlin's name are you talking about?"

"When I found out about the Macnairs, I thought the same as you. I didn't want to curse my child to a life of madness and violence. But I couldn't back out of the marriage contract, do you see? So I turned to someone else."

"Turned to... you mean you deliberately got pregnant? Before you married Father?"

"Yes."

Malcolm got up and walked to the window, putting his large hands down to lean against the window-seat.

She said, "Say something, please."

He turned back to her, his face alarmingly blank.

"I don't know what to say. What to think about this," he said.

"I know it's hard to take in."

Then he asked the question she'd been dreading.

"Who was he?"

She shook her head and said, "It hardly matters now."

"Maybe not to you, but it bloody well matters to me! Who was he, Mum? Did you . . . did you love him?"

"No. Not that way. He was a friend. That's all."

"*Who?*"

"A good man. A kind man."

"Damn it, can't you just tell me who he was?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because he wouldn't want me to."

Malcolm stared at her, incredulous.

"Bugger what he wants! He made you pregnant. Did he just walk away once the deed was done?"

"He didn't know."

"What?"

"I tricked him into it."

Malcolm rubbed his head as if trying to clear it.

"I can't believe this," he said, turning and pacing away from her again.

She rose and followed him, speaking to his back. "I'm not proud of it. But I was desperate, and I wasn't sure he'd agree."

Malcolm said nothing, and it took all her willpower not to touch him. When next he spoke, he sounded like the little boy who'd asked if his father was ever coming home, and her heart broke for him.

"Does he know about me?"

"He found out. Some years ago. By accident."

"And?"

"He was angry. And he was sad that I'd kept it from him."

"Then why hasn't he contacted me? Tried to see me?"

"He . . . he followed you as you grew up. He cared deeply about your welfare once he found out about you. But he was not in a position to be a father to you, so he felt it would be unfair to approach you about it."

"He was married," Malcolm said dully.

"No. That wasn't it."

"Then what was it?"

"His job. His position . . . you have to understand that he had no idea this might happen."

"This' being me."

"Oh, Malcolm..."

"How could he have no idea that you might end up pregnant if he slept with you? Was he a complete fool, or just a randy bastard?"

"Don't you dare!" she shouted, and Malcolm recoiled as if he'd been slapped.

"Mum..."

"No, you have no right to judge him! I lied to him, and I used him, used our friendship. And he forgave me, even though I believe it nearly killed him to find that he had a son he couldn't raise. He wasn't... *Malcolm*?"

He had taken two staggering steps backward and clapped a hand over his mouth.

He looked like he was going to be sick.

"Malcolm, love, what..."

"It's him, isn't it?" he whispered.

"I don't..."

"It's Albus."

And there it was. At last.

"Isn't it?" he asked again.

There was nothing she could say that wouldn't be either a betrayal or a lie, and she was done with both.

"I cannot give you an answer."

"My gods," Malcolm said. "My gods."

"I am so sorry, Malcolm. For not telling you a long time ago." Despite her best efforts, a tear escaped and made its way down her cheek, followed by another, then another, although she made no sound.

He watched her for a minute, then pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and gave it to her.

"Thank you," she said. She felt the weight of his gaze as she dabbed at eyes that refused to stop running.

When she was able to control the tears, she handed the handkerchief back. He folded it and put it in his pocket, then surprised her by putting his arms around her and holding her close.

He said, "I can't help being angry, Mum. Not about what you did, but for keeping it from me. But I can understand why you did it."

She pulled away and looked at his face. "Can you?"

"Yes. I still don't think it was right, but I know you. You did what you thought was best."

Malcolm shook his head sadly. "All this time, Mum. You kept this secret all this time . . . and Albus . . . all those private lessons. I don't know why I didn't twig to it earlier. It was right there, staring me in the mirror for years . . ."

He laughed abruptly, startling her, and said, "I guess I should thank you. I'm glad you didn't choose some dim-witted, spotty schoolboy for my father."

He went to the window again and stared out, as if searching the grey sky for answers.

"So you and Albus were lovers?"

"No. It was just the once."

"And since?"

"No. Albus has been nothing but kind to me...and to you...but he doesn't love me. Not like that."

"Does he love me, do you think?"

"I'm sure of it. In his own way. It may not be the way you want, but he does love you."

"I don't actually know what I want. I can't suddenly think of Albus as my father. It would be easier if you'd told me it was Alastor."

Her chest tightened. "I wish it had been."

"You could've married Alastor, Mum. Had more children."

She wanted to embrace him and hold him as she had when he was a little boy with some small hurt. Because what he meant was: we could have been a real family. Gods, how Malcolm had wanted that! He never said it, not directly, but it had been so plain to Minerva. But she couldn't sign another marriage contract, bind herself to another

man...even Alastor.

She said, "No. After you were born, I made sure there would be no more children. I couldn't risk it with your fa...with Gerald."

She told him the whole story, of the way she'd manipulated Albus and of the potions, and when she'd finished, his mouth was open in shock. But it wasn't for the reason she'd thought.

"That potion...you might have bled to death!"

"But I didn't."

"I've only ever read about it...easy to brew, but I'd never dare dispense it to anyone but a Healer. You took an enormous risk." He grasped her hands. "The books say the pain is terrible."

"It was bad, yes."

"I'm so sorry."

"I'm sorry too, my darling boy. Sorry you didn't have proper father . . . brothers and sisters."

They stood, hands clasped for a few more moments, then he asked, "So what do we do? About Albus?"

"You have to decide that."

"I think . . . I think I have to speak to him."

"What will you say?"

"I don't know. But I'll come to see him when he gets back."

"I'm not sure when that will be."

"Before September, I assume?"

"Yes. I'll owl you when I know," she said. "Should I tell him we've spoken? Before you come?"

"Maybe we should do it together."

"Yes, let's," she said, brightening. "Everything out in the open. That's exactly right."

*Everything in the open.*

The relief that had begun to come over her evaporated when she remembered the other half of the conversation she meant to have with Malcolm.

*Let it go for another time. He's had enough of a shock.*

*No. I won't keep it from him for one more day.*

Her thoughts travelled back to the afternoon she'd told Alastor about Gerald. And to everything that had happened after. It came to her all at once that she'd been so terribly, terribly wrong about almost every important thing in her life. All the things she'd thought she could manage, with her great talent and keen intelligence, had spiralled so far out of her control and hurt the people she'd wanted to protect.

*Fool!*

She'd forgotten the most fundamental lesson every witch or wizard learned in the first month at Hogwarts: magic could not be totally controlled. It could be channelled, it could be focused, but it would always have an element of unpredictability that had to be respected. What was the first thing Albus had taught her about Transfiguration? It changes things. Not only on the surface, but underneath, in hidden and unforeseeable ways. However skilled the practitioner, a hedgehog would never be a pincushion, just as she herself would never be a cat. Her essential Minervaness would always exist and would come out.

Like the truth. It was a sort of magic too, and she'd failed to recognise and respect it.

She looked at her beloved son and saw that his lovely smile had returned.

He hugged her again.

"Mum, you know what this means? I can marry Eliane. We can have a family!"

He went to gather his cloak.

"Malcolm..."

"Sorry to run, Mum, but I've got to see her. Please, Merlin, don't let it be too late . . ."

*Too late.*

Near-panic rose in her breast as he made for the door.

"Malcolm, wait, please."

Her tone stopped him.

"What?"

"Come sit down. I have something else to tell you."

# Chapter Thirty-Six

*Chapter 36 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**10 June 1979**

Albus hesitated for just a second before stepping into the open arms of a beaming Malcolm. As they embraced, he glanced at Minerva over Malcolm's shoulder. Her face would have been inscrutable had he not known her so well. The way her lips pressed tightly together, combined with the hint of pink in her cheeks, told him that she was trying to keep her emotions in check.

And why shouldn't she be emotional? This was her son's wedding, after all.

Their son's wedding.

He still didn't allow himself to think of it too often. Since Minerva's confession, he'd spent considerable time examining his feelings, looking for the requisite emotions. Not finding them, he had been both disappointed and relieved. The concept of having a child remained as abstract as the idea of having a tail, even after Malcolm had confronted him with his newfound knowledge.

"Why?" Malcolm had asked.

Albus's answers...something about caring for Minerva, wanting to give her control over one thing in the obscenity that was her betrothal and marriage, as well as an admission that her request had appealed to his unforgiveable vanity...had been carefully prepared against just this eventuality, and they utterly failed to satisfy Malcolm, who had shaken his head in irritation.

"No. I mean, why did you never tell me?"

"By the time I found out, you were a teenager . . . nearly grown. I didn't think you...or your mother...would appreciate my trying to insinuate myself into your lives in that way at that point."

"You might have asked."

"Perhaps. But by then, you had Alastor. My interference might have soured that for you all. At the very least, it would have complicated things between your mother and him."

"Those are facile answers, Albus," Malcolm said, his steady gaze penetrating, searching for a deeper truth in Albus's face.

And there it was. Yet another moment at which Albus had to decide if the truth about his . . . peculiarity . . . was a better or worse angel. His persona had been meticulously constructed over the years, his frequent musings on the importance of love adding to his legend. How could he say aloud that he, the great and mighty Albus Dumbledore, lacked the ability to wield this most human and powerful of all magics?

It seemed an intolerable admission, more because of Minerva than Malcolm. She'd always held him in such regard, and he couldn't bear to shatter her illusions about him.

It struck him suddenly that he'd been closer to her than to anyone since Gellert, and he nearly laughed aloud at the irony.

He told Malcolm, "You're right. My answers are too easy. But they are all I have. I'm not sure what else you want of me."

"Just the truth."

Malcolm's eyes sought and held Albus's. Albus looked away first.

"I would never ask what you can't give." The steel that had lined Malcolm's earlier words was absent. "You've been good to me and to Mum. I suppose I just wish things had been different. For all of us."

"If wishes were Thestrals, Muggles would fly," Minerva said.

Both men turned to her. She'd been silent after Malcolm had begun what was obviously a rehearsed speech about how he had made the discovery that Albus was his natural father.

Albus chuckled in spite of himself, and she grimaced.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Malcolm gave his mother a tight smile that looked like it had come straight off her own face.

Some of the tension in the room had dissipated, however, and Minerva said, "So everyone knows the truth now."

That his mother had lied about the fate of the man Malcolm had known as his father appeared to trouble Malcolm less than the discovery of his actual paternity, and Albus wondered if perhaps he had had drawn his own conclusions about Macnair's disappearance before Minerva had told him everything.

*Well, not quite everything.*

Malcolm's story had not included his mother's relations with Petrus Berquier. Albus supposed there were some things she was still not prepared to share with her son, for which he could hardly blame her.

*Her son.*

Malcolm had gone back to France after their confrontation, and his occasional letters continued as they always had: warm, affectionate even, but Albus was at sixes and sevens when he sat down to try to answer them. His previous easy, avuncular, tone seemed wrong now, somehow, and he had nothing with which to replace it except greater formality.

Yet now, here Albus was, playing a father's role at Malcolm's wedding.

The corner of Minerva's mouth quirked upward when she saw him, still clasped in Malcolm's embrace, looking at her. He returned the smile and stepped back, keeping his hands on Malcolm's forearms.

"I wish you every happiness," he said.

"Thank you. And thank you for standing up with me." Malcolm said.

"It was an honour."

Eliane stood on her tiptoes to kiss Albus on both cheeks in the Gallic fashion.

"I am so happy to have met you at last, Professor," she said. "Thank you for coming to our wedding. It means a great deal to us."

Albus wondered if Malcolm had told her.

Then the other participants in the marriage rite...Minerva, and Eliane's parents, Apolline and Lothaire...exchanged embraces, and the officiant shook the wizards' hands and kissed the witches' cheeks.

The newlyweds then went out to receive the congratulations of the thirty-odd friends and family who had gathered in Eliane's aunt's small garden in the countryside outside Paris to see them married. Albus made pleasant conversation with the officiant as Minerva, Lothaire, and Apolline greeted guests.

When her duties as mother of the groom were completed for the moment, Minerva returned to talk with Albus. A few minutes later, Malcolm and Eliane made their way back to them.

"Have either of you seen Alastor?" Malcolm asked. "I saw him during the ceremony, but he seems to have disappeared."

"I believe he went into the house," Albus told him.

"Probably checking your aunt's wards," Malcolm said to Eliane. She laughed, but Malcolm wasn't smiling.

"Don't make fun, Malcolm," Minerva said.

"I'm not. He always checks the wards wherever he goes. I know some people think he's daft, but I'm not one of them."

"Of course not," Eliane said, and Malcolm kissed her quickly on the corner of the mouth.

A burst of raucous laughter made them turn their heads to where a witch wearing an elaborate hat decorated with bright yellow Fwooper feathers was making expansive gestures with her arms at Glenna McGonagall, who wore a pinched smile.

"Looks like we'd better go rescue Gran from your Tante Clothilde," Malcolm said to Eliane.

Albus watched them clasp hands to cross the garden, as if they were a unit now, two inseparable parts of a whole. It had been a lovely wedding...small, with a short version of the traditional rite, the parents doing the handfasting, followed by this informal reception. Malcolm's happiness was nearly palpable, and Albus was happy for him. Yet, as he watched them, a brief pang of the sort that hadn't troubled him in years gripped him.

But there it was, the old familiar envy.

He automatically brought the iron gate of his will down on the memories that would threaten his sanity.

"Are you all right, Albus?"

He turned to see Minerva's concerned face.

"Fine, my dear, fine," he said patting the hand she had laid on his arm.

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Four hours later, Albus slipped through the door to a shop in Paris's Quartier des Mages after the last customer had left. It must have been charmed to alert the proprietor to visitors, because a voice called from the back room:

"Veuillez vous asseoir sur le canapé. Je reviendrai tout à l'heure. Voulez-vous du café?"

"Merci, non."

Rather than sitting as he'd been bidden, Albus wandered around the small shop, looking at the mannequins, which spun and posed to show off robes in a variety of exquisite colours and fine fabrics. He stopped to admire the delicate embroidery on a set of dress robes and couldn't resist picking up a sleeve to rub a bit of the rich velvet between his thumb and forefinger.

A trim man of middle years, his short hair slicked back and gleaming brown and grey, appeared from the atelier, carrying a cup and Levitating in front of him a bolt of cloth that subtly changed colour as the light hit it from different angles, first appearing cobalt blue, then teal, then azure. It was extraordinarily beautiful, no doubt intended to ensnare a customer at first glance.

"Nous venons de recevoir ce crêpe marocain. C'est..."

The man stopped.

"Dumbledore."

"Hello, Malquin," Albus said, dropping the sleeve he'd been examining. "I was just admiring your work."

"I would not think that one quite to your taste," Malquin said, putting the cup on the counter. The fabric set itself down a safe distance away from potential spills.

"What brings you to Paris?"

"This and that."

Malquin's eyes crinkled, whether in amusement or annoyance, Albus didn't know.

"And to my shop? Is my sister's work no longer up to your standard?"

"Madam Malkin's skills remain unmatched in Britain."

"But not in France."

Albus inclined his head.

"Your skills are unmatched anywhere. Regrettably, I am in need of no new robes at the moment. I merely thought to drop in...a personal call rather than a business one."

"It has been a long time since you have paid me a personal call."

"It has. Too long."

An unspoken question filled the silence.

Albus got his answer when Malquin pulled his wand from its pocket and flipped the window sign over to *fermé*". He turned and went into the atelier without another word.

A moment later, Albus followed.

Later, as they sat up in bed in a room that smelled of clean sweat and sex, which neither bothered to charm away, Malquin smoked and spoke of fashion and art, none of which interested Albus much, but he enjoyed watching Malquin's mouth as he spoke. Malquin paused occasionally to draw on his gold-tipped cigarette, allowing the smoke to billow out in a gentle cloud that enveloped the top part of his face like widow's veil. He'd always had the most wonderful lips, the bottom one full and enticing, the top one delicately bowed and very expressive, and as they moved against one another, or pursed around the tip of the cigarette, the effect was hypnotic.

The soft amber light in the room was more flattering to Malquin than was the bright light of the atelier, where Albus had had noticed the signs of age on his *isopain*. But in the bedroom, the inevitable toll of several decades was muted by orange voile curtains and the flickering shadows animated by large tallow candles that sat at each side of the bed. The softer light was no doubt calculated to flatter, Albus thought as he watched Malquin rise from the bed to pull on a dressing gown of copper brocade.

In this setting, it was almost easy to imagine that they were both still the youngish men they'd been when they met, each a peacock in the exotic zoo of beautiful boys that filled the *boîtes* of 1920s Paris. There had been girls, too, back then, like none Albus had ever met. They were voracious, carnivorous things, Muggle and witch alike, snatching pleasure as if aware that the youth and beauty that bought it were fleeting. They expected sex as part of an evening out the way the witches he'd known at home expected flowers, and Albus, in his long-suppressed need, had been eager enough to oblige, although he'd come to understand that his infatuation with Gellert had not been a one-off.

Malquin had been his first male lover, experienced and somehow less intimidating than the younger boys who might have laughed at Albus's naïveté in matters carnal. They were products of a different time and place, he and Malquin, each with a respect for caution and discretion that the younger men lacked. In Malquin's bed, Albus had been pleased to find that the things he'd learned from the witches he'd been with were, if not perfectly applicable to his newer pursuits, useful nonetheless.

They'd seen one another on a number of occasions in the years since their parting, but the interval since their last assignation had been long enough that the changes wrought by age were impossible to ignore. Arcs had been whittled to angles, and there was softness where once there had been only wide expanses of smooth flesh riding over hard muscle. The shock of seeing Malquin's cock extending from a bush of mostly grey pubic hair had nearly made Albus change his mind about the tryst. Tonight, he didn't wish to be reminded of the grooves time had worn into his life. But when he'd closed his eyes, he could almost imagine them in Malquin's two-room flat in the Rue Cambon, both still relatively unblemished, and he'd carried on.

Their coupling had been less heated than in years past, and Albus felt vaguely unsatisfied. He was only sporadically interested in sex these days, but when he wanted it, he wanted to be overwhelmed, consumed by desire and physical sensation. His lovers had been few since the heady days of Paris and the Continent, but carefully selected for their talent for providing what he needed without asking for more than pleasure and pleasant company in return. Malquin had set the standard.

"I would show you out, but you know the way," Malquin said as he tied the sash to his gown. "I didn't expect the pleasure of your company this evening, and I have another engagement."

"I won't keep you, then," Albus said, rising to gather his clothes from where they'd been carelessly tossed on the floor. Malquin sniffed his disapproval of Albus's treatment of his sister's handiwork.

Watching Albus button his robes, Malquin said, "Salomon is still in the Rue du Bac. You should go to see him. He still talks about you. When he's been drinking."

The little dig made Albus smile.

"I'm not certain I'll have time," he said.

Malquin shrugged.

"Such a busy man! Well, adieu, *mon grand*. I must prepare for my evening. Let it not be so long until you come to see me next time, eh?"

"No. I'll look in when I'm next in Paris," Albus said, and they both knew it to be a lie.

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"Champagne, Master Alastor?"

A tray with five glasses nudged Alastor's arm gently, and he looked down at Elgar, who was Levitating it. Alastor had never got used to Minerva's elf calling him "master". Truth be told, he'd never got used to her having an elf at all, and he suspected the little fellow knew it, because Alastor had rarely seen him after the first few visits he'd made to the castle to visit her.

"No champagne, thanks," he said. But his natural eye followed the tray as it made its way around the garden even as the magical one whirled around, searching the area for potential threats. He forced himself to look away.

The afternoon had been agony, despite Alastor's gladness at Malcolm's joy. The Frogs had been polite enough, but were obvious about keeping their distance, as if his ugliness were a contagious disease. The elder McGonagalls had sat with him at the ceremony and made a polite attempt at small talk afterwards, but Madam McGonagall let her eyes alight anywhere but on Alastor's face as she asked him about Ireland and pretended to be interested in his answers. Eventually he'd taken pity on her and excused himself to find the bog.

He'd congratulated Minerva after the ritual, an awkward moment in which she'd taken his hand, and his magical eye had run riot over her body, giving him a glimpse of her scanties underneath her robe before he'd been able to stop it, making him flush like a ruddy schoolboy.

His gaze was drawn back to her now, as she took a glass from the proffered tray. She was talking with Eliane's parents, and the smile she gave at something the father said was her genuine one, not the tight little curve of her lips that said she was merely being polite.

*She's happy.*

Telling Malcolm about his parentage and what had happened to Macnair had done her good. And Merlin knew it had done Malcolm good; it had given him the push to get his girl back. It was madness to hold this wedding in the middle of a war, though. There'd been little DE activity outside Britain, but Alastor wouldn't have come if Malcolm hadn't practically begged him to. Alastor's refusal to hold the fede ring had puzzled Malcolm, and he'd tried to insist, until Alastor had said, "And who's going to be standing guard, making sure your bride and your guests stay safe from what's out there?"

Malcolm had looked as if he were going to say something more, then nodded, and he'd not brought it up again.

Alastor looked over to where Dumbledore sat at a wrought-iron table, deep in conversation with one of the Frogs. It was only right that Dumbledore had presented the ring during Malcolm's marriage rites. He was the boy's true father; it was a fact, even if both of them seemed determined to ignore it.

He heard a step behind him, and his eye whirled around as his hand went to his wand. But it was only Amelia.

"What're you doing standing here all by yourself, Moody?"

"Watching."

"Well, stop it. Go talk to people. I'll maintain constant vigilance for now. I think I can still manage to cast *Protego*."

"Not if last week's session was any indicator. I had you laid out on the mat twice, remember?"

"Lucky hits," Amelia said.

"I'm serious. This is no time to let your skills slip, even if you're behind a desk."

"I'm not one of your trainees, Moody."

"No, because if you were, you'd be in the ring more than once a week."

Amelia gave her throaty laugh. "And I'd be on the verge of nervous collapse, like half of them."

"Gotta weed out the ones that are too soft for it. I wouldn't be doing them any favours to let them out there without knowing what they're facing."

"Yes, but ambushing them during their off hours isn't exactly fair tactics."

"And the DEs play fair now, do they? Wait 'till office hours to do their killing?"

The amusement slipped from her face. "No," she said softly.

He was about to go on, but then he remembered.

"Ah, Christ, Amelia. I'm sorry. I forgot for a minute."

"It's all right. I forget for hours at a time now, some days. And then it comes back."

"Especially when some gobdaw puts his boot right in it."

"No worries. And you're right about the trainees. You're doing well by them."

"Tell it to Crouch."

"I will."

One of Eliane's relatives...that mad auntie...started yelling something in French, and all the Froggies applauded as Elgar brought out an old music box. It took the witch two goes with her wand, but it finally struck up a slow tune featuring too many violins.

A smile crept over Alastor's face as Malcolm lead Eliane to the centre of the garden and took her in his arms. The boy was happy, despite everything. Whatever mistakes Minerva had made, she'd done right by him in the long run.

Several of Eliane's family paired off to dance. Alastor watched Eliane's father go up to Minerva with a small bow. She took his elbow, and they joined the other dancers swirling around the garden. She was at least two inches taller than he was and had to lean down to hear whatever he was saying to her. When the tune segued into a faster piece with a French vocal, Dumbledore cut in. He took her by the waist, pulled her close, and they moved together as if made for it. Alastor's magical eye stopped scanning the skies above the garden and joined his normal one to fix on the pair. He allowed it to penetrate Dumbledore's fancy robe. The old wizard's body was fit for a wizard of nearly 100, but the years showed in the bones of his chest and the curve of his belly. Nevertheless, he was still straight and strong, and he could still squire a pretty lady around a dance floor with his two good legs, unlike some people Alastor could name.

Dumbledore might be an old poof, but he'd given Minerva a son, and there was nothing Alastor could do to compete with that. He wasn't even sure he could give her a good shagging anymore, come right down to it, so he'd lost the one edge he'd ever had over the old man. Besides, if Dumbledore had been willing once, he could do it again, if that's what she needed from him. Or she could find someone else. That Dearborn bloke, God rest him, had been giving her the eye at the last Order meeting Alastor had been to, which had made Alastor want to hit him with a Cruciatus. When he'd read about Dearborn's death in the *Prophet*, a niggling sense of guilt had led to bad dreams that had led in turn to his blasting several holes in his bedroom walls when he was still half asleep. His flat would come down around his ears one day soon, with all the repairs he'd had to make.

Alastor jumped when he heard Amelia speak. He'd forgotten she was still standing there with him.

"You should talk to her."

"I have."

Amelia snorted.

"She misses you."

"She told you that?" he asked.

Amelia looked at him as if he were a particularly dim suspect caught in a lie.

"Come on. It's Minerva. But I can tell by the way she pretends she's only mildly interested whenever I mention your name. And the fact that she keeps your picture in her top desk drawer."

"And just how do you know that?"

"I was looking for a piece of parchment to leave her a note. She had to duck out of our tea to deal with a student problem and was late getting back. I had to go, so I looked in the drawer, and there you were, staring back at me."

"Doesn't mean anything. Probably forgot she had it."

"Right. Because it's only in the drawer she has to open every single time she wants to write something."

"Leave it, Bones."

Amelia gave an exasperated shrug. "Suit yourself, then."

His magical eye caught her smirk when the dance ended and Minerva came straight over to where they were standing.

"Why is that son of yours only dancing with the young girls?" Amelia asked Minerva. "I'm going to get a dance out of him if I have to Imperius him to do it." She strode away, leaving Alastor and Minerva alone.

"I've wanted to come talk with you," Minerva said, "but I've rather had my hands full with the Giroux family."

"They seem like a lively bunch."

"They are. It's been exhausting."

"Malcolm's happy."

She looked over her shoulder to where Malcolm was again dancing with Eliane. Amelia had apparently been waylaid by Lothaire Giroux, who was talking animatedly up at her as they danced.

Alastor thought he'd give his other leg to be the bloke who'd put the smile on Minerva's face when she looked back at him.

He said, "You did the right thing. Telling him."

Her brows rose a fraction before she said, "Yes. I know."

"It couldn't have been easy."

"No. But he's forgiven me."

"You were doing what you thought was best for him. He knows that."

"Was I? I thought I was, but now I'm not so sure."

Alastor said nothing and waited for her to continue, but what she said wasn't what he expected.

"Have you forgiven me, Alastor?"

He wanted to reach out and touch her face...gods, she was so beautiful today...but he kept his hands to himself and let his eye career as if scanning for threats again.

He said, "There's nothing to forgive. The past is past. It's forgotten."

When he was able to look at her again, he saw her swallow and blink several times.

"As you say," she said. "I just wanted to make certain there were no hard feelings. We haven't had the opportunity to speak privately in some time."

"Right. Well, there are none. Hard feelings, I mean. Not on my end."

"Good. I'm glad you came, Alastor."

"Wouldn't miss it. It's been a long time coming."

"Alastor!" Malcolm called, striding towards them. His smile faded when he got closer. "Are you doing all right, Alastor?" he asked. "Can I get you a chair?"

"No, I'm fine," Alastor said. "Can't stay much longer, anyway."

"Oh. I was hoping you'd stay the night and we'd have the chance to visit a bit once everyone else goes," Malcolm said, frowning.

"You'll want to be alone with your bride," Alastor said.

Malcolm's cheeks reddened. "Yes, but later. I thought maybe we could all have dinner together, you, Mum, Eliane, and me."

"Sorry, but I've got to get back."

"Oh. Well . . . another time, then."

"Right."

They embraced, Malcolm squeezing him harder than he'd expected.

When they broke, Malcolm turned to his mother. "I was wondering if you'd saved me a dance."

"Of course. The last one of the afternoon for me, I think," she said.

Looking at Alastor, she said, "Well . . ."

And for once, she seemed lost for words. She startled him by leaning over and kissing his cheek.

"It was good to see you," she said.

He nodded, not trusting his voice, and watched her take her son's arm and walk away.

The next time he spoke to her, she was a grandmother three times over and he was sitting helpless at the bottom of his trunk.

# Chapter Thirty-Seven

Chapter 37 of 48

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

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**25 August 1994**

The silvery cat shot off into the night sky.

Minerva hoped it would find Albus; she wasn't certain how far the charm would carry, but she doubted it would reach the Continent, if that's where he was.

Thank goodness she'd found Arthur. She'd been sick with dread when she'd seen the Dark Mark hanging in the sky above the stadium, certain it had something to do with Harry Potter. But he and the other children were safe with Arthur, and Arthur had agreed to allow extra security around the Burrow until Potter was safely back at Hogwarts. Although if last term's events were any indication, even Hogwarts wasn't safe for the Boy Who Lived. While Albus publicly projected his usual air of avuncular wisdom and competence, in private, with Minerva, he worried about the mistakes he was making.

"I'm afraid I'm past it," he'd said after Potter and company's near-miss with a werewolf and the Dementors.

"Nonsense. You're just tired."

"It's more than that, Minerva. I'm missing things I should have foreseen."

"So you're a Seer now, are you?"

Ignoring her comment, he'd said, "The last war should never have happened."

"That can hardly be laid at your door, Albus."

"I should have been able to stop it. I didn't act soon enough, decisively enough."

"You did everything anyone could have expected, and more."

"And yet it was not I who ended it."

Minerva had remonstrated with him, tried to buck him up, but there was some truth to what he was saying. There was another war coming, and she was afraid they were all too old and tired to fight it. And Albus's conviction that Potter would once again be the key . . . it seemed madness. He was a boy. A good-hearted, moderately talented boy, but even younger and greener than anyone in the original Order had been, and so many of them had died of their inexperience. Potter had been lucky once, protected by some obscure magic she could only begin to guess at, but sending him against one of the most powerful Dark wizards of all time would be tantamount to murder. She prayed to all the gods that Albus had something up his spangled sleeve that he hadn't shared with her. His insecurity added a layer of unease to the general anxiety she'd felt since he'd told her, during their initial argument about leaving Harry on the doorstep of that horrible family, that Tom Riddle wasn't quite as gone as everyone hoped.

She tucked away her wand and began to make her way to the Apparition point.

The campsite was a maelstrom of activity, with witches and wizards hurriedly packing up and herding children to the designated Apparition points. The grounds around the stadium were littered with items left behind when the panic had broken out. Banners bearing Ireland's shamrock or Bulgaria's red, white, and green stripes skittered across the ruins of the celebration, borne along by a light breeze that also brought the acrid smell of smoke to Minerva's nostrils. Some campers had abandoned their tents, and in the evening's chaos no one had bothered to put out the campfires that burned in front of them. Minerva transformed and padded through the debris, changing back to human form and dousing each small blaze with a blast of water from her wand. Satisfied that there was no longer any danger of a large conflagration, she joined the stragglers at the nearest point beyond the wards and Apparated back to the gates of the school.

She went first to the Headmaster's office and composed a note, wording it cryptically, lest it fall into other hands:

A,

*I sent you a cat this evening, but I fear she may not have reached you, as they are notoriously shy about crossing water. You will be interested to hear that there was an unfortunate incident involving some of our charming former sparring partners at this evening's gathering. No one was seriously injured, and our young friend is safe with the Mustilidae family. Mr Moony will spend tomorrow inspecting the ginger fox's den, and I imagine his canine companion will also show up at some point, so the kits should remain safe from predators.*

*I look forward to your return with ever greater anticipation.*

M

"Fawkes, my friend, I have a favour to ask of you," she said to the phoenix, whose black eyes had followed her since she'd entered the office. Albus was the only one he really liked, and she had to tread lightly with the temperamental creature if she wanted him to do her bidding.

"If you would be so kind as to deliver this note to Albus, I would be in your debt, and I am certain he would be most pleased with you. There will be many treats waiting for you when you return."

Fawkes cocked his head, considering, and there was a moment when Minerva thought he would simply duck under his wing and pretend to sleep, as he did whenever he was being shirty with her. But then he gave a mild chirrup she took to be his acquiescence, so she opened the cage and held out the rolled bit of parchment for him to take in his great talons. He fluttered out and gave a squawk of annoyance when she wasn't quick enough opening the window.

"I'm terribly sorry," she said and let him out into the clear night air, where he soared for a few seconds, stretching his wings, before disappearing in a burst of flame.

As soon as she entered her own office, an owl that was perched on the stone gargoyle outside her window began tapping with his beak on the glass. She opened the window and took the note it held, giving the bird a scratch on the head and an owl treat.

*Minerva,*

*Sorry to have deserted you. It's a madhouse here. Return a message with this owl so I know you've got home all right.*

*(And you still owe me five Galleons. Krum got the snitch, even if he lost the match. You can pay up next week.)*

*Amelia*

Minerva took a piece of parchment from her top desk drawer, dashed off the requested note, and sent it off with the owl.

The following evening, there was a knock at Minerva's door, and when she opened it, she was unsurprised to find Albus standing there.

"Thank you for your message," he said as she gestured for him to come in.

"I thought you'd want to know as soon as possible. Here."

She handed him the glass of smoking Firewhisky she'd just poured for herself and went to get another.

"Do you think it had anything to do with Potter?" she asked.

"Perhaps, but even if it didn't, it's worrying. It suggests that the Death Eaters who escaped justice are feeling emboldened by the Ministry's impotence."

"Amelia says that the policies Fudge has pushed through are hamstringing any investigation into potential Death Eater activity. They aren't even allowed to refer to them in any reports. It's as if the war never happened."

Albus sighed, and his hand went up to stroke his beard

"It will make things very difficult when Tom returns."

A wave of nausea passed through Minerva. "So you think he will return soon?"

"The things I have discovered in my travels suggest it."

She closed her eyes for a moment.

"And of course, the Tri-Wizard Tournament *would* have to be at Hogwarts this year," she said.

"That does rather complicate things."

He downed the last of his short drink, then gave her a wan smile, which told her he was about to say something she wouldn't like.

"Fortunately, I have taken steps to ensure that we have some extra security." He got up and went to the drinks trolley to refresh his Firewhisky.

"I'm happy to hear it," she said. "What steps, if I'm allowed to know?"

He held up the bottle, offering to top her glass off, and she shook her head.

"It is imperative that you know ahead of time, but I fear you may not like it," he said.

"Now I'm on tenterhooks. What is it?"

"I have killed two birds with one stone."

"Out with it, Albus."

"I have engaged Alastor as our Defence master."

She forced herself to remain still.

"I see," she said. "And what about that other fellow . . . Peasegood?"

"He withdrew."

"What a shame."

"Perhaps. But Alastor is ideally suited to the task at hand."

"Twenty years ago, I would have agreed with you. Ten, even. But now . . ."

"Now?"

She lost the battle to stay seated and rose, going back to the drinks trolley. After adding another two fingers of whisky to her glass, she turned back to face him and said, "You must know that he has become exceedingly . . . eccentric over the years. His paranoia has got worse. He..."

She pressed her lips together and squeezed her eyes shut, unable to continue the thought.

Albus pretended not to notice her distress, and quietly nursed his drink until she had regained her composure.

"Malcolm says that he hears things that aren't there." It felt like a betrayal to say it aloud.

"Yes, I heard the rumours that circulated after he was retired from the Auror training programme. Kingsley believes it had more to do with Alastor's saying that Voldemort would return than it did his other behaviour."

"Even if that's true, do you think he's well enough to be around children? Some of the teaching methods he used with his trainees were apparently quite unorthodox."

"Unorthodox" was Minerva's term. "Ruthless" had been Amelia's. Nevertheless, Amelia had publicly supported Alastor throughout his tribulations those last years, at some cost, perhaps, to her own professional reputation. His retirement had come as a relief to her and to Minerva, who, in those final months of Alastor's career, had opened

each morning's *Prophet* with trepidation, half expecting to read an account of a new commotion, written in Rita Skeeter's sly, insinuating tone, involving the man even the paper of record had taken to calling "Mad-Eye".

Albus said, "I have his assurances that he will adapt his methods so that they are appropriate for children. And a bit of unconventionality might be good for them. You once said yourself that he would make a fine teacher."

Minerva was surprised Albus remembered that. Then again, she supposed, it had been a memorable day.

She said, "That was . . . oh, I don't know how many years ago that was. He's changed."

"We have all changed, Minerva."

"You know what I mean."

"I do. But Malcolm believes our students will be quite safe in the classroom with Alastor."

"You spoke with Malcolm about Alastor?"

The same strange mixture of anxiety and hope that had always arisen when she thought of Albus and Malcolm together welled up in her. She knew they corresponded, but it had never gone much beyond that, despite the visits Albus had had from Malcolm, Eliane, and the children, Rosemonde, Maximilien, and H  l  ne, when they came over to see Minerva. Albus behaved with them as he did with all children: he was kindly, avuncular, and somewhat aloof.

"I thought Malcolm would be able to provide an accurate view of Alastor's mental and physical state," Albus said. "He is confident that Alastor's peculiarities pose no threat to anyone, except perhaps himself. Alastor is, apparently, very gentle with the children."

"According to Malcolm, they adore him."

"Children are often the best judges of character."

"I have never been concerned about Alastor's character, you know that. It is his behaviour that worries me."

"We shall keep a close watch on him, of course, but Malcolm thought it a good idea," Albus eyed her over the rim of his glass. "He also thought it would do Alastor good to be out among people, feeling useful."

Minerva smiled.

"You're getting obvious in your old age, Albus."

"Am I? I shall have to look out for that."

He finished his drink, and Minerva took his empty glass. His warm hand on her shoulder surprised her, and she looked up at his face to see his eyes crinkled in concern, peering into hers.

"My dear, I recognise that it will be difficult for you to have him here. If you think you will find it intolerable..."

She waved him away.

"Don't be absurd. It may be awkward at first, but I'm sure I'll manage."

There was a pause, and Albus said, "I'm certain you will. And I believe we will all be safer with him in the castle."

After Albus left, Minerva paced around her sitting room for several minutes, trying to settle her nerves. After the excitement of last term, she'd enjoyed the relatively quiet summer, visiting Malcolm and his family in France in June, and looking forward to the Quidditch World Cup in August...even if Scotland had been knocked out by Luxembourg, of all teams. Although the Tri-Wizard Tournament meant loads of extra preparation, she didn't really mind, as she preferred to keep busy. All in all, it had been a good summer.

And now all this.

The Death Eaters on the march, Albus's fears of Voldemort's impending return . . .

But what was utmost in her thoughts was the idea of Alastor there, at Hogwarts, of seeing him every day, at every meal, in meetings . . . she tried to picture it, but failed.

Telling herself to stop being foolish, she got ready for bed. An early night would do her good, and there was a great deal to be accomplished over the next week. Staff would be arriving in three days' time, and she'd need to have the timetables sorted by then, making sure that everyone had adequate nights off and that no one had too many chaperone or patrol hours.

Going over the timetables in her mind helped settle it, and she fell asleep within minutes of lying down. Nevertheless, her dreams were a disturbing montage of scenes from her life with Alastor, the pleasant mixing with and morphing into the unpleasant without any warning, and when she woke in the morning, she felt enervated rather than refreshed.

### 31 August 1994

Alastor was packing his trunk.

Dead useful, it was, and the best bargain he'd ever made. Second-hand, and cheap at only ten Galleons. It had some scratches and dents, sure, but the locks were sturdy enough to take the protective spells he put on them, and the Expansion Charms were better than any he'd encountered commercially. The seventh compartment alone was big and sturdy enough to hold a troublesome suspect through a tricky Apparition, and had done on several occasions. It could handle almost anything Alastor cared to carry with him, and that was the trouble. He didn't quite know what to bring and what to leave, space being almost no object.

He'd already thrown his few clothes and other necessities into the trunk, plus the Invisibility Cloak, which he'd folded carefully. It had cost him nearly a year's salary, but worth every Galleon. The standard-issue one every senior Auror got from MLE was, as far as Alastor was concerned, useful for lining a Jarvey's pen, but not much else.

Next, he'd tossed in a variety of antidotes and medicinal Potions he'd brewed himself. He hadn't touched anything made by another hand since a batch of Blood Replenisher he'd been given in the field...the Ministry said it had just gone bad, but Alastor knew better...had put him in Mungo's for nearly a week a few years back. Not that he didn't trust the matron at Hogwarts, but you couldn't be too careful. If something could be swallowed, it could be tampered with, and that was a risk Alastor wasn't going to take. He might be retired from the Aurors, but there were still plenty of people wanted him dead. So the flask was coming, too, despite his worry that certain people would think he'd taken to drink again.

He looked at the trunk.

What would a teacher need?

As far as his subject was concerned, all it required was a wand and maybe the charmed cloak Minerva had given him all those years ago.

In the weeks since Albus had cajoled him into taking the position, he'd thought a lot about how to approach it. When he'd been in school, the standard Defence curriculum had consisted mostly of book descriptions of Dark magic and lots of practice using only the most basic defensive spells. That was all very well and good, but even back then he'd known it wouldn't be enough, and if it hadn't been for the extra tutoring he'd badgered Professor Merrythought into giving him, he wouldn't have lasted the first month of Auror training. These kids didn't need to be Auror level, but they'd need a lot more than a perfect *Protego* or *Expelliarmus* if they were going to survive what was coming.

So he'd worked out a plan to give them a taste of real Dark magic without exposing them to too much risk. He would start them off casting some of the more serious hexes and jinxes at him, which would both give them some practical experience in casting offensive spells and allow him to demonstrate effective counter-spells. Then he'd turn it around and have them try to block what he sent at them. And they'd be facing more than a *Rictusempera* or Jelly-Legs Jinx by the time the year was out. Although he didn't intend to use any Unforgiveables or mount any sneak attacks, as he had done with his trainees, most of the students would never even have seen an actual curse cast before, and he didn't want to frighten them too much or humiliate them. As he worked the older ones up to dealing with some of the Darker spells, he'd decided, he would let them use the cloak. He'd reinforced the charms, which would stand up to the weakened curses he planned to throw at them and repel anything that got through, while letting them get a bit of a feel for what it was like to block a spell that, under normal circumstances, would have been intended to kill.

So the cloak would be coming with him, even if the sight of it brought back memories he didn't need pestering him.

What else?

He tried to remember what Minerva's office had looked like the last time he'd been in it.

Books. Minerva had always had lots of books around her office and her quarters.

After almost 50 years as an Auror, Alastor seldom needed to look anything up about defensive magic or the Dark Arts, but he didn't fool himself that he knew everything. One of the little buggers might just have a question that he'd never considered, and how would it look if he had to send 'em to that pinch-faced librarian to find the answer?

He went into his sitting room and bent down to look at the bookshelf. When he blew the dust off the spines, it came right back at him and made him sneeze, so he pulled his wand and cast a weak *Scourgify* so he could read the titles.

There were two shelves of spellbooks, mostly outdated. After a few minutes' deliberation, he pulled out a copy of *Magick Moste Evile* that was missing its front cover; a dog-eared 1960 edition of the *World Encyclopaedia of Curses*, the International Confederation's *Index of Proscribed Spells, 1970-1975*; and *Elusive Elixirs and Dreadful Draughts*. He added his father's prized first edition of *Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean* because he couldn't bear to leave it behind in an empty flat, and *Theories of Transubstantial Transfiguration*, which he'd only bought because Minerva had written the chapter on Animagus transformation. If, for some as-yet inconceivable reason, she were to visit his office, it couldn't hurt if he had her book on his shelf, could it?

He went to his battered desk. From a magically enlarged drawer, he withdrew a large stack of yellowing parchment. Since he was going to be stuck in the Highlands for the duration, he thought he might make use of the Hogwarts library. He had a notion...daft, no doubt...to organise the letters and notes and memories he'd got from Galatea Merrythought over the years into some sort of collection. Professor Merrythought had known more about the Dark Arts and the way its practitioners thought than anyone he'd ever met, and that included everyone at MLE. It wouldn't be anything as grand as a book, but it could be something useful for future Aurors and anyone else interested in the topic. Alastor hoped Dumbledore might be willing to help with the project, as he'd known Professor Merrythought as long as anyone alive.

The drawer also contained his letters from Minerva. He stood there for several minutes, debating with himself. It was about time he parted with them. He thought about tossing them into the fire, but decided to wait until he returned in the summer. Nine months of seeing her every day ought to give him his fill, and then maybe he'd be ready. He closed the drawer, grabbing a handful of quills to toss into the trunk, and stopped.

The afternoon post sat in a small pile on the desk where he'd dumped it. On the top was a catalogue from one of the companies specialising in magical security. Several had cropped up during the long years of the last war. Out of curiosity he'd ordered a few things, and as he'd suspected, most of them had turned out to be a load of shite. But it gave him an idea.

After depositing the quills and papers in his trunk, Alastor went to his bedroom and rummaged through a Shrunken box of junk that languished at the bottom of his wardrobe, and fished out a few items, including the three Sneakoscopes he'd stripped down to see how the spells worked. Two of them were rubbish, but one still functioned, more or less. He poked through the box some more and found the looking-glass he'd worked on using some of the charms he'd teased out of the one decent Sneakoscope. He never really planned to do anything with it...it worked inconsistently at best...but along with the Sneakoscopes, he could use it to demonstrate the volatile effects of intent in determining whether a spell was Dark or Light, or somewhere in between.

Alastor was rather pleased with himself. That ought to do it for his office. Enough things so he looked like he'd put some thought into teaching, but not so much that he looked like a prat who brought half his house with him wherever he went.

He was going to toss the Sneakoscopes and what he called the Foe-Glass into the trunk when a noise from outside stopped him.

It was a sort of clanging sound and had come from just outside the flat. He stood still, not breathing. He listened.

Nothing.

When he picked up the Foe-Glass, he thought he saw a shadow in it. He put it down and peered into it, but his own ugly face peered back at him.

Then he heard it.

It sounded as if there were voices coming from the vicinity of his front stoop.

He drew his wand.

*Don't go off yet, boyo. It's probably the voices in yer head again.*

He made his way quietly down the stairs into the dark, narrow entryway and fixed his magical eye on the front door. He saw no one there, but the night was dark and his vision hazy through the thick oak. He pressed his ear to the door and listened.

His heart almost stopped when a loud banging erupted just outside. Then there came an ungodly screech.

*Cats at the rubbish bins again.*

The clanging continued, punctuated by the plaintive sounds of feline misery.

Alastor frowned. The charms he'd set on the bins to prevent the moggies getting into the rubbish shouldn't have harmed them.

But maybe something had gone wrong. It wouldn't be the first time one of his protective enchantments had worked a little too well lately.

The yowling rose in pitch and intensity. Whatever had happened, the unfortunate creature was suffering, and the thought of a cat in distress bothered Alastor more than he'd have admitted to any of his old Auror mates.

He sighed, and quickly removed the wards from his door. He opened it cautiously and had just enough time to think */ should have* . . . when he was hit by a stunner.

He came to a few moments later and realised he was bound, arms and legs, and there was a shape coming towards him. He waited until it got close then flung himself at it. They both went arse over teakettle down the front steps to crash against his front gate, which made an almighty crash. A light went on in the flat across the street.

His assailant was underneath him, struggling to get free. Alastor bit down hard into the flesh that was pressing against his face, and his opponent howled in pain and redoubled his effort to get up.

Alastor did it again, and the metallic taste of blood filled his mouth.

The man screamed again and yelled, "He's trying to kill me!"

Alastor worked his bound legs up until he could brace them against something firm...his opponent's back...and pushed himself into a kneeling position. He looked at the back of the man's pudgy neck and brought his elbows together. If he hit hard enough, he'd stun him, or even kill him.

A shadow fell between him and the streetlight, obscuring his view. He looked up. There was a brilliant flash of light, then Alastor knew no more.

When regained consciousness, he was lying on a hard surface in a room that was only a little longer than he was tall. He pushed himself up to sitting. His head ached, and he squinted at the blinding light that seemed to be coming from far above him.

Where the hell was he?

And more importantly, where was his wand?

Gone, of course. Along with his shirt and trousers. And his eye and leg.

*Shite.*

Well, best to find out right away how much trouble he'd bought.

"Oi!" he shouted.

A moment later, a shadow blocked out the direct light. Alastor's eyes focussed and he saw a face looking down at him from a height of about ten feet, and then he knew where he was.

The face disappeared, and Alastor heard a voice say, "He's awake."

Another face appeared, and this one he recognised.

He called up to it.

"Crouch. Thought you were dead." He made sure his voice didn't betray his shock.

Crouch laughed. "Surprised?"

"Not really. The stench of bad rubbish has a way of lingering even after you've taken it out."

He was gratified to see Crouch's brows knit together for a moment.

"You're awfully amusing for a man who's going to spend the rest of his short life locked in his own trunk."

"You sure of that?"

"As sure as I can possibly be, Moody.*Incarcerous!*"

The magical bonds that secured Alastor's arms and legs tightened painfully.

Crouch hopped down into the compartment.

"I'm happy to find that you still have the trunk. It makes my job even easier," he said. He looked around and sniffed. "It's even smaller than I remember it. And smellier."

The other face, bearing a worried expression, appeared at the opening and looked down after him.

"Are you sure he's safe, Barty?"

"I thought I told you to go deal with the Muggles. The Master won't be very happy if you bungle that, too, will he?"

The face disappeared again, and Crouch turned back to Alastor, his eyes glinting with malice.

"It's going to give me such pleasure to break you, Moody. But where to start? How about a minute for every stinking hour I spent in Azkaban?*Crucio!*"

Alastor put all his effort in to keeping quiet as the agony ripped through him.

Crouch held the spell for a minute, then blessed relief washed through Alastor when Crouch's wand dropped to his side again.

When he caught his breath, Alastor said, "Still playing lapdog to that bent Little Lord Fauntleroy? Where's he been hidin' since losing all his power to a baby?"

*"Crucio!"*

The agony came again, this time for longer, and when it ended, Crouch was panting almost as hard as Alastor.

Crouch said, "I would kill you for speaking so disrespectfully of the Dark Lord, but unfortunately, I need you alive for the time being. You see, you're going to help him get his power back."

Alastor snorted. "Yer even dafter than you were when they handed you to the Dementors."

"I have you to thank for that, don't I?"

"You've got no one to thank but yerself, boy."

Crouch's hand shot out, grabbed a fistful of Alastor's hair, and yanked, ripping it from his head.

He stuck it in his pocket, saying, "This ought to be enough to start with," and Alastor's bowels turned to water.

There was only one reason Crouch would want his hair. And if he looked like Alastor, he'd have the run of Hogwarts, where the Potter boy was. And Minerva.

It couldn't work, Alastor told himself. Someone would twig to it. Minerva would know it wasn't him. He'd not spoken to her for more than a decade, but she'd know.

"Now, there are some things I need to know, Moody," the little shite said. He crouched down to speak directly into Alastor's face. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way."

"Fuck off."

"Your choice." Crouch stood again. "*Crucio!*"

When it stopped two minutes later, Alastor vomited down his front.

Crouch pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket and held it to his nose. His voice was comically muffled when he said, *Imperio!*

Alastor felt the tickle of the spell inside his mind, and summoned his strength to block it.

Crouch shook his head.

"You are determined to draw this out, aren't you? *Crucio!*"

It went on for almost an hour, the torture alternating with Crouch's attempts to gain control of Alastor's mind, until Alastor blacked out again.

He awoke to see his own face staring back at him, his wand pointed at his head

"You really have worn out your welcome with the Ministry, haven't you, Moody?" Crouch said. "They were ready to haul me off until that Weasley oaf showed up."

So Arthur Weasley had been fooled.

*Means nothing. Never spent much time with him.*

He wasn't prepared for the next *Crucio*, and he started screaming immediately.

It stopped, and Alastor felt a warm wetness that he realised was his own piss. When the tendrils of Crouch's Imperius wrapped around Alastor they were like his mother's arms, soft and inviting, he knew he could hold out no longer. He let Crouch in and found himself answering the questions Crouch asked. It felt good. He had no decisions to make, no will to exert, just peace.

He caught himself in time.

*Christ. I almost . . .*

Aurors were trained to resist Veritaserum, which was why Crouch wasn't using it. If he'd tried Legilimency, Alastor would've been lost, but almost no one knew how to do it. Not many could do an Imperius either, but some could, and after the last war, Alastor had insisted that his trainees practice resisting it. Thus, his own skills were still sharper than Crouch probably thought they'd be. If only Alastor could hold on . . .

Crouch grilled him endlessly, stopping to repeat the cycle of torture when it seemed Alastor might be trying to resist. Alastor leant into the curse, and let Crouch have some unimportant...he hoped...information about Dumbledore's plans for the Tri-Wizard tournament, and spewed some deliberate misinformation about protections Dumbledore had placed on the Potter boy.

When Crouch began asking about his relations with various members of the Hogwarts staff, Alastor rallied the last of his strength to keep from letting slip anything about Minerva.

"Barely know her," he said when Crouch got around to asking. Alastor's head was pounding like a herd of Hippogriffs had been stampeding through it and his words were slurring, but he kept his grip and went on. "Tight-arsed, stuck-up prude. Thinks she's Dumbledore's right hand, but she's too in love with him to know that he doesn't trust her. He lets her babysit Potter. That's all."

"Someone told me you'd been lovers once."

*Fuck.*

"A rumour Dumbledore spread around. I took her out a couple of times on his orders. He didn't want anyone else nosing around there. She was a security risk. If she had a lover, she might tell 'im about things. Dumbledore figured if people thought she was with me, it would put them off."

"So you didn't have a personal relationship with her?"

"With Minerva McGonagall? I pity the bastard tries to get into her iron-clad knickers."

Crouch seemed to accept that and moved on. Thank Christ he didn't know how much effort the last bit had cost Alastor, because there was no strength left in him to resist.

The interrogation continued, Crouch applying the *Cruciatus* at regular intervals. Alastor guessed it was because he liked doing it. Alastor was too exhausted by his efforts to protect Potter and Minerva to resist telling Crouch about his own life and habits.

"Well," Crouch said finally, standing and stretching, "you've been really helpful. But now it's time to head up to Scotland. If I hurry, I should just make the opening feast."

As Crouch turned, a delirious and nearly unconscious Alastor said after him, "Yer dead."

Crouch laughed. "I would have thought the last few hours were enough to convince you that I'm very much alive."

"You misunderstand me, boy. When I get out of here, I'm going to kill you."

# Chapter Thirty-Eight

*Chapter 38 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**Author's Note:** Several lines in this chapter are taken verbatim from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire.

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**2 September 1994**

Bloody leg.

Barty had known getting around with it would be difficult, but he hadn't realised how painful it would be until he tried walking the quarter mile from the front gates to the main entrance of Hogwarts. He was glad now that he'd grabbed the walking stick on his way out of Moody's flat. He'd observed Moody covertly for a week, and he'd only seen the old man use it once, when he went out for what had turned out to be an extended round of shopping in Diagon Alley. Barty hoped no one would notice how much he leant on it.

The stairs at Hogwarts would be a problem. Barty hadn't thought about how many times a teacher had to climb them every day. The Floo took him from his quarters to his office and back, but there were chaperone duties on the grounds, security rounds at night, and meals in the Great Hall three times a day. By the time dinner of his second day came around, he could barely walk, and he was ready to Cruciater anyone who looked at him wrong.

As he made his painful way down the last flight of the main staircase, he spied Potter near the end of the queue to get into the Great Hall. He appeared to be arguing with someone. Barty had to suppress a grin as Potter turned and the little Malfoy poof fired a hex at his back. Finally, an excuse to dole out a little punishment! A shame he couldn't use the Cruciatus, but he had another spell ready. He was very good at Transfiguring people into small animals; it was his speciality and had often amused his fellow Death Eaters. Including Lucius Malfoy, who hadn't spent so much as one hour in Azkaban, but went on with his happy little life as if his Master had never existed.

Barty cast at Malfoy, adding a garbled "laddie" to the end of his shout to cover the fact that he'd forgotten to renew the charm on his voice before coming out of his quarters. He did it quickly and silently as he limped down the steps.

The room had gone quiet, people at the front of the queue standing on tiptoe to see what was going on. Barty's heart thumped with anticipation, as it always did when he had a victim in his sights, but he reminded himself that he was there to take Potter...alive...for his Master, so he went first to the boy to make sure he wasn't injured by Malfoy's hex.

Malfoy, now a greasy white ferret, tried to scuttle away, his escape hampered by the potentially lethal feet of the crowd.

Running away just like his bastard father.

Scum.

Barty turned and pointed his wand at the ferret. It took all his willpower not to blast him into oblivion. He settled for bouncing him up and down, just hard enough to hurt without killing him.

"Professor Moody!"

The magical eye spun around in Barty's head to see Minerva McGonagall standing at the first landing, a stack of books in her arms.

For a fleeting moment he was again the lonely, mousey eleven-year-old he'd been, caught in some childish transgression by the terrifying Head of Gryffindor, but he laughed it off. What was she going to do about it, write to his father?

"Hello, Professor McGonagall."

"What... what are you doing?"

"Teaching."

"Teach... Moody, is that a student?"

Her voice was high and shrill, but Barty didn't turn around.

"Yep."

"No!"

He heard a clatter and felt the *whoosh* of a spell from behind him, and the ferret changed back into a blonde boy cowering on the floor.

McGonagall flew down the staircase, wand drawn. The crowd parted for her, and she stopped a few paces away from Barty, staring at him. Her face was ashen.

"Moody, we *never* use Transfiguration as a punishment. Surely Dumbledore told you that."

Her voice had dropped at least an octave, and her wand was still clutched tightly in her hand. A frisson of fear passed through Barty. Minerva McGonagall was a formidable magical practitioner, as some of his colleagues had discovered to their dismay during the last war, and the way her eyes were fixed on him made him think of Jimmy Wilkes, and how his had widened in surprise when he'd taken her curse. She hadn't intended to kill him, probably, but the force of her spell, meant for the Dark Lord but intercepted by Jimmy, had opened his chest wide enough so that Barty could watch his heart beat its last.

He forced himself to keep a casual tone.

"He might have mentioned it, yeah, but I thought a good sharp shock..."

"We give detentions, Moody. Or speak to the offender's Head of House."

Barty relaxed a little when she put her wand away. He saw that she was shaking.

She was afraid as well as angry. Interesting.

"I'll do that, then," he said.

After he'd dragged Malfoy away and dumped him on Snape...another one Barty would like to get alone at the end of his wand...he watched McGonagall at dinner.

She said little and ate even less. Barty had managed to put her off-kilter already. Good.

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Minerva brought a forkful of roast chicken to her mouth and chewed mechanically without tasting it. She only managed to swallow a few bites before giving up in favour of pushing the food around her plate. She barely heard any of the debate Albus was having with Filius, and gave only perfunctory answers when they attempted to engage her. Thankfully, Severus sat between Alastor and Minerva. He wasn't one for dinner-table chat, so there was no danger he'd entangle her in a conversation about what had transpired earlier.

Midway through dinner, Albus leant down and whispered, "Is everything all right?"

"Of course."

"You're very quiet, and you've barely touched your food. I was afraid you might be unwell."

"I'm quite well, thank you. It's just that I'm afraid I've made an error in the funding request for the extra provisions for our visitors."

"No matter, my dear. We have two more months before they arrive, so you can simply resubmit it," he said. "Are you certain that's all that's bothering you?"

"Yes."

She rose before the pudding was served, and felt Albus's eyes on her as she left the Great Hall.

A dram of Cardhu failed to quieten her nerves, so she poured herself another with hands that were still less than steady.

The idea that Alastor would use Transfiguration to discipline a student was bad enough, but he'd seemed utterly unconcerned about the effect his stunt had had on her. In fact, the tiny smile that he'd given her when he'd left with the Malfoy boy in tow had been almost cruel.

Did he really hate her so much?

She drank the remainder of the Scotch in one swallow and sat with her eyes closed for a few minutes.

As the liquor made its way into her bloodstream, her emotions settled a little, and she tried to think rationally about things.

She knew that Alastor had changed over the years, become sharper and more paranoid, prone to hallucinations, which was likely due to the insult to his brain when he'd lost so much blood in the accident that took his leg. Malcolm had told her a bit about the changes to his personality, but he had never prepared her for an Alastor who would want to wound her so deeply out of spite.

No. It simply wasn't possible. There had to be another explanation. Perhaps his memory was impaired? That awful Healer had raised the possibility all those years ago. Or could he be on the drink again? Alastor's old flask had made an appearance at dinner . . .

As terrible as either thought was, each was more bearable than the idea that he had deliberately tormented her about the worst memory of her life. She tried to push it from her mind over the ensuing days, but every time she saw Draco Malfoy's resentful face looking back at her during class, it came flooding back, and she finally acknowledged that she'd have to confront it.

She decided to speak to Alastor in the evening, in his quarters...his turf, inasmuch as anyplace in Hogwarts might be said to be his rather than hers...in order to put him as little on the defensive as possible. She wanted him to feel safe, to know that he could still trust her, and that even if he had done it purposely, she would not hold it against him if he could acknowledge the deep hurt he'd caused her this evening. They could get past it.

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Barty expected McGonagall to go running to Dumbledore about the ferret incident. It had been a mistake; he'd let his anger get the better of him, and if it had compromised the mission, he'd be in terrible trouble with the Dark Lord. He knew he'd have to talk alone with Dumbledore eventually, but he'd been hoping to postpone it until he was more comfortable in his role as Moody. But no call to the Headmaster's office to discuss the incident came.

Over the next few days, though, he got the sense that McGonagall was watching him closely, either on Dumbledore's orders or on her own initiative. He'd have to be careful with her. Next to Dumbledore, McGonagall was the biggest threat, and she was Potter's Head of House, so she'd be watching over the boy carefully.

Although Moody had said they didn't know one another well, he and McGonagall had been in the Order of the Phoenix together, and they'd seen one another socially a few times. It would be wise to avoid any chance that she'd notice something amiss.

Barty did his best to keep as much distance between them as possible. He took care never to sit next to her at meals, and he never went into the staffroom.

If they were scheduled for the same patrol hours, he made sure to duck into another room if he heard the click of her heels.

So he was unpleasantly surprised when she appeared at the door to his quarters one evening after dinner.

"Hello, Alastor."

"Professor."

"May I come in?"

He almost said no but thought the better of it. It might make her wonder what he had to hide.

"It's your school," he said, leaving the door open and limping back into the sitting room.

She followed him and stood there awkwardly, waiting for him to invite her to sit, but he was silent.

"I wanted to see how you were getting on. Are you comfortable here?" she asked.

"Yep."

"Good."

The damned magical eye, which sometimes seemed to have a mind of its own, gave Barty an unwanted glance under her clothes. He'd have expected white cotton granny knickers and a bra like a fortress, but surprisingly, it was pale blue lace.

She flushed, but soldiered on.

"I had hoped we might have a chance to talk. To catch up a bit."

*Merlin's balls.*

Barty searched his memory for what Moody had told him about her.

He had said they went out to dinner several times in London and that nothing particularly interesting had happened, so Barty hadn't grilled him for the specifics, but now she wanted to waltz down memory lane for some reason. And it was time for his next dose of Polyjuice. Past it, actually.

"Catch up?" he said. "Let's see: Over the past few years, I was training Aurors, but they bounced me out about a year ago because they didn't like my methods. Since then, I've been sitting around my flat eating lots of take-away fish and chips and reading Muggle novels. No one much comes to see me, and I don't go to see them, and that's how I like it. A few weeks ago, Dumbledore asked me to come up here to teach, so here I am. You've been teaching and helping Dumbledore look after Potter. Anything else is none of my business, so you can keep it to yourself."

He expected her to storm out in a green-tartan huff, but she just looked at him with great sadness, which puzzled him.

The slight tingling began under Barty's skin, heralding the coming transformation. He pulled the flask from his pocket and took three swallows.

A funny expression passed over McGonagall's face. So she'd noticed his grimace at the awful taste of the potion.

Shit.

He'd had too little time to prepare for this mission. He would have liked to perfect his performance...little things like the grimace could give him away.

But when the Dark Lord wanted something, he wanted it immediately, and Barty would never presume to argue with him, but the speed with which he'd had to ready himself had forced him to cut some corners. The lacewing flies had only been stewed for twelve days, which meant that the potion's period of efficacy was greatly reduced. He had to dose himself every two hours around the clock, to be safe. At least Moody's flask had come in handy. He was known for it, so it wouldn't look odd for Barty to drink from it often, but it was supposed to be Butterbeer or something equally wholesome. He didn't want anyone wondering what was in the flask that tasted so awful.

He had to get rid of her before he dropped any more inadvertent clues.

"If that's all, Professor, I have things to do," he said.

She didn't move.

"Is it so terrible even to be in the same room with me?"

It was nearly a whisper, and Barty scoffed to himself at her stupid, Gryffindorian need to be liked.

"What are you after, coming to my rooms at this hour? Did Dumbledore send you?"

He stepped toward her, hoping she'd be intimidated by his greater size, but she held her ground.

Glaring at her with both eyes, he asked, "Is that it?"

"No, I..."

"Are you spying on me?"

"Of course not."

"I don't believe you."

"Alastor, please listen. I..."

"Or did you come here for something else? Maybe you finally realised what you were missing. Well, if a quick ride is what you're after, I'm happy to oblige. You're a bit of all right under those clothes."

Barty let the magical eye rove over her for a moment, keeping the other trained on her face.

She was bright pink now, hands clutching at the selvedge of her robes.

"What is wrong with you?" she asked.

"Nothing, aside from a few missing parts. But what's left still works."

He took another limping step toward her and grabbed her arm.

She shook him off. "Don't you touch me!"

"What's the problem? You didn't come down here tarted up in your fancy knickers just for a friendly chat, did you?"

"I came down here because I foolishly thought we might sort things out and be friends after all this time. I shan't make that mistake again."

She fled the room, slamming the door behind her.

Barty had the feeling she wouldn't be back.

Excellent.

### **23 February 1995**

"Excuse *me*," Minerva said to Severus's back as he raced down the corridor, having nearly knocked her over on his way out of the staffroom.

She shook her head and went in, then stopped just inside the doorway.

Alastor was standing by the tea table, handing a set of robes to Dobby the house-elf.

"Wait a minute," he said, although she'd made no move either to leave or enter the room. "Come over here. I want to ask you something."

Minerva's temper flared. She was a not a lapdog to be summoned! She was about to say as much, and tell him that he could bloody well come to her office if he wanted to meet with her, when she noticed him rubbing his bad leg. The cold February air was probably giving him a lot of pain. Her own joints had taken to aching several years back whenever winter settled in around the draughty castle.

Glancing over to where Pomona and Filius huddled rather too obviously over the chess board, Minerva pulled her heavy outer robe more tightly around herself and entered the room, shutting the door behind her.

"Yes, Professor Moody?"

"Have you talked with Weasley and Granger yet?"

"About what?"

"Going into the lake."

She was momentarily taken aback. Only the Heads, Ludo Bagman, and Barty Crouch...if he could be found...were supposed to know about the hostages. But she reminded herself that Albus would have consulted Alastor about security. After the first few weeks of term, when it had become painfully clear that Professors McGonagall and Moody were not, in fact, going to be friends ever again, or even friendly colleagues, Albus had stopped including Minerva in his discussions with Alastor.

"No," she said. "I intend to do it after dinner this evening. Albus, Olympe, and I thought it best to wait in order to avoid the possibility that one of them would let something slip."

"Good idea. Make sure to tell them not to antagonise the merpeople. Dumbledore trusts the slimy buggers, but I don't."

His peremptory tone infuriated her, but she held her temper. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing that he'd roused it.

"The hostages will be in an enchanted sleep." She couldn't help adding, "Or didn't Albus tell you that bit?"

He ignored her tone.

"That'll make it tough for them to escape if the champions don't rescue them in time," he said.

He'd hit on a sore spot.

Albus had assured her and the other Heads that the merpeople would return any hostages who were not rescued, and that they would not harm any of the champions, but it still worried Minerva. Merpeople had a reputation for craftiness and deception, and they had no great liking for humans. Albus had spent years building a relationship between himself and the Black Lake's colony, going so far as to learn Mermish, and he counted their chieftainess as a friend. Minerva had expressed her doubts in no uncertain terms, but Albus had overruled her, and there was nothing for it but to trust in his judgement.

She searched Alastor's face for clues that he was goading her, but he merely peered back at her with an expression of mild interest.

Attempting a neutral tone, she said, "I'm quite sure Albus has made certain that..."

"What do you think Potter's chances of getting Weasley back are?"

The heat rose in her face. He was definitely goading her.

If he'd spoken with Albus, he likely knew that she wasn't optimistic that Harry would manage it. In fact, she hoped Harry hadn't worked out how to breathe underwater at all. That way, he wouldn't be able to dive deep enough to encounter the Grindylows or, Merlin forbid, a Naiad, or any of the other hazards the loch held. Hermione had been helping him, so there was a chance they'd worked something out, but the kind of Transfiguration that would give him an aquatic creature's ability to survive underwater was far beyond the capabilities of either child, and though they could probably manage a Bubble-Head Charm, its buoyancy would hinder his ability to swim quickly in deep water.

She told Alastor, "I'm not at all certain he'll be successful. The magic that will be required isn't taught until seventh year."

"What about Gillyweed?" Alastor asked.

"Gillyweed?"

Minerva frowned to herself. She remembered reading something about its magical properties, but she didn't recall it clearly.

"Yeah. If you eat it, you develop gills."

He was speaking a little too loudly, and Minerva wondered if his hearing was going.

"As helpful as that would be for the task, Professor Moody, it would present something of a problem later on."

Pomona piped up from across the room.

"Not at all. The effect is temporary, directly correlated with the amount one eats."

"And how much would he need to eat to have gills for, say, an hour?"

"Oh, I think about an ounce or two would do it. There have been a few studies. I'm surprised you know about it, Professor Moody. It's quite a rare plant, and not many people are aware of its uses."

"I read about it in a book."

"The one you lent to Longbottom?" Pomona asked.

"The very one."

Minerva formed a sudden suspicion that Alastor was trying to pump Pomona for information.

"You didn't tell this to Potter, did you?" she asked.

"What if I did?"

"It would, in fact, be cheating."

Alastor snorted. "As if Karkaroff and Maxime haven't helped their champions."

"I don't care what the other..."

"Don't get your knickers in a twist I didn't say anything to Potter," Alastor said. "But it isn't cheating if Longbottom happens to mention it to him."

Anyway, I don't know where he'd get Gillyweed around here. The apothecary in Hogsmeade doesn't carry it, and it only grows in the Mediterranean."

"It's a shame he hasn't asked me," said Pomona. "I have a few small pots of it in one of the greenhouses. I'm almost tempted to..."

"Pomona . . ." Minerva said in a warning voice.

"All right, Minerva," Pomona said, holding up her hand. "I won't say a word. Why would I want to give Potter an advantage over Cedric? And before you ask, I haven't mentioned it to him, either."

"Well," said Alastor. "There's still a chance. Potter's got until tomorrow at 9:30 to figure it out or have someone else clue him in. And no, it won't be me, so don't give me your famous glare. What are you still doing here? Go on."

Minerva was about to explode when he added, "And get it right this time. No starch. Don't make me tell you again."

She realised was addressing Dobby, who was still standing there holding a pile of robes.

"Yes, Professor Moody," Dobby said, and popped away.

When she returned to her quarters later that evening, she couldn't concentrate on her marking, and finally gave up in favour of brooding over the encounter

with Alastor.

His viciousness the night she'd gone to his quarters had cured her of any notion of rapprochement between them, but they'd seemed to have entered a sort of detente. Whatever the reason for his behaviour...true malice, neurological impairment, or some malign combination of both...it had been too awful to face, and she'd taken the coward's way out ever since, avoiding him whenever possible. It hadn't been difficult, as Alastor seemed equally disinclined to spend any time in her company. They'd managed to stay blessedly out of one another's way.

Which is why she'd been so surprised to see him in the staffroom that afternoon. He'd never shown up there before, to the best of her knowledge, and certainly not to any of the 4:30 teas that she habitually took with the other Heads.

When she thought about it, what bothered her most about the entire episode was the way Alastor had spoken to the elf. While she'd been stunned at the vitriol with which he had treated her since he'd come to Hogwarts, at least it made a twisted sort of sense. They had a history that made any relationship between them difficult, and she understood that his nastiness was, in part, a protective mechanism, although that made it no easier to bear.

But for him to be so nasty to a house-elf?

That was nothing like the Alastor she'd once loved. He'd been uncomfortable around Elgar, true, but only because the idea of someone serving him in that way was so alien. As gruff as he could sometimes be, Alastor had never been unkind.

She'd had no reports of problems from the students, thank Merlin, but she had heard them talk about him, and the Alastor Moody they described seemed almost a parody of the man he'd once been, his loathing for Dark wizards and his admonitions about constant vigilance exaggerated into caricature.

She watched him surreptitiously the next day. He was agitated, pacing back and forth when it seemed that Potter wasn't going to show up. He appeared to relax a little when the boy raced in at the last possible moment, and when it emerged that Potter had used Gillyweed after all, he wore a look of smug satisfaction that lifted Minerva's spirits. If he'd told Harry about the Gillyweed...and she had little doubt he had done...it had been out of kindness.

She was certain of it.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

*Chapter 39 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**24 June 1995**

Alastor counted handfalls as he dragged himself across the floor.

*One, two, three, four, five, six.*

He stopped, propped himself up on one hand and his good leg, and pushed down his drawers. Despite his need, it took him a few seconds before his bladder released. He tried not to piss too hard; he knew from experience that he was close to the wall, and he didn't want it to spatter back at him. When he was finished, he rolled over on his side to relieve his bowels.

He usually tried to hold his water and shite as long as he could, in hopes Crouch would visit not too long afterward and Vanish the mess. He might even cast a few cleansing spells on Alastor. A sensitive nose, had Bartemius Fecking Crouch Bloody Junior.

After hitching his drawers back into place, Alastor pulled himself back across the cell. His left hand hit the canteen, sending it clanging and echoing through the small space.

*Bugger.*

He hoped it hadn't gone all the way to Loo Corner. Alastor would dig through the mess for it if he had to, though. Merlin only knew when Crouch would come to bring him more water.

Panic made his gorge rise. It seemed to come upon him more and more, although Merlin knew the idea of death held no horrors for him at this point. But thirst . . .

He'd been reduced to drinking his own piss once, and that wasn't a thing he ever cared to try again. When Crouch had returned...from a weekend off Dumbledore had forced on him, he'd said...Alastor had wept.

The panic threatened to overtake him.

*Fuck it.*

He began to sing quietly into the darkness to beat it down.

*"If you'll be the lass of Aughtim*

*As I'll take you to be*

*Tell me that first token*

*That passed between you and me.*

*"Oh don't you remember*

*That night on yon lean hill*

*When we both met together*

*I am sorry now to tell . . ."*

His belly made a plaintive sound, and he fell silent. The song put him too much in mind of Minerva. He only let himself think about her after Crouch had just left. It was too dangerous otherwise. In his weakness, he might let something slip under Crouch's Imperius.

*What a fool I've been.*

Alastor's predicament...and everything that was going follow...was the result of his stupid pride and stubbornness. Minerva had hurt him, refusing to marry him, and then lying to him about her Order activities, but he'd hurt her first. He knew it now. He'd had long, lonely years to think it over. He'd wanted to protect her, but he'd pulled her too close. He knew how important her freedom was to her, yet he'd tried to control her as surely as everyone else in her life had done before, and in the end, it hadn't mattered that he'd done it out of love.

By the time he'd come to that realisation, he'd been a cripple and mad into the bargain, and she was well quit of him. That's what he'd told himself, anyway. She'd wanted to be friends, sure, but that wasn't what he'd wanted. He'd wanted her, and by God, if he couldn't have all of her, then he wouldn't have any. The wanting was too painful. So he'd pushed away the one person left on this bloody island who really cared about him, until she no longer knew him well enough to know that Crouch wasn't him.

Now he'd never have the chance to tell her he was sorry.

His stomach cramped and complained.

*Enough. Put her out of your mind.*

How long had it been since Crouch's last visit? If his belly was gurgling, chances were the next one would be fairly soon. Crouch couldn't let him get too thin; the Polyjuice transformation would reflect any significant changes in Alastor's appearance.

Nevertheless, the day would come when Crouch would either kill him or leave him to rot. It wouldn't be too long now, Alastor reckoned. The second task was over ages ago...Crouch had come to crow afterwards. How many days since then?

You couldn't measure time in here; all Alastor knew was that there was too damn much of it. And too little left.

So he sang.

*"As I went home on Monday night as drunk as drunk could be,*

*I saw a horse outside the door where my old horse should be.*

*Well, I calls me wife and I says to her, 'Will you kindly tell to me*

*Who owns that horse outside the door where my old horse should be?'*

*"Ah, you're drunk, you're drunk, you silly old fool, and still you cannot see,*

*That's a lovely sow that me mother sent to me.'*

Alastor got as far as Saturday:

*". . . So I calls me wife and I says to her, 'Will you kindly tell to me*

*Who owns the hands upon your breasts where my old hands should be?'*

*"Ah, you're drunk, you're drunk, you silly old fool, and still you cannot see..."*

A sudden shaft of light pierced the darkness, followed by *athunk* and a rattle as Crouch let himself down into the compartment.

When Alastor opened his eyes, his doppelganger stood there, a handkerchief pressed to his nose.

"Gods, but you *stink*, Moody. *Tergeo!*"

Alastor noticed with alarm that Crouch's hands were empty. No food. No canteen.

It would be today, then. Or tomorrow at the latest.

He prayed to Jesus that Crouch would oblige him with a quick AK instead of... No. Best not to think about that.

"I didn't know you had such a fine singing voice," Crouch said. "A pity I never thought to try it out myself. But then, I've never much liked music."

He leant down and sliced off a small tuft of Alastor's hair. It still infuriated Alastor to see his wand in Crouch's fist.

"Last time, old man," Crouch said, stuffing the hair into his pocket. "In a few hours, I'll be finished living in your disgusting old carcass. And you . . . you will simply be finished."

Crouch rubbed his bad leg.

"It's been a very long ten months," he said, and it sounded almost like commiseration. "But when the Dark Lord rises again tonight . . . I'm only sorry that I won't get to kill Potter myself, after all the trouble he's given me. Not too bright, the Boy Who Lived, is he? But I'm sure the Dark Lord will let me take care of some of the other scum. I've

earned my right to a little fun, don't you think?"

He began to pace.

"I'll start with Snape. Maybe I'll even keep him alive for a while, take him home, keep him in the cellar where my father kept me. Then that dim-witted Weasley boy. Make his blood-traitor mummy and daddy watch while I kill him. And Longbottom. No, Bella can have him . . . she'd like to collect the set, I think, and she deserves a toy after all those years in Azkaban."

He gave an obscene giggle, and Alastor wondered how no one outside had noticed had truly mad "Mad-Eye" was.

Crouch nattered on, elaborating on whom he would kill, and how. Alastor thought he was overly optimistic. Crouch apparently believed that all it would take would be Potter's death and Voldemort's return, and the rest of world would just stand by and let their lot take over. That, more than anything, was proof of his insanity.

Surely Crouch realised Dumbledore wouldn't roll over and play dead. Nor would Minerva, nor Shacklebolt, nor Tonks, nor Bones, nor any of the other good, talented wizards and witches who'd fought Voldemort and won the first time around.

Of course, who knew how long they could have held out if Potter hadn't rebounded Voldemort's curse and saved everyone's hide, including, miraculously, his own. And Albus clearly thought the boy would be important again.

*Help me protect Harry Potter.*

That's what Dumbledore had asked, and Alastor had failed utterly.

Frustration pounded at his temples and his blood was a herd of hippogriffs in his ears. He'd had one fecking job to do, probably the last one he'd ever have, and he'd muffed it before he'd even got started.

There was silence, and Alastor realised Crouch had had stopped talking. He was grinning like a demented child waiting for praise from its mother.

"You done?" Alastor asked.

"No. But you are, I'm afraid."

He pointed his wand at Alastor, who forced himself to keep his eye steady on his murderer. Alastor thought fleetingly of Malcolm's three children and sent a hurried prayer to whoever might be listening that they'd grow up free and happy in spite of his blunder.

He waited for the blast of green light that would release him from this hell.

But Crouch lowered his wand.

"No," he said softly and turned away. "Ta, Moody."

He gave the incantation to Levitate himself out of the trunk and began to rise.

Alastor pushed off as hard as he could with his one leg and launched himself at Crouch's back. His arms wrapped around Crouch's thighs, and he hung on as Crouch's concentration broke and they both fell.

*"Expelliarmus!"*

The wand flew out of Crouch's hand, hit the wall, and clattered to the floor a few feet away.

*"Accio wand!"*

They'd both shouted at the same time. Alastor's spell was stronger, even in his weakened state, but his reflexes were off, not to mention his binocular vision, and the wand ricocheted off the side of his head rather than sailing firmly into his hand.

He rolled off of Crouch and dove for it, but just as his fingertips brushed it, he was hit from behind, and it skittered back out of his reach. Crouch was on his back. Alastor opened his mouth to cast another desperate *Accio*, but he had no voice. Crouch's hands had closed around his throat, his fingers pressing into Alastor's trachea. He tried to buck Crouch off him, but it was impossible with only one leg and a stump, and thirteen stone of imposter crushing him.

After an eternity, the hands released him, and he gulped in mouthfuls of stale air. The weight lifted from his back, and he flipped over, panting, to see Crouch standing over him, wand pointed in his face.

"I'm afraid not, old man. *Stupefy!*"

/\*\*\*/

When the red sparks rose from the maze, Minerva quickly calculated that they were from Alastor's side.

There were several anxious minutes before Pomona came around the corner to give her the news.

"It was Krum. He's been Stunned, but Poppy says he'll be all right."

"Thank you."

"Looks like Cedric and Harry are still in it," Pomona said, giving Minerva a thumbs-up before hurrying back to her place with the champions' families.

Krum Stunned? That was odd. Minerva had been consulted on all the obstacles for the maze...she'd Transfigured the Sphinx herself...and she could think of none that would result in a Stunning.

Was it Miss Delacour, perhaps?

Minerva had a hard time believing it was either Potter or Diggory, but she supposed it was possible.

She continued patrolling her portion of the maze's perimeter, alert for any sign of trouble from within.

If asked, she'd never have admitted it, but she now harboured a secret hope that Harry might win it. He'd had help with the other two tasks certainly, but the third was the one she was least worried about. He was a bit of a prodigy in Magical Defence, and none of the obstacles in the maze were beyond his skills to manage if he kept his wits about him. The Sphinx's riddle was the only thing she thought might trip him up. It was Filius's doing, of course, and well . . . rational thought had never been Harry's strong suit.

Still, the boy wasn't a fool, and he might work it out before Cedric, who'd never struck Minerva as the swiftest gnome in the garden, or Fleur, of whom Minerva admittedly

knew little. She and Olympe had avoided the topic of their champions during the pleasant hours they'd spent talking. To Minerva's delight, Olympe had remembered Malcolm, who'd been her student when she was Arithmancy mistress at Beauxbatons.

"We were quite sad to lose him," she'd said. "What is 'e doing now?"

"He owns an apothecary in Paris."

"Ah! So 'e returned to France, then? *Très intelligent, ce garçon. Comme sa mère.*"

"*Merci, Madame Directrice.*"

Madame Maxime had clasped her enormous hands together and leant forward.

"*Olympe. Je m'appelle Olympe.*"

"And you must call me Minerva."

Minerva had been glad to find a friend in Olympe Maxime. Albus had encouraged Minerva to seek her out..."You will likely find yourself in her shoes one day"...but she'd been reluctant. Alastor's treatment of her had beaten her down, and her emotions were too battered for her to want to invite new friendships, but the chance to converse with another smart, powerful witch who understood the enormous responsibilities she shouldered had helped Minerva forget her troubles for a time.

She looked to the sky as she paced the perimeter. It was remarkably clear, and she could see up into the stands. The hum of the crowd carried on the breeze and grew as the minutes ticked away with no more excitement from within the maze to divert them.

Minerva had lost track of time when the murmur was pierced by a single scream, then a chorus of them, rising to a cacophony.

What had happened?

She didn't dare leave her post in case any of the champions were still inside the maze, but her mind tripped across a variety of terrible possibilities even as she told herself not to be foolish. The crowd was overexcited and eager for something to happen, that was all.

Nevertheless, her heart thudded and dread tightened her chest.

The ominous form of Severus Snape appeared from around the corner.

"Come quickly. Diggory's dead. Dumbledore will need your help."

He disappeared in a flapping of black robes, and Minerva hurried after him.

*Diggory dead? And Potter?*

When she got to the front of the maze, she saw Pomona kneeling in the dirt, her hand on the shoulder of Amos Diggory, who was wailing as he clutched his son to him. From the way the boy's head rolled on his neck, Minerva knew that Severus had been correct. He was dead. She could hardly comprehend the enormity of it.

Albus stood between the Minister and Althea Diggory. Althea held herself stiffly, as if she could change the terrible events of the evening if only she didn't move. Minerva thought of Malcolm and was nearly staggered by the visceral agony of the association. She couldn't imagine what Althea felt at this moment.

Fudge said something Minerva didn't hear and that no one else acknowledged, and moved away from the scene, nodding at Dawlish and another Auror Minerva didn't recognise. They followed him out of the stadium.

Minerva went quietly up beside Albus and touched his arm.

He looked over at her, his face hollow with disbelief, which terrified her.

"Minerva," he whispered.

"Albus, what about Harry? Is he still in there?"

"No, he's . . . it was a Portkey, I think . . ."

"A Portkey?"

Minerva's presence seemed to bring him back to himself.

He gestured to her to move away so that Althea couldn't hear.

"He appeared outside the maze with Cedric's body. He's injured, in shock. It's happened, Minerva. Voldemort's back. Harry saw him."

Minerva barely processed the news of the Dark Lord's return. She was focussed entirely on Harry.

"Where is Harry?"

"Alastor took him." Albus's brow creased. "I don't know what he..."

"Oh, my gods, Albus . . ."

It had come to her with the power of an *Avada Kedavra* that Alastor wasn't Alastor. Later, she would wonder what had made her so certain, but in that moment she was as sure of it as she was of her own name.

Albus looked at her with an expression of puzzled consternation, then annoyance, as she struggled to find words to express the unthinkable.

"Alastor . . . we have to . . . Harry . . . he . . ."

Unable to form a coherent sentence, she clutched at Albus's sleeve.

"Alastor..."

Albus's eyes widened.

"Bloody hell," he said.

He turned and ran in long, loping strides down the pitch toward the exit. Minerva hitched up her skirt, unconcerned about how undignified it might appear, and ran after him.

Cornelius Fudge stood just outside the stadium exit, talking in hushed tones to the two Aurors, who were nodding gravely.

"Albus, where are you going? Wait . . . Minerva?" Fudge called after them as they streaked past him.

Neither Albus nor Minerva bothered to answer.

When they came through the main doors, Severus was there, striding purposefully towards them.

"They're not in the infirmary. Albus, I believe we have..."

"An imposter, yes. They may be in his office," Albus said. "Hurry."

Later, Minerva would marvel at the quickness of Severus's mind in following Alastor to the castle, but at the moment her thoughts were taken up entirely with finding Harry before it was too late. Questions about Alastor's fate tried to crowd in, but Minerva pushed them away. Harry was her first responsibility right now.

When they arrived at Alastor's office, Minerva didn't hesitate to draw her wand against the man she already thought of as the imposter, but Albus was faster, and Stunned him right through the heavy door.

Seeing Alastor's body inert on the floor...though it wasn't Alastor, of course...almost undid her.

*I cannot do this.*

There was a squeaking noise, and Minerva looked over at Harry, who was pale and shaking. There was blood on his shirt and trouser leg.

She went to him and tried to get him to stand, grateful for an excuse to get away from the scene before she lost control, but Albus stopped her, and his words about acceptance seemed aimed more at her than at Potter. But that may have been an illusion. Minerva was sure of very little during those surreal minutes in Alastor's office.

A moment later, when Albus dispatched her to find Sirius, she was confused. Albus would later tell her that when he'd realised Alastor might have been in the trunk for ten months, he'd thought the better of keeping her there until he knew more about Alastor's condition, which he was afraid might be very bad indeed.

The errand gave her time to think, and as she hurried back from the Headmaster's tower, she came to the same conclusion Albus had: the imposter had used Polyjuice, which meant that Alastor was most likely still alive. The hair from a corpse would not work, if she remembered her Potions lessons correctly. She hoped to all the gods that she did.

When she returned to Alastor's office, still anxious and distraught, the tale that issued forth from Barty Crouch made her ill, but her nausea was quickly overlaid with relief at his confirmation that Alastor was alive.

A quick darting of Albus's eyes toward the open trunk as he left her to guard Crouch told her what she was most desperate to know.

When Albus left her to stand guard, she kept her wand trained on Crouch, who sat quietly, arms and legs bound. All was silent, but for the steady weeping of the house-elf in the corner. After a moment, when it became clear that her charge wasn't going to move, Minerva backed a few steps toward the trunk and chanced a look inside.

There he was.

He wasn't moving. But Crouch had given every indication that he was still alive. Surely Albus wouldn't have left her here alone with Crouch if Alastor were dead, would he?

A glance back at Crouch told her that he was still quiescent.

"Alastor?" she called down into the trunk, hating how frightened and tentative she sounded.

"Alastor, please wake up."

He stirred.

"Alastor, it's Minerva."

"Minerva?"

His voice was thin and creaky, and the most beautiful sound she'd ever heard.

"Here I am, love," she said.

"Barty Crouch...the son..."

"Yes, we've got him. You're safe now."

"Potter?"

"He's fine."

Alastor smiled.

"Good lad," he said.

"Alastor?"

"*Hmm?*"

"Are you... are you all right?"

It was a stupid question, but he didn't seem to mind. He grinned like a man drunk.

"Never better." He lifted a hand to shield his eyes from the light and looked up at her. "Jaysus, but you're beautiful."

She let out a sound that was half laugh, half sob.

A moment later, his eyes closed and he seemed to fall back into a contented sleep, his snores reassuring her as to his well-being. She wanted more than anything to get into the trunk with him, take him in her arms, make sure that he was truly all right, but at that moment Poppy bustled in.

She wrinkled her nose on seeing Crouch.

"Where is Moody?" she asked. "Severus said he was here."

"He's in there." Minerva pointed to the trunk.

Poppy blanched, but went right to the trunk and climbed in.

Minerva resisted the urge to call down to her for a report on Alastor's condition, and less than five minutes later, Poppy re-emerged.

"How is he?" Minerva asked.

"He's weak. Been Stunned hard, among other things. His pulse is thready, and..."

When she saw Minerva's face, her mien softened. "He'll be all right, Minerva. He just needs a little care."

She bent over the trunk with her wand, saying, *'Mobilicorpus,'* and Alastor's prone form, covered by one of Albus's brightly spangled cloaks, rose.

"Why is he unconscious?"

"I put him in a Stasis Sleep. He needs to stay calm, and being Levitated isn't pleasant. I'll wake him after I've had a proper look at him in the hospital wing."

"Thank you, Poppy." Minerva's voice caught, and Poppy patted her shoulder with her free hand.

"He'll be fine. He's a tough old bird."

Minerva gave her friend a watery smile.

Poppy spied Winky in the corner and put her free hand in her pocket to withdraw a small phial.

"Give this to the house-elf. It's Dreamless Sleep, a very small dose. Severus said she was distraught."

Minerva nodded, and Poppy guided Alastor's floating form from the room, her wand keeping him steady.

Minerva went over to Winky and knelt.

"Winky? I'd like you to drink this. It will help you sleep."

"Winky does not want to sleep. Winky wants to stay with Master Barty."

"I know, but there isn't anything you can do for him right now. When they . . . when they decide where to take him, you will be allowed to visit him. Professor Dumbledore will see to it."

Winky's enormous eyes, red and wet, met Minerva's. She took the phial and looked at it sceptically.

"Go on, dear. It's to help you."

Winky unstopped it, but before she drank it, she said, "Professor McGonagall will make sure no one hurts Master Barty?"

"Yes."

Winky nodded solemnly, and tipped the contents of the phial into her mouth. A moment later, the phial dropped from her hand, and she slumped over, snoring.

*Poor little thing.*

Minerva turned her attention back to Crouch. She knew she shouldn't speak to him, but she couldn't help herself.

"I don't understand you."

He didn't respond.

"Your mother and father loved you so much. They were good people. How could you have turned to such wickedness?"

She was surprised when he spoke.

"I was born wicked."

He sounded empty. Still under the influence of the Veritaserum, then.

"No one is born wicked."

"I was."

"Why do you say that?"

"I liked killing. Even when I was a child."

Minerva was dumbfounded.

"You killed as a child?"

"Animals. You know . . . mice, birds . . . a few cats. Our Crup . . . Father strapped me when he found out what I was doing, so I learned to hide it. From then on, I played the good little son."

"But you knew it was wrong."

Barty shrugged.

"My father said so. I had no reason to disbelieve him."

"But you kept doing it."

"It felt good. And it impressed the boys at school."

"You told your schoolmates?"

"A select few. I needed protection. I was small. I was shy. I wet the bed. And my father's work made me unpopular in Slytherin. So I showed them what I could do. They

enjoyed my creativity. And then one of them introduced me to the Dark Lord. He has such power . . . my father never dreamed . . ."

"That's what attracted you to him?"

He looked at her as if she were some exotic species of bird.

"Of course. And I am his favourite. He has promised to show me things . . ."

Minerva's attention was suddenly pulled from the horror of his words to the possibilities they offered.

"What things? Has he told you his plans?"

Crouch frowned. He was obviously aware, on some level, of what she was doing, and was trying to resist the potion's imperative.

Minerva's nerves were strung like a bow; if she played things right now, she might get information that could help them cut the coming war short.

Alastor's long-ago advice about getting the truth from a recalcitrant subject...or student...rang in her head:

*Make him want to tell you.*

"Barty, the Dark Lord has told you a great deal, hasn't he? Things he's told no one else, because he trusts only you."

The frown melted into a smile.

"He has favoured me."

"He shares secrets with you. About what he plans to do . . ."

"To scum. Muggles and mudbloods and blood-traitors." He looked at Minerva, and the smile grew into a leer. "Like you."

"What is he going to do?"

Confusion clouded Crouch's face.

"He... no . . ."

"He's going to punish blood-traitors like me and Dumbledore, isn't he? We're . . . we're scum, aren't we?"

"Yes . . . scum . . . He's going to punish you all."

"But we... we scum control the Ministry, the Wizengamot. How will he ever punish us without taking them over first?"

"He will . . . he . . . will . . . no . . ."

"No? You think he will fail?"

"No! He will do it . . . once he controls the Ministry . . ."

"The Ministry will be very hard to take. I don't think even the Dark Lord would be able..."

"He has supporters. Inside."

"Ohhh," she said, as if the idea were a revelation. "Supporters inside the Ministry. Like you."

"No . . . scum . . ."

"Former Death-Eaters? The ones who escaped . . ."

"Scum. They never cared for him."

"Not like you. Who are they, Barty? The scum your Master trusts with the Ministry?"

Minerva became aware of voices in the corridor, and Barty swayed a little.

*Not now!*

"Barty..."

A sudden sensation of blistering cold ran through her, and her mind fogged over. Dark images hovered just outside her conscious thoughts, and terrible sounds echoed faintly in her memory.

*"I'll take him from school, and you'll never see him again. . . I'll take him . . . never see him again . . ."*

The door opened, and a Dementor floated in, followed by Dawlish and the other Aurors, their Patronuses urging the Dementor toward Crouch.

No! This must not happen!

Minerva summoned her happiest memories.

She was on the beach, watching Alastor and Malcolm wrestling and splashing one another in the gentle surf . . . Malcolm handing Rosemonde...so tiny!...to her to hold the first time . . .

When she turned her wand on the Dementor, Dawlish stepped in front of her.

"It's all right, Professor. We've got it."

"But..."

Cornelius Fudge's voice cut her off as he entered the room.

"Oh. Minerva. Yes. Well, no need for you to stay. We have this in hand."

He gestured to the Aurors, who withdrew their Patronuses. The Dementor swept down toward Crouch. He had gone white, and slid from the chair in which he'd been

seated.

*"Expecto Patronum!"*

The silvery cat leapt from Minerva's wand. It drove the Dementor to a corner of the room where it hovered as the cat prowled back and forth, keeping it in check.

The Aurors looked from Minerva to Fudge, who frowned and made an impatient gesture at them.

Dawlish pointed his wand at Minerva's Patronus and Vanished it. The Dementor went immediately back to Crouch, who was now pressed against the wall.

"No, no, nooo! Please don't, please . . ."

"Cornelius, stop this!"

But Fudge said nothing, his mouth set in a grim line, and she watched as the Dementor bent to Crouch, lifted his chin in its skeletal hand, and pressed its mouth to his lips.

She wanted to turn away, but she forced herself to stand witness as their best chance for avoiding another war was destroyed.

The creature released him and hovered a foot or two away from the ruined husk of Bartemius Crouch Jr.

Moments before, Minerva had hated him with every molecule of her being, but her loathing had drained away along with his soul, replaced with horror at what had been done to him in the name of justice.

*Alastor would have stopped it.*

He'd never held with the Kiss. Five of the Dark wizards...and none of the Dark witches...he'd helped prosecute had received the ultimate penalty, all after fair trials, and he'd made it a point to watch every sentence carried out.

He'd come to her afterwards once, sick with anger.

*"It's unimaginable, Minerva. We have no right. I don't care what he did. He took life, but we took his humanity. If we deprive a man of his soul, how are we any different from them?"*

It had taken hours to soothe him, and now she understood why. She was shaking, and her mind was aflame as if from a curse she couldn't escape.

Dawlish raised his wand and cast his Patronus. The Dementor drew away from Crouch, kept at bay by the Auror's Peregrine falcon.

Crouch's eyes were empty, and a thick rope of saliva hung down from his open mouth.

Minerva turned on Fudge, her fury like a thing alive, and he took a step backward, clutching his hat by the brim against his chest as if to protect himself.

"It was for the best," he said. "You must recognise..."

"I recognise that you have condemned a man without benefit of trial!"

"He confessed! Snape told me."

"That doesn't give you the right to steal a man's soul!"

"May I remind you that I am Minister for Magic? I have every right..."

"No, you do not! No one has that right. And if you tell yourself you do, you're just as wicked as he was, no matter what lies you tell yourself to the contrary."

Fudge's face reddened, and he glanced at the Aurors.

She turned on them. "And you! Doing whatever you're told, without question, brining that *thing* in here like a pet you can control. Dumbledore will have your guts for garters...all of you!...when he finds out."

Dawlish looked helplessly at Fudge. "Minister..."

"Get it out of here," Fudge said through clenched teeth. Gesturing at Crouch, he added, "Him too."

A swish of Dawlish's wand sent his Patronus at the Dementor, and the falcon swept it out the door, Dawlish hurrying out behind it.

The other Auror went to where Crouch was slumped on the floor and Levitated him. He gave a cry of disgust when Crouch's bladder let go, splashing the Auror's shoes with urine.

Minerva raised her wand.

*"Tergeo!"*

Her spell cleaned and dried Crouch, and she put her wand back in its pocket, despite the pleading look from the Auror. When he realised she had no intention of drying his shoes for him, he guided the hovering form of Barty Crouch out the door.

Fudge tucked his hat under his arm and followed them out of the office without a word. Minerva was at his heels.

"Have you any idea what you've just done?" she asked.

"Get hold of yourself, Minerva," Fudge said, walking quickly without looking at her. "The terrible events of this evening have clearly overcome your good judgement."

"My good judgement? You have destroyed a man who might have given us valuable information!"

"Nonsense. What valuable information could a . . . a lunatic provide?"

"Information about You-Know-Who's return."

Fudge stopped and turned to her. His face resembled watery pot cheese.

"He has not returned."

"Potter says he has."

Fudge turned away and resumed his brisk pace down the corridor.

"Potter is lying."

"Dumbledore believes him."

"Dumbledore is mistaken!"

"When was the last time Dumbledore was mistaken about anything?"

"Your loyalty is commendable, Minerva, but you are blinded by your admiration. Dumbledore has been hoodwinked by an attention-seeking young man. There is nothing Crouch could have told us that we don't already know. He was a dangerous lunatic and has been rendered unable to harm anyone else."

He spoke as if giving a speech, and Minerva realised he'd already formulated a story in his mind. She wondered if he believed it.

"What was his crime?" she asked.

They were on the staircase now, and Fudge stopped again. His eyes narrowed at her.

"What do you mean?"

"You said that Crouch confessed. To what crime?"

"He . . . he impersonated Alastor Moody. False imprisonment . . ."

"And is it customary to subject a man to the Kiss for such things?"

"He was deranged. Dangerous. Diggory . . ."

"How did Cedric Diggory die?"

"I don't . . . that's . . ."

"Did Voldemort kill him?"

"Certainly not."

"Then did Crouch kill him?"

"We don't know. Possibly."

"*Possibly*." She shook her head in disgust. "And what were his other crimes?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"If I understand you correctly, you do not believe that Barty Crouch aided and abetted a Dark wizard because you do not believe that Dark wizard exists. Is that so?"

"Crouch was deluded."

"But you admit that you are unsure of how Cedric Diggory died and whether Crouch was directly responsible."

"I'm certain we will discover..."

"You absolutely refuse to consider the explanation that Potter gave and that Crouch himself confirmed under Veritaserum. You call him deluded, yet you accept his confession as regards the kidnapping and impersonation of Alastor Moody. Am I correct so far?"

"That isn't..."

"Ergo, you have condemned a deluded man, at your sole discretion and without having bothered to interview him yourself, to the worst and most permanent penalty the wizarding world has to apply...the first and only time it has been invoked for a non-lethal offence, if I am not mistaken. So, Minister, I am asking you *why*."

"I do not have to explain myself to a schoolteacher!"

He continued down the stairs, Minerva following relentlessly in his wake.

"No. But if I have anything to say about it, you will have to explain yourself to the Wizengamot and the wizarding world at large."

"They will support me once they hear the facts."

Fudge stuck his hat firmly on his head and descended the last of the stairs.

"Where are you going?" Minerva demanded.

"Back to the Ministry. I have other business to attend to."

"Not until you tell the Headmaster what you have done. Or are you afraid to face him?"

"I am not afraid of Albus Dumbledore!"

"Good. Then you won't mind talking to him. I expect he's in the hospital wing with the boy Crouch has spent the past year planning to kill for no reason, as you would have it."

Fudge sped toward the main door and almost ran into Severus Snape, who was coming through it.

"Minister," he said, putting a hand on Fudge's arm as if to steady him. "The Headmaster would like to see you."

"Escape foiled," Minerva said.

Snape looked from Fudge to Minerva, raising his eyebrows at the expression on her face.

Fudge looked out the door as if contemplating running for it.

He huffed in exasperation.

"Very well," he said, removing his bowler and smoothing his thinning hair. "Where is he?"

Severus said, "He was in the infirmary when I left him, however I am afraid I was detained in delivering the message. I believed you to be on the grounds, and when I went to find you, I encountered a problem with your Auror guard."

"A problem?" Fudge asked sharply.

"He was in some difficulty with the Dementor," Snape glanced again at Minerva. "He had been overcome, so I lent my aid."

"Was he...?" Fudge asked.

"Kissed? No, but he was rendered incapable of performing his duties. I enlisted Hagrid to carry him to the gates."

"And the Dementor?" Minerva asked.

"I believe I dispatched it, Deputy Headmistress, but it would be advisable to set a patrol over the grounds this evening. The creature was quite . . . energised."

"Yes. Thank you, Snape," Fudge mumbled, and continued on into the hospital corridor, Minerva close behind him.

The idea that the Dementor might have been left unchecked at the school launched her fury into incandescence.

"You have endangered everyone in this school with your cowardice!"

"My good woman..."

"I am not your good woman!"

Fudge pushed the doors to the infirmary open with a bang, and she followed him in, still shouting.

She knew she was making an undignified spectacle of herself, but at that moment she didn't care.

It was only after Albus had dispatched her to fetch Hagrid and Olympe...probably to keep her from chasing Fudge down and covering him with painful boils...that she realised Alastor hadn't been in the infirmary.

After a grave meeting in the Headmaster's office with a shell-shocked group that included Olympe, Severus, Hagrid, and the Weasleys, she raced down the stairs to the infirmary.

"Poppy!"

"Hush, Minerva," Poppy said, hurrying over. "Potter is sleeping."

"Where is Alastor?"

"In his quarters. After I woke him, he refused to stay. I took him myself...he's still very unsteady."

"Thank you."

Poppy caught her arm as she turned to go.

"Minerva, he's going to be fine, but I'd feel better if someone were looking after him for the next few days. Maybe you can convince him to let . . . someone stay with him."

"I'll try."

Five minutes later, she found herself outside his door, trying to work up the courage to knock.

## Chapter Forty

*Chapter 40 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

### 24 June 1995

Alastor was unsurprised at the knock on his door. He'd been expecting Dumbledore to appear for a debriefing, although he hadn't expected him quite so soon. He had managed to wheedle some of what had happened that evening from Poppy Pomfrey, refusing to take any of her blasted potions unless she told him. And then he'd refused anyway.

The knock came again.

He moved slowly to the door, fumbling in his pocket for the magical eye. He popped it into his head. It whizzed and swirled as if possessed, and refused to focus on the door long enough for him to get a look at the person standing on the other side of it. Cursing Crouch for the millionth time, he plucked the eye out, spat on it and rubbed it against his robes, then stuck it back into the socket. It was calmer, like a Crup puppy that had been chastised, but it still didn't show him anything more than a hazy silhouette standing in the shadows of the corridor outside his rooms.

There was another knock, louder this time, but before he could demand that the caller identify himself, a voice said, "Alastor, it's Minerva."

He stepped back. His mouth was suddenly dry and he couldn't speak.

"Alastor?"

A chill ran through him.

*Could be one of them.*

"Alastor, please answer."

It sounded like her, but spells to change a voice weren't hard for someone who knew what he or she was doing.

So the question was, should he open the door and try to figure it out, or ignore her . . . or whoever it was? The prospect of opening the door made his bowels go loose, but the idea of sending her away without telling her he was sorry gave him an ache in the centre of his chest that he suspected would never entirely leave him.

"I'm not leaving until you at least speak to me, Alastor Moody."

The tone was Minerva's, but anyone who'd sat in her classroom for more than a few minutes could probably imitate it.

He wanted to open the door, to see her, to speak to her...apologise for everything he'd done from the moment he'd got it in his head to pry into her past right up to failing to take Barty fucking Crouch down a few hours ago. But he was paralysed with anxiety.

*Breathe, boyo. Think.*

He leant against the door and slid down to a sitting position, back against it, listening.

What a goddamned cock-up. A boy was dead because of him. By some miracle, it wasn't Potter, and Pomfrey hadn't said anything about the Dark Lord, so either she didn't know or Crouch's plan had failed.

He pressed his ear to the door. He heard nothing, and his heart sank in spite of himself.

"Bugger."

"Alastor, thank Merlin." The tone was softer now. "It's really me. I know you need to make sure, so do whatever you must. I won't move."

He put the palm of his hand to the door as if he could touch her through it. It had been so long and she was so close, but he couldn't bring himself to say a word.

There was white noise in his head, and for a moment he was back in the trunk, trying desperately to keep her out of his mind as Crouch interrogated him.

"Please, Alastor," came her voice. "I'm putting my wand on the floor. You can bind me if you like, but please let me in. I need to know that you're all right. Please. I'm begging you."

Oddly, it was his phantom voices, buzzing their low symphony of fury and doubt, which helped him focus. They were familiar and somehow reassuring. He was Mad-Eye Moody, and, if nothing else, he knew how to handle the enemies that lived in his own bloody head.

He got to his feet and drew his wand. Opening the door a crack, he saw Minerva standing there. Or someone who looked like her.

He stuck his wand through the opening and cast.

*"Finite Incantatem. Homenum Revelio. Specialis Revelio. Decipere Aperio."*

She closed her eyes as the barrage of spells hit her. Although a couple of the charms were bound to be uncomfortable, she didn't flinch once.

Nothing happened, and he wanted more than anything to trust what was in front of his eyes.

But a little voice whispered that a talented witch or wizard could defeat even the strongest of revealing spells. He stood with his wand still extended, unable to cut through the terror that gripped him at the thought of taking action, any action, that might result in something permanent and irrevocable.

His paralysis broke when she took a step toward the door. Panic made him thrust his wand out, and she put her hands in the air as if she were a fucking criminal.

He hated himself.

She was calm, almost sanguine, though, and his terror abated a little.

"Ask me something only I would know. Anything," she said.

He still couldn't speak; his thoughts were a tempest of warring desires...to slam the door and never open it again; to pull her into his arms; to hex her into oblivion for not knowing that Crouch wasn't him; to fall at her knees and beg for her forgiveness . . .

"Shall I tell you about myself, then? Secret things?" she asked, slowly lowering her arms. "I . . . I slept with a man who wasn't my husband for money. I Transfigured Gerald into a rat when he threatened to take Malcolm away. I tricked Albus into..."

"Stop!"

He looked hard at her, searching her face for any sign of deception.

"What was the first gift I ever gave you?" he asked.

Her hand went to her throat and fingered the silver-and-agate circlet there, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

"This brooch. For my thirty-sixth birthday."

It was a stupid question, but not a thing a Dark wizard who'd plumbed Minerva's mind for information about Alastor would have been looking for.

When he opened the door wider, he felt as if he'd stripped off his clothes.

He cursed himself for it, but nothing...not love, not exhaustion, not the knowledge that no Dark wizard could have known about the brooch...could stop him.

*"Expelliarmus!"*

Her wand flew toward him and struck him mid-chest, but he grabbed it before it fell to the floor.

She still wore the smile. Her palms were turned outward, not in supplication, but in an act of trust that almost made him melt. His good eye went to the brooch.

"You still wear it."

"It's my favourite."

He hoped she didn't notice how much his hand shook when he held her wand out to her.

She was close enough to touch, and it was too much for him. His eyes stung and his jaw worked furiously. He turned his back so she wouldn't see.

"Come in." His words were choked, and he wondered if she'd understood them.

Her robes rustled behind him, and he forced himself not to turn his wand on the sound. He walked slowly, leaning on his staff, then let himself fall onto the settee, his heart racing.

If this wasn't Minerva, well . . . he was so tired that he was ready to pack it in anyway. He could just turn his wand on himself and end it all. But Christ, how he wanted it to be her.

She sat in the chair opposite him, and when he got up the nerve to look at her, there were deep lines etched in her forehead. She looked as tired as he felt.

"I'm so sorry."

Her words hit him like a Bludger.

"You?" he said.

"I should have known it wasn't you immediately. I should have..."

"No!"

His shout made her flinch.

"If anyone has a call to be sorry, it's me," he said. "I failed you. In so many ways . . ."

His voice broke, and he covered his face with his hands, ashamed at the tears he couldn't stop.

She pulled him in to rest his head on her chest.

"It's all right, love. Everything's going to be all right now."

Her arms and the soft beating of her heart shook something loose in him. He clutched at her blindly and buried his face against her, sobbing like a ruddy baby, his shoulders heaving and his breath shuddering.

She crooned soothing words he barely heard over his sobs, and rocked him, her hands stroking his hair. He felt her kiss the top of his head like his mam used to do before the gin made her forget everything but itself. It shouldn't have worked, but it did, and he felt the storm pass.

He couldn't look at her. It was unforgivable, losing control the way he had. He searched for something to say.

"I've got snot on yer robes."

"It wouldn't be the first time. And frankly, I'd rather yours than some homesick firstie's." She pulled a handkerchief from her robe pocket and gave it to him.

"Thanks," he said, wiping his eyes. "Stupid. Can't seem to get control of myself."

"It's no wonder. You've been through something unimaginable."

He blew his nose. "Wasn't the Shelbourne Hotel, but I survived."

She reached out as if to touch him, and he drew back without meaning to.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't..."

Before he knew what he was doing, he grabbed her hand and drew it to his mouth, kissing her palm. He kept it pressed to his lips, afraid to let her go.

He would have been content to live the rest of his life in that moment, but her voice pulled him from that fantasy.

"Alastor."

Reluctantly, he released her hand and looked up at her.

"May I?" she asked, lifting her hand again.

He was confused. What did she...?

She ran her fingertips over his cheek, lightly tracing his scars.

She said, "I just . . . I just need to reassure myself that you're here. That you're alive."

He could barely breathe, but he managed to whisper, "I'm here."

Leaning forward, she kissed his mouth gently. "I'm so glad." She touched her brow to his and left it there.

The scent of her made him dizzy, and when she sat back, he reached for her again, pressing his face to her neck, inhaling more of her. She let out a soft breath, and he realised he had actually opened his mouth and tasted her skin with his tongue. He tried to pull away, but she held him close. The thrumming of her heart and the rise and fall of her chest had a hypnotic effect. His pulse slowed and his breath fell into her steady rhythm. They sat like that, simply existing together, until a knock at the door broke the spell.

A jolt of familiar fear shook Alastor, and he tried to stand, but Minerva kept her arms around him. The knock came again, and she sighed, releasing him.

She rose and went to the door.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"It's Albus."

She turned to Alastor with a questioning look.

*Bugger him.*

With the possible exception of Barty fucking Crouch fucking Junior, Albus Dumbledore was the last person he wanted to see just now, but he nodded, resigned to the inevitable.

As she opened the door, he tensed, reaching reflexively for his wand.

Before Dumbledore could enter, she said to him, "Give me your wand."

"I'm sorry?"

"Your wand, Albus. For security."

Dumbledore withdrew it from his sleeve and handed it to her.

Alastor thought he might faint with surprise when she drew her own wand and turned it on the Headmaster.

""*Finite Incantatem. Homenum Revelio. Specialis Revelio.* What was the other one, Alastor?"

*"Decipere Aperio."*

She performed the spell, then turned back to him.

"All right?" she asked, and he nodded.

If Dumbledore found the proceedings odd, he didn't show it.

"Alastor," he said, coming into the room. "How are you?"

"Better than I have any right to be."

"Madam Pomfrey says you refused to allow her give you the Strengthening Solution."

"I don't take potions from just anyone."

"Understandable. But you will need to get your strength back. I'm counting on you."

"For?"

"For the fight against Voldemort."

A lead stone dropped into Alastor's belly.

"He's back, then?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Christ, I'm an eejit! Letting that bastard get hold of me. I..."

He stood too fast, and his vision swam. Minerva put a steadying hand on his arm, and he let her help him back into the chair. Dumbledore had the good grace to ignore the incident.

"It was going to happen one way or another," Dumbledore said. "And it doesn't seem to have gone quite the way he planned. For one thing, Potter still lives."

"No thanks to me."

"On the contrary, I suspect it had quite a bit to do with you. There was a great deal you could have revealed that might have influenced the outcome tonight."

"Not much."

"The wands. It appears he didn't know about them. It likely saved Potter's life."

"Yeah, well . . . Crouch didn't think to ask, did he?"

"Still, you could have bartered the information. I imagine there was a lot you could have given him that he would have found helpful. The fact that he discovered so little is a testament to your courage, Alastor. I'm sure he tried to be very persuasive."

Minerva made a funny sound, and Dumbledore glanced at her before continuing. "We all owe you a debt of gratitude. And our apologies."

Alastor put a hand in the air. "No more bloody 'I'm sorries'," he said. "From anyone."

Gods, but he was tired. And he wanted Dumbledore out.

"All right," Dumbledore said. He looked around at the room, which still bore the signs of its former occupant, including several empty phials and a small, dirty cauldron. "Would you prefer a different set of rooms? I could arrange..."

"No need. I'll get back to London after I've had a kip."

"No," Minerva said.

Both Alastor and Dumbledore turned their heads to look at her.

"You need rest," she said. "You should stay here. Your flat may not be safe."

Alastor started to object, but he was interrupted by Dumbledore.

"It would be most helpful, Alastor, if you were nearby for the time-being. I'm reforming the Order, and we will have much to discuss."

Alastor recognised that he'd been double-teamed, but gave a terse nod anyway. He was too tired to argue. That Minerva wanted him to stay...even if it were just to babysit

him...made him feel as if he'd been given the Draught of Peace.

"Well then," Dumbledore said. "You are in good hands. Minerva, I will see you at the staff meeting in the morning. We should all get some sleep. It's been a terrible day. Although not without its blessings. I'm very glad to have you back with us, Alastor."

"Yeah. Thanks."

When Dumbledore left, Minerva shut the door behind him.

She said, "You should eat something before bed."

Alastor nodded, letting his eyes close. When he opened them again, she was still there, looking at him.

"I can't stay here, I have my House to look after," she said.

The voices in his head, which had been quiescent since Minerva had held him, began their hissing anew.

*She doesn't want you. What would she want with a helpless old cripple? She's only doing Dumbledore's bidding . . .*

He spoke too loudly, to drown them out.

"Sure. Go on. I'll be fine."

The voices receded into his unconscious or whatever other hell they came from. The only voice in his head now was his own.

*Don't go.* It said. *Please don't go.*

"Come with me," she said.

Before he could say anything, she added, "For me, Alastor. I need you."

/\*\*\*/

Minerva had little appetite, but she forced herself to eat some of the shepherd's pie Elgar had brought, in hopes it would encourage Alastor to take some nourishment. He did, although not as much as she would have liked. He was clearly knackered. She didn't bother pestering him with the vitamin potion or Strengthening Solution. She could only hope that he'd have the energy in the coming days to brew some himself, and made a mental note to ask Severus to make his lab available.

It had pained her to watch him struggle to get up the three flights of stairs to her quarters, and he had had to stop and rest every few steps. She'd kept herself from offering to Levitate him, knowing how humiliating he would have found it, but the way he leant on his staff was almost as bad. Thank Merlin all the students had been confined to their dormitories.

The food had been waiting for them under a Warming Charm, and she wondered how Elgar had known there would be two people at her small table.

When Alastor put down his fork and yawned, she said, "Why don't you go in and use the loo first, and I'll find something for you to sleep in. Do you still prefer pyjamas, or would a nightshirt do?"

He hesitated, then said, "Nightshirt. It's easier these days."

"All right. There should be a clean flannel and towel in the bath, and I keep a new toothbrush in the drawer next to the sink."

"Thanks."

When he came out, she handed him the nightshirt she'd Transfigured from a set of old robes and went into the bathroom to clean her teeth and wash her face. She re-emerged to find him still sitting there in the ill-fitting robe Poppy had given him when he'd insisted on leaving the infirmary.

He watched her as she took down her hair. She went to her wardrobe and withdrew a nightdress. Forcing herself to move slowly and deliberately, she began to undress. When she stepped out of her robes, he started to unbutton his. As she removed her bra, his good eye shifted to focus on a photo of her grandchildren that sat on her bedside, but the magical one spun around several times before fixing itself on her breasts.

He pounded on his head with the heel of his hand.

"Damn thing doesn't work right. Can't control it. Sorry."

"I thought we were finished with sorries," she said, smiling despite the fleeting image of the imposter's leer that had come to her.

"At least he didn't fuck up the leg," Alastor muttered.

She pulled the nightdress on over her head and debated what to do about her knickers. She didn't want to make him more uncomfortable, but he likely remembered that she didn't wear them in bed, and she wanted everything to seem as normal as it could be under the circumstances, so she slid them off, picked them up with her robes and bra, and took the clothes to the hamper in the bath.

When she returned, his shoe and sock were laid next to the bed, but he still hadn't taken the borrowed robes off. He sat quietly, his head down.

"What is it?" she asked. "Do you need help?"

"No. It's just..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

She sat down next to him.

"Is it this?" She put a gentle hand on his bad leg.

He looked at her, his real eye bloodshot, the magical one still whirring. "I'm a cripple, Minerva. An old, ugly man. You don't need it staring you in the face."

"You're not a cripple, we're both old, and as someone once said, beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

"Still..."

"If you don't want me to look, I won't. But I promise that seeing it won't change anything. Not for me, anyway."

"I can't bear for you to see my weakness. Stupid...as if you didn't know it already."

"That's just it, Alastor. I know you. And you know me. There are no secrets between us. You've seen every part of me, and I don't just mean the marks on my belly from when I carried Malcolm or the bits I've never even seen myself. You've seen the darkest parts of my soul, and if you didn't run from that, I can certainly manage to look at your leg."

He exhaled hard and nodded. Minerva finished undoing the buttons to his robe, and he opened it. She kissed his cheek before letting her gaze drop to his prosthetic leg.

"It's wood," she said, surprised. "I thought Malcolm said it was metal."

"The first one was. Too noisy, though, so I had this one made."

She touched one of the straps that held the socket to the end of his stump. "Will you show me how to take it off?"

She read the doubt in his face and tried to keep her own expression neutral as he searched for his courage. Her heart sped up. She was not afraid to see what lay under the prosthesis, but she was afraid of his fear. Whatever was happening between them now was fragile, and it seemed as if the slightest breath could send either of them reeling away.

His voice was very quiet when he said, "First I undo the buckles."

Relief flooded her.

She trembled as she reached for the first buckle, and he touched her hand.

"It's all right," he said. "You don't have to."

He was right; she didn't have to. It was enough that he was willing to let her help him.

"I know," she said. "But this is part of our life now. I won't ignore it."

He opened his mouth as if to say something, but pressed his lips together again, nodding.

She set to work on the buckle. It was tight."

"You need to pull harder," he said. "Go on. You won't hurt me."

When she'd undone both, he said, "There's a spell that helps it stick to the . . . the stump. *AFinite Incantatem* will do it, but it has to be very focused. You'll need your wand. I can do it without, but it . . . it'll take practice."

She took her wand from the bedside table where she'd laid it, and pointed it at the top of the prosthesis."

"*Finite*."

Nothing happened.

He said, "The spell's strong. Might be easier after you've actually seen the stump."

He did his own wandless *Finite*, and the prosthesis dropped to the floor.

She felt his eyes on her as she looked down at his leg.

The area above the stump was pink with irritation, and the skin around it puckered into a waxy-looking mass of scar tissue where the leg ended above the knee. His thigh was pale and thin where it disappeared into the leg hole of his underpants. She swallowed.

"Lovely, isn't it?" he said.

"It isn't that. It reminded me for a moment of the day you were injured. I would give anything for you not to have had that pain, Alastor, but the leg itself doesn't bother me. It's like the mole on Malcolm's bum: neither ugly nor beautiful, but part of someone I love," she said.

He made grunting sound, and she asked, "Does it hurt?"

He cleared his throat and said, "It's sore right now because I'm not used to the prosthesis. Usually it only bothers me if I've been doing too much running about on it."

"Wait a moment," she said, getting up and heading into the bathroom. She emerged with a tin of salve.

"Will you let me put some of this on? It might soothe the skin. It's one of Malcolm's."

"All right."

She massaged the unguent into the skin of his stump, gingerly at first, and then more firmly as she gained confidence that she wasn't hurting him.

"Feels good," he said. "Same one he's made for me, I'd guess."

"I use it when my hands and feet are tender."

At his raised eyebrow, she said, "Paws are much tougher than human skin. Sometimes I forget and overdo it."

"I'll have to return the favour," he said as she rubbed. "It's better when someone else does it." He took a deep breath. "Smells like lavender. Mine's more like Eucalyptus. But I guess you won't mind me smelling like a girl for tonight."

"I don't think there's much I'd mind tonight."

It was perhaps a terrible thing to say, given everything that had transpired, but it was the truth. She'd think about the Dark Lord and Cedric Diggory and everything else tomorrow. Tonight, there was only the fact that Alastor still lived.

They were quiet as she worked the balm into his leg. When she finished, she sealed the tin, cleaning her hands with her wand.

"Bed?" she asked.

"Yeah."

To her surprise, he stood up, holding on to the bedside table for balance, shrugged off his robe, and pushed his underpants down, where they bunched around his ankle.

After he pulled on the nightshirt, he swivelled gracefully around on his one foot and turned down the covers.

"I hope you still like the right side, because I'm not hopping around the bed," he said, letting himself fall back onto the mattress.

"The right side is just fine."

"Good." He kicked the underpants off his good foot and Banished the discarded clothes to the hamper.

"I know you don't approve of using magic for things like that," he said, tucking his wand under the pillow, "but I've got lazy in me old age."

"I can hardly complain. You used to leave them lying on the floor, if I recall correctly."

"I remember one or two occasions when I persuaded you to leave yours."

"Yes, I remember that too."

She got into bed beside him and doused the candles wandlessly.

Shifting to her side, she laid a palm against his chest. His heart was beating hard and fast.

"Minerva . . . I don't know if..."

"Enough for tonight," she said. "Sleep now."

His hand covered hers and squeezed it.

As his heartbeat slowed, his breathing became deep and rhythmic.

She lay still, listening to him for a few minutes, then drifted into a sleep that was surprisingly empty of bad dreams.

## Chapter Forty-One

*Chapter 41 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

### 1 July 1995

Alastor had to stop every few stairs, silently cursing the weakness that still plagued him, and it took him longer than he anticipated to make the trek to the headmaster's office. By the time he got there, everyone was already seated around the Enlarged table. Kingsley stopped mid-sentence when he saw Alastor standing in the doorway.

"Sorry I'm late."

"Quite all right. We were just getting started," said Dumbledore. He stood, and with a wave of his wand, he conjured a chair to the right of Minerva's.

Alastor's staff thudded loudly, and he felt all eyes on him as he limped across the floor and fell into the chair.

Arthur Weasley broke the silence. "Good to have you back, Moody."

The others murmured their agreement, and Minerva squeezed Alastor's thigh under the table.

He was grateful when Dumbledore brought everyone's attention back to the subject of the meeting.

"As Kingsley suggested, our first order of business should be to find a safe place in which to meet in future. Given the Ministry's unfortunate stance, Hogwarts will be under increased scrutiny, as will we all."

"Arthur and I would be happy to offer the Burrow," said Molly Weasley. "If you don't mind a bit of clutter, that is. It's not Unplottable, but the protective charms we have on it can be beefed up."

"No good."

A dozen faces turned to Alastor.

He fought back the urge to tell them to stop staring.

"It's no secret you and Arthur were in the Order last time, and if what Dumbledore says about Fudge is right, you'll have the Death Eaters and the Ministry both breathing down yer backs. You don't want to make your place a target with kids still at home."

Molly flushed and glanced at Hestia, and there was a rustle of bodies shifting in chairs.

Everyone remembered the fire that had consumed Eamon Jones's house during the last war. His body had never been found.

"As it happens," said Dumbledore, "I have another possibility. The Black family home in London."

He explained the events surrounding Sirius Black's escape from Azkaban to a stunned group.

"Black was innocent the entire time?" Emmeline Vance asked.

"Yes," Lupin said.

"How can you be certain?" asked Podmore. "He might have..."

"Because he was!"

"And you're the best judge, Lupin?" Snape said, looking at his nails as if utterly bored by the discussion.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Come off it, Lupin," said Podmore. "Everyone knows how close you two were."

"A veritable canid love story," said Snape.

"Gentlemen," said Dumbledore, giving Snape a sharp look, "let us get back to the matter at hand."

"Which is whether Black's family home would make a suitable centre of operations," said Kingsley. "It would certainly be secure. The charmwork is very old and can only be altered by the heir to the Black line."

"I thought Orion Black disinherited Sirius," said Arthur.

Dumbledore said, "Yes, in favour of his brother. But with Regulus dead, Sirius is the last male of the line, and the house reverts to him. Orion could not change that."

"Assuming Sirius told you the truth," said Podmore.

Kingsley said, "Dumbledore and I went with him to Grimmauld Place yesterday. The charms check out as Black says."

"But Sturgis is right," said Emmeline. "It comes down to whether we trust Sirius. With all due respect, Dumbledore, if he was clever enough to become an Animagus on his own, he's clever enough to learn Occlumency well enough to mislead even you. I think I need more than his word that he wasn't guilty. I just can't see Peter as smart enough to fool everyone that way."

"Hear, hear," said Podmore. "Black was tried and convicted. People don't get sent to Azkaban for no reason."

"Sure there was a reason," said Alastor.

A frown creased Dumbledore's brow.

"The Ministry needed a high-profile conviction. They'd already let too many guilty people go. Malfoy, Avery ..." Alastor let his good eye wander over to Snape, who looked back at him without reacting. "Black was the perfect patsy, with no friends or family left, no money. Ministry's always given folks like that the shaft."

"So you don't think he was guilty of anything," asked Hestia.

"Arrogance, maybe. Changing the plan to protect the Potters without telling Dumbledore or Remus, or anyone else with better sense, sounds about right for him."

The group was silent for a moment, then Emmeline said, "I'm willing to believe he didn't betray James and Lily, but after Azkaban, who knows what his frame of mind is."

Remus said, "He's as sane as you or I."

Snape snorted.

"He's all right," Alastor said.

"And you know this how?" asked Podmore.

"Spent some time with him here."

"He's been at the castle all this time, then?"

"No. I don't know where he's been...lying low somewhere...but Dumbledore brought him up to see me a few days ago."

Dumbledore said, "I wanted Alastor's opinion on his reliability."

"Why him?" Podmore asked. He looked at Alastor and added, "I mean ... not to say anything against Moody, but he's..."

"Mad?" said Alastor. "Reckon Dumbledore thought it'd take one to know one."

The next silence was even more uncomfortable than the last, which gave Alastor a small frisson of glee.

"Alastor has always been a perceptive judge of character," said Dumbledore. "And his recent experience has, unfortunately, given him a unique insight into the psychological effects of imprisonment under very adverse conditions."

"I don't think anyone can argue with that," said Arthur.

Hestia said, "And you think Black is all right, Moody?"

"Yeah. He'll need lookin' after, though. He's hot-headed and spoiling for a fight. Best if he's not left alone in that house."

"I can stay," said Lupin.

"Excellent," said Dumbledore.

"And what about Lupin's ... time of the month?" asked Snape.

"What about it?" asked Lupin. "Since you've been kind enough to make the Wolfsbane Potion for me, I'm not a danger to him."

"Yes. But you will be a somewhat ineffective nanny for a few days each month, which rather defeats the purpose of your no-doubt selfless offer."

Lupin coloured, and looked as if he were about to say something, but Molly interrupted.

"Maybe Arthur and the children and I could come stay." She glanced at her husband. "Since Alastor thinks the Burrow isn't especially safe anymore. Just until we can add some protections." She turned to Alastor. "Maybe you could help us with that, if you have the time?"

"Be happy to."

"And we can help get the Black place ship-shape again. It's bound to be an awful mess after being vacant for more than ten years."

"That'll be a big job," said Kingsley. "It's full of doxies, boggarts, and Merlin knows what else. You'll be glad of the help, Remus."

"I would. Thanks, Molly."

"That's settled, then," said Dumbledore. "I think our next task should be to find out exactly who our enemy is."

Everyone looked at Snape, who sat impassively.

"Severus, do you know which of his former followers have returned to him?"

"Some. Malfoy, Avery, Nott, Crabbe, Goyle ... Macnair." Alastor followed Snape's eyes as they moved to Minerva and shifted back quickly. "I think we can expect a handful of others to fall in line: Mulciber, Selwyn, Rowle ... Yaxley. He'll be a problem."

"Influential in the Ministry, yes," said Arthur. "He has a lot of hangers-on."

"The Ministry will be an obstacle, Dumbledore," said Kingsley. "We have supporters there, but Fudge is trying to drum up all kinds of sentiment against you. We're going to be fighting on two fronts. You can count on Amelia Bones, Tiberius Ogden, maybe a few others. But Amelia says most of the Wizengamot is waiting to see who looks like winning before they take sides."

Dumbledore nodded. "Then I suggest we don't fight the Ministry. When the time comes, I shall step down from the Wizengamot."

There was a chorus of objections, but Dumbledore put his hand up. "I will be able to do more good elsewhere."

The group talked for another hour, setting up plans for surveillance of known and suspected Death Eaters, and protection for those most at risk, including Harry Potter.

When they were done, Dumbledore asked Minerva, Alastor, and Snape to stay behind.

"I should like your opinions on something," he told them when the door had closed after the last Order member had left.

He went to his desk, plucked up a candy, and popped it in his mouth.

"Sherbet lemon?"

The others declined.

"Well, then, I'll get right to it," said Dumbledore. "The Ministry has asked me if I have someone for the Defence position. I've told them I haven't."

Minerva looked at Alastor. He knew she'd been thinking that he might take up the post...for real, this time...but they hadn't discussed it outright.

"I'd have liked to ask you, Alastor, but I think your talents would better be used elsewhere," said Dumbledore.

"He isn't fully recovered yet," said Minerva.

"Recovered enough," said Alastor.

"If the state of my lab is any indication, I'd imagine he's brewed enough Strengthening Solution to shore up an entire army of ex-Aurors," said Snape.

"I'll be out of yer hair soon enough, Snape," said Alastor, "so you can stop watching me. Don't think I haven't noticed you skulking around."

"Alastor..." Minerva started, but Dumbledore cut her off.

"Alastor, I'd like you to begin surveillance of some of the more dangerous Death Eaters and their known associates."

"Right," said Alastor. "I'm thinking the same thing."

Alastor glanced over at Minerva. She said nothing, and he was silently thankful that she wasn't putting up any further objection to his re-engagement in more active Order duties. They'd skirted around the issue of the Order since his escape, neither eager to address a topic that had caused them so much grief in the first war. While he couldn't help his anxiety at the thought of Minerva being in the thick of it once again, he knew she was just as anxious about his health...physical and otherwise...so each was careful not to bring it up too directly. But they couldn't avoid the topic much longer.

"Then we are still short one Defence teacher," Minerva said.

"Headmaster, I would be pleased to take on the post," said Snape.

"No, Severus, the time is not right for that."

Alastor watched Snape's lip twitch.

"Do you have someone in mind?" Minerva asked.

"No," said Dumbledore. "I am of a mind to let the Ministry handle the appointment."

"You cannot be serious. They'll put in one of Cornelius's cronies, just to spite you."

"I believe they already have a candidate," said Dumbledore. "Dolores Umbridge."

Snape frowned. "Isn't she related to Vibius Selwyn?"

"His cousin, I think. And she is in sympathy with the Death Eaters, although she has never taken the mark, or so Amelia Bones tells me."

"Why let her come here?" asked Snape.

"Bloody brilliant," said Alastor.

At Minerva's and Snape's puzzled expressions, he continued, "If Fudge puts her here, he'll think he's got a spy at Hogwarts. You two can keep her busy, focused on Dumbledore's supposed anti-Fudge activities, while he goes about his real job of chasing down Voldemort. Umbridge is ambitious and just stupid enough to fall for it, and it'll keep Fudge's eyes here instead of on what we're doing outside. Less risk of the Ministry interfering with the Order's business."

Snape gave Moody an appraising look.

"It could work," Minerva said. "Much as I loathe the idea of having her around the children."

"That is a price we may have to pay," said Dumbledore. "I'm afraid, though, that much of the burden is likely to fall on you, my dear."

"I can manage the likes of Dolores Umbridge."

"No doubt. But it would be best if you didn't manage her too much. We want her...and by extension, Cornelius...to think they have the upper hand."

"But she could be extremely disruptive to the school."

"Nevertheless," said Dumbledore with an apologetic smile.

Snape said, "We, and the children, shall simply have to make do. War is nothing but a series of tactical sacrifices, after all."

*Something's going on between them*, Alastor thought as he watched Snape look insolently at Dumbledore.

It was oddly reassuring. Alastor didn't trust Snape. He still had the mark on his arm, and no one who had ever borne it had betrayed the Dark Lord and lived to tell the tale. Snape surely knew that better than anyone. But the fact that he so obviously resented Dumbledore told Alastor that the old man had something on him. And that was to the good.

Dumbledore said, "Minerva, I'm sure I need not tell you that you'll have to keep a firm watch on Harry Potter. He'll be nervous and angry, and is apt to act somewhat recklessly. We don't want Dolores to focus too much on him if we can help it."

Minerva sighed.

It was going to be a spectacularly awful year for her, Alastor thought.

## Chapter Forty-Two

*Chapter 42 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**6 August 1995**

*Crack!*

Hermione dropped the bag of owl treats, which spilled all over the floor. When the crack of the second Apparition came, she screamed, as much in frustration as in surprise.

"Look what you made me do!"

"Well, that's the thanks we get," said Fred, pushing the pile of *Martin Miggs* comics off of Ron's bed and flopping down on it.

"Why should I thank you for making me drop Hedwig's dinner?" Hermione bent down to collect the treats, blowing on each one to remove the dust as she dropped it back in the bag.

"Because," said George, sitting on the other bed, "we risked life and limb to bring you important information."

"What information?" asked Ron, who was watching two Chocolate Frogs hop across the small table.

"Chuck me one of those, and we'll tell you," said Fred.

Ron scooped up a frog and threw at Fred. It sailed past him and hit Hermione in the chest.

"Hey!"

"Sorry, Hermione."

"Well, I guess we can all see why they didn't make you a Chaser," George said to Ron.

"Come on, what's the news?" said Hermione. She picked up the moribund confection and tossed it pointedly in the rubbish bin.

"They're getting him today," said George.

"Getting who?" Ron asked.

"Harry," the twins said in unison.

"Today? Are you sure?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah," said George. "We heard Mum talking to Bill about it."

"When's he coming? How're they getting him?" asked Ron.

"Don't know." Fred patted his shirt pocket, out of which dangled a flesh-coloured string. "Mum discovered one of our little friends here before we could find out more."

"You might have heard a bit of yelling," said George.

"Mum can be bang unreasonable sometimes," said Fred. "And *that's* why we Apparated up here," said Fred. "She thinks we're in the library de-doxing the curtains."

"But we rushed up here to give you the good news," said George.

An annoyed hoot from the cage in the corner reminded Hermione that she hadn't finished feeding Hedwig. Hermione went to the cage and held out a morsel. "So that's why you stayed here instead of going back to Harry," she said to the bird, stroking the top of its feathered head. "We were so worried."

She looked around the room, and said, "You ought to tidy up a bit."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Harry won't mind. He's a bigger slob than I am."

"That's hard to believe," said Hermione.

"Just like Mum and Dad," George said.

"Always rowing," Fred agreed. "When's the wedding?"

Hermione felt her face heat up.

"Look, you lot..."

She was interrupted by the sound of footsteps in the hallway.

The door opened, and Mrs Weasley stood there, hands on her hips.

"I *knew* I'd find you here," she said, glaring at Fred and George. "Have you finished with the library?"

"Er ..."

"That's what I thought. You can just march downstairs and do it, and then you can dust and clean the floor of the entry hall."

"Oh, Mum..." said the twins.

"Go!"

The boys slid off the beds, but before they reached the door, Mrs Weasley shouted, "Wait!"

She went to Fred and pulled the Extendable Ear from his pocket. "I thought I confiscated all of these."

"That's the last one," said Fred.

George added, "We just found it. We were going to turn it in."

"I'd better not find any more, or you'll be doing all the loos again. Without magic," said Mrs Weasley.

Fred and George left without another protest.

Looking around, Mrs. Weasley said, "And you can tidy up in here, Ron. There's an Order meeting tonight."

"They're not going to come in here, are they?"

"No cheek from you. Hermione, dear, would you mind helping me with the pies? There'll be some extra people for dinner tonight."

"Sure, Mrs Weasley."

A half hour later, Mrs Weasley stood back, wiping her arm across her floury face with a satisfied sigh.

"That's that, then. Ready for the oven. Thanks for the help. I'd never have got it finished without you."

Hermione was quite sure that was an exaggeration. Molly Weasley's best magic, as far as Hermione could see, was expended in the kitchen, but Hermione suspected she enjoyed the company. She talked animatedly as they worked, asking Hermione about her studies, surprising her with a keen knowledge of charms theory and defensive spells.

Mrs Weasley was gradually teaching her how to prepare Ron's favourite dishes. Hermione supposed she should be offended, but somehow she wasn't. Hermione, whose mother was an indifferent cook at best, found she rather enjoyed learning to cook, discovering what could be done by magic and what was best done by hand. It was a bit like Potions, requiring a combination of precision, observation, and problem-solving, along with careful wand-work and hand-skill, and there was satisfaction in seeing the pies, lined up neatly and ready for baking.

*You can definitely see which ones are hers and which ones are mine* Hermione thought. *But I'm getting better.*

A *thud* came from the hallway, followed by a screech from that awful portrait in the hall: "More blood-traitors and mudbloods! In my home!"

"Damn. They're arriving already, and the kitchen is still a mess," said Mrs Weasley, running a hand through her flyaway hair.

"I can take care of it," said Hermione.

"Thank you, dear. I'll just go clean myself up a bit. They can wait in the library until we're ready to serve the food. I hope the boys have finished with the curtains."

It only took Hermione five minutes to have everything ship-shape in the kitchen. She set a pitcher of Pumpkin Juice and a selection of glasses in the centre of the table and went to see how Ron was getting on.

The bedroom was somewhat tidier than before, but there was still a collection of feathers, wood chips, and a few owl droppings on the floor under Hedwig's cage, she noted with disapproval. Hermione swept them up while Ron finished tacking something up over one of the beds.

"How does it look?" he asked.

It was a Chudley Cannons poster. The bright orange contrasted horribly with the Slytherin-green bedclothes.

"Um ... okay, I guess."

"Where are you going?"

"Hedwig's out of water. I want to bring up a pitcher before the meeting starts."

Tonks was just arriving when Hermione got downstairs.

"Wotcher, Hermione," she said. "Am I late?"

"No, I don't think they've started yet. Everyone's gathering in the library."

"Thanks."

When Hermione pushed open the door to the kitchen, she was surprised to find it occupied.

Professor McGonagall was there with Professor Moody. They were standing very close together, and she was touching him.

"Oh! I'm sorry. I didn't know anyone was in here."

Professor McGonagall withdrew her hand from Professor Moody's cheek and said, "That's quite all right."

After a moment, during which Hermione didn't move, Professor McGonagall said, "Was there something you wanted, Miss Granger?"

"Oh. Just some water."

Moody and Professor McGonagall were silent as she filled the pitcher, but they didn't move away from one another.

When Hermione returned upstairs, Ron asked, "What's the matter?"

"What?"

"You're all red."

"Just hot."

"I can ask Dad to do some more Cooling Charms on the room."

"That's okay."

She felt as if she'd interrupted something very private. Professor McGonagall? And Mad-Eye Moody? An hour ago she would have said it was impossible, but there was no denying that the gesture she'd seen was intimate. She'd only caught a moment of it, but there had been something so tender in it, she almost felt as if she'd seen them kissing.

Which was a frightening thought.

Hermione had never had imagined Professor McGonagall with someone like Moody. She was so self-possessed, so regal and calm. And he was none of those things. Of course, the "Professor Moody" she'd met at Hogwarts had been an imposter, but over the past few weeks she'd observed the real Moody as he came and went from the house, and he seemed gruff and jumpy, and he was, well ...

She realised with disgust that the word she was trying to avoid thinking was "ugly". Yet Professor McGonagall had put her hand on those terrible scars, had seemed to be tracing them with her fingers.

Hermione looked over at Ron. His freckles and his gangly limbs, his awkwardness, suddenly made him seem very dear.

"What's wrong?"

Hermione blinked. "What do you mean?"

"You're looking at me funny."

"No, I'm not."

Ron shrugged. "If you say so." He bent down over his broom again, and snipped at the ragged straw ends of the tail, letting the clippings fall to the floor.

/\*\*\*/

"Oh, thank Merlin," Minerva breathed as soon as Alastor appeared in the doorway, Tonks and Remus right behind him.

Dumbledore stood. "You've got him?"

"He's with his mates upstairs," said Alastor.

"Did you encounter any difficulty?"

"None. Unless you count Tonks here nearly making a rubble of the Dursley house."

Tonks's hair went from brown to purple and back again. "It needed a little roughing up. It was too clean. Spooky, really."

The rest of the "Advance Guard," as they called themselves, spilled into the kitchen and crowded around the table. They were two places short.

Bill Weasley stood and said, "Take my seat, Mad-Eye."

As always, Minerva inwardly winced at the nickname, but it didn't seem to bother Alastor.

Snape, who was sitting next to Minerva, got to his feet. "No, you can have mine," he said to Alastor. "I'm leaving shortly. Lupin can have your seat, Weasley. I'm certain he would like to be seated next to Black. It's been a full three hours since they've seen one another."

"Thanks, Snape," Alastor said, stumping over to the table.

Minerva resisted the impulse to catch Alastor's eye as he sank down in the chair next to her, but, seemingly of its own accord, her hand moved from her own lap to rest on his good knee. His magical eye swerved around to meet her face for a moment before righting itself to focus on Dumbledore at the table's head.

"We were just discussing Potter's upcoming hearing," said Dumbledore. "At Minerva's request, Amelia Bones has arranged to be the presiding judge, so I think we can count on a fair trial on that score. The only question that remains is how much influence Fudge will have over the remaining Wizengamot members."

Minerva barely followed the rest of the discussion of the options for Potter's keeping and protection should he be expelled from Hogwarts. She was too acutely aware of the man sitting next to her, and too relieved at his appearance, unharmed, at the meeting. Before his arrival, she'd been plagued with visions of him falling from his broom and lying, broken, somewhere on the stony soil between Surrey and London.

Minerva had come early for the Order meeting, and she and Alastor had managed a few moments alone in the kitchen before the Advance Guard set out to fetch Potter. She'd said nothing about her misgivings about his participation in the mission; she didn't have to.

He'd reassured her with his touch that he would return to her, and she with hers that he'd have something worth returning to. Hermione had interrupted before they could say much, and Minerva had no doubt that the girl now knew that she and Alastor were something more than colleagues.

Funny, but Minerva had had no impulse to step away from Alastor, to cloak her feelings in her usual veil of propriety and discretion. It had surprised him, she knew, and touched him. As soon as Hermione had gone, he'd kissed her, his hands gentle on both sides of her face. When they broke, he'd looked at her for a long moment, before saying, "I'd better get in there. I need to brief everyone before we get going."

Minerva had waited in the kitchen with Molly, who made small talk about the work they'd been doing around the house. When more than an hour had passed with no sign of the Advance Guard's return, Molly poured the last of the tea, and sat next to Minerva in silence. Each time Walburga Black's portrait began to shriek, Minerva stood, only to sink back down when it turned out to be another Order member arriving for the meeting.

Albus arrived last, as usual, and his frown at hearing that the guard had not yet returned had done nothing to soothe Minerva's nerves.

Severus had said to Albus, "I'm sure they'll be here soon with blessed Potter no worse for wear. Moody probably insisted they go down to Wales and double back to ensure they weren't followed."

Albus had glanced at Minerva, saying, "I'm sure you're right," and had called the meeting to order. They'd hardly started when the Advance Guard had appeared at last.

The meeting concluded with the assignment of guard duty for the prophecy, and most of the Order, save Tonks, Remus, and Fletcher, left in clumps. Minerva and Alastor waited before stepping out together and Apparating back to Hogwarts.

He hadn't returned to his flat since being released from his trunk, but he seemed to content to stay with her, and she was certainly glad to have him. Of course, it couldn't go on this way, not with the students returning soon, and she wondered what, if anything, she should say about it. There had been no discussion of the status of their relationship, as if each of them were hesitant to put words to it, but it no longer felt so fragile to Minerva.

That evening, as she and Alastor were getting ready for bed, she tried not to grill him on how he was feeling after his first field mission since his ordeal. She'd noticed he'd been taking slugs of the Strengthening Solution from his flask all evening.

"It must have been cold, that long flight," she said as she brushed out her hair. "I could ask Elgar to bring up some hot tea or warm milk."

"Not necessary. Tonks wouldn't let us go too high into the clouds," Alastor said, his disgust evident. "Auror corps has gone soft since I left, apparently."

"You did have Potter with you. It wouldn't have done to let the Boy Who Lived succumb to hypothermia on the way to the safe house."

"He'll have a lot more to worry about than a little chill soon, I'm afraid. Ah, that's better," Alastor said as he released the charm on his prosthetic leg and let it clunk to the floor.

"Is it awfully sore?"

"Nah, I'm just ready to be free of it for today. Actually, it feels a bit better than usual. Sitting on a broom isn't as tiring as standing around doing surveillance."

Minerva put her brush down on the dressing table and went to hang her dressing gown in the bathroom.

"You're feeling better these days," she said, when she re-emerged.

Alastor was lying on top of the bedclothes, his arms folded behind his head.

"I am. Snape gave me a suggestion about improving my Strengthening Solution. Made a difference. You didn't put him up to it?"

"Me? No. I daresay it would be hard for anyone but Albus to put Severus up to anything he didn't really want to do."

Minerva lay down on the bed next to Alastor, who put an arm around her.

"What's Albus have on him?"

Minerva sighed. "I don't know, exactly. Albus says it's between himself and Severus, but that he does trust him implicitly."

"Are they queer for each other?"

"No, it isn't that. When Severus came to us, he was already ... broken, and I think Albus was able to take advantage of that somehow, but not in the way you're suggesting. Merlin only knows what Severus had had to do for that madman." She shivered. "Back in school, he was already surly, but he wasn't the sort of boy who enjoyed cruelty. He was far more likely to be the victim, unfortunately. Maybe that's what drove him to You Know Who. I'm not entirely blameless in that."

Although she had many to choose from, Minerva counted her inability to stop the Marauders' tormenting of young Severus Snape among the worst of her failures. She'd tried, but not hard enough. And Severus had not been a boy to inspire anyone to go to extremes to help him.

"I'm sure you did what you could," Alastor said.

"It wasn't enough. Severus needed help, but I let those boys run roughshod all over him. Oh, I stopped it when I saw it, but there was so much I didn't see. I didn't want to. I was so bloody focused on supporting Sirius...the first Gryffindor of his family, and an outcast among them...that I lost sight of who he really was. And a lot of it wasn't very nice."

"So there's history between Black and Snape. That's why they always behave like a couple of Hippogriff stallions in rut when they're together."

"I'm afraid so. And I'm afraid of what might happen if Harry is expelled and has to go live with Sirius. Harry already has a sizeable...if understandable...chip on his young shoulder."

"Black wouldn't be the best influence," Alastor said. "Lupin will be there, though, and Molly and her brood."

"Only for a while. Molly and Arthur will have to go back to the Burrow eventually, and Remus ... well, he's always let his good sense fail him where Sirius is concerned."

"Mmm," agreed Alastor. "He's clearly thinking to take up where they left off, but Black doesn't seem to be having it. Not surprising. I imagine a decade or so in Azkaban

knocks all thoughts of romance right out of a bloke."

"Indeed." She wondered if he was trying to tell her something.

They'd kissed, touched one another, slept in the same bed for weeks, but neither had made a move toward more. Minerva wasn't certain what Alastor wanted. He'd hinted earlier that he might not be able to make love, but that was right after he'd emerged from his ordeal, and he hadn't mentioned it since. Perhaps age and disability, not to mention months locked in that damn trunk, had stolen physical desire from him. Anger at a universe that had allowed such things to happen to this good man flushed through her, and she looked away from him, trying to hide it, afraid he'd mistake it for pity.

Alastor took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and gently turned her back to face him. He ran his fingertips gently over her lips.

"Minerva ..."

He leant over and kissed her, tenderly at first, then with greater ardour, and she tried not to hope for too much.

*He's wounded, she told herself. He's a wounded man.*

"Come closer," he said.

She wriggled toward him and put her hands on his chest. She could feel his heart hammering through his nightshirt.

"Closer." He put a hand on her hip and tugged her up against him.

He was hard against her, and she was flooded with a terrible, wonderful longing that pooled between her legs and made her gasp.

"Can you possibly want a crippled old man?" he whispered.

"I want whatever we can have."

"I don't know. Me leg ..."

His hand was running up and down her side.

"Tell me what you need," she said.

He kissed her and tugged on her nightdress.

"Take this off?"

She sat up, pulled the gown over her head, and tossed it on the floor.

She was self-conscious for a moment. No man had seen her without clothes since Alastor all those years ago, when they were both younger and fitter. She reminded herself that he'd seen her naked most evenings since his return, however briefly, when they changed for bed, but he'd obviously tried not to look at her.

She was about to douse the candles, but his intense gaze stopped her. She leant down and ran her hands up under his nightshirt to his chest and kissed him. His hands moved to her breasts.

"Still the nicest I've seen," he said, rubbing a hardening nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

She laughed.

"You need to get out more." She took the hem of his nightshirt in her hands. "May I?"

"Please."

She lifted it above his hips. She was used to his abbreviated leg now, so she barely registered it. His erection stood stiff and proud, just as she remembered it. Without thinking about it, she moved down and took it in her mouth.

He leant up, surprised, saying, "Ah, gods, Minerva ... I can't ..."

But he flopped back down against the pillow and gave himself up to her languid tongue.

She wanted to give him everything they'd both missed over the years, wanted to envelop him completely, show him that, though they were both old, broken, hurt, there was still pleasure to be had, to be taken while there was still time. Every heaving breath, every moan he gave, exalted her.

She released him, wanting more.

"Now," she whispered, "is it all right if I get on top?"

"Jaysus, god, yes."

She straddled him and guided him into her, slowly sinking down as he filled her, and pleasure mixed itself with memory, and there was a great feeling of homecoming that made her stop for a moment, overcome.

She looked at the face of the man beneath her, his decency and courage mapped out in the topography of scars and craters that spoke of loss, of endurance. His good eye was squeezed shut, the prosthesis not spinning for once, but fixed on her face.

She began to move, and he groaned. Suddenly unsure of herself, she stopped. His natural eye popped open. Tears filmed it, and her heart moved into her mouth.

"Am I hurting you?"

"No," he whispered, and pulled her down to kiss him. His lips and tongue were hungry and demanding, and he put his hands on her hips, urging her to continue, so she did.

If their lovemaking was tentative and more careful than in the past, it was nevertheless a triumph over the dark, and over all the other things that had pulled them apart over the long years.

It took longer than she remembered for him to finish, and she hadn't climaxed, but lying against his chest afterward, she felt as complete as she had in years.

"You didn't come," he said.

"Out of practice, I suppose," she said.

"I know I'm not what I used to be. If you don't want..."

"*Shh*. I do want. I've spent years wanting. Just now, I'd like to enjoy having."

He let out a long breath. "I wasn't sure I could do it."

"But you wanted to?"

"Gods, yes. Been thinking about it for ages."

"So have I."

He chuckled deeply and squeezed her shoulders. "Nice to know it isn't only dirty old men."

They were quiet, their breathing synchronised. She thought he'd sleep then, but he was restless, and she moved off him, thinking he was uncomfortable, but instead he shifted over onto his side and moved his hand down to her sex.

"It isn't necessary," she said, opening her legs nevertheless.

"It is, lass."

She was quiet as he touched her at first, unused to the pleasure of another's hand, but eventually she let go and gave herself over to him, calling his name and moving her hips to meet his stroking fingers.

"Thank you," she said when she'd regained her breath.

He kissed the side of her head.

After a few moments, he said, "I'm not giving this up again. You, I mean. I can't."

"You won't have to."

They both knew it was an empty promise. There was a war on the way, and no one knew what was to come.

## Chapter Forty-Three

*Chapter 43 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**18 June 1996**

Alastor's belly gave a protesting rumble.

He took the second half of the sausage sammie Molly had insisted on making for him that afternoon from his cloak pocket and carefully unwrapped it.

He should have had dinner before coming on watch, but his clandestine meeting with Dumbledore had taken longer than he'd expected, and if Alastor Moody had never once been late for a watch during his Auror years, he certainly wasn't going to start now.

A swig of tepid tea from his flask chased down the last bite of sandwich.

He shifted his weight from one leg to the other and rubbed his bad thigh.

What time was it? He couldn't cast a *Tempus*, not with all the detection charms that were likely about, but he estimated he'd been here for more than two hours, which would make it after one in the morning. Two hours before he was relieved, unless something happened before then.

His stump sang choruses of pain up his leg. Dumbledore had suggested he find someone else to take the watches that called for long periods on his feet, but Alastor wouldn't hear of it. He might be minus one leg, but he was still better at stealth and concealment than anyone else in the Order, including Kingsley.

And if this watch required anything, it was stealth and concealment. Alastor had no doubt that the house had sophisticated protective charms around it. Alastor's best Invisibility Cloak would only help him so much; the charms he'd perfected over the years to counter revealing and discovery spells were what really mattered on missions like this.

Some of the Order had balked at spending resources on round-the-clock surveillance of Quentin Yaxley, but Alastor thought he was a likely candidate to attempt to steal the prophecy, given his position as director of the International Magical Office of Law. Dumbledore agreed, although Alastor knew he was afraid there was also a spy directly in the Department of Mysteries.

A light flickered in an upstairs window. So someone was there and awake. Padmore had reported seeing Yaxley go in around 7:30, but he could have Flooed out again; he had a direct connection to the Ministry. No worries on that score, though. The Order had someone there all night on watch, so if Yaxley showed up, they'd know about it. And Alastor doubted he allowed Apparition directly in or out of his house.

"Moody."

Alastor whipped around, wand ready and a hex on his lips.

"Jaysus, Snape. You almost got a faceful of *Stupefy*." His heart pounded out a tattoo.

Snape stood less than a yard in front of him, face betraying nothing, despite the wand pointed directly at his nose.

*How the hell did he sneak up on me like that? Do all Death Eaters learn to see through Invisibility Cloaks?*

"I'm here to relieve you," Snape said.

"Nice try. D'ye think I'm daft? Yer..."

"It's Minerva."

Alastor's gorge rose, and the idea that Snape was trying to trick him into giving up his watch vanished in a shock of panic. He threw off his Invisibility Cloak.

"Is she alive?"

"She was badly stunned. She's..."

Alastor grabbed the front of Snape's frock coat and shook him.

"Is she alive?!"

Snape looked down at Alastor's hand on him, then back up to his face.

"Yes. But she is unconscious. Madam Pomfrey couldn't Rennervate her, so she's been transferred to St Mungo's."

Alastor released him.

"Take my watch. If anyone goes in to see Yaxley, make note of it and remember who it was. Follow 'im if you have to. Make sure yer not seen."

He snatched up his Invisibility Cloak and threw it at Snape, then turned and Apparated on the spot. Later it would occur to him that he'd not only abandoned his post, he'd given one of his best tools to a Death Eater without a second thought.

The abrupt trip from Aberdeenshire to London was enough to make Alastor vomit up his ersatz dinner. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and sped around the corner to the entrance to St Mungo's.

At that time of night, there were no Muggles about, so he didn't bother lowering his voice.

"Here to see a patient, Minerva McGonagall."

The mannequin guarding the entrance beckoned him forward, and he stepped through the glass's protective charm into the reception area.

The Welcome Wizard looked up from his desk. His smile faltered at the expression on Alastor's face.

"What can I..."

"Minerva McGonagall. Where is she?"

The wizard consulted his log. "Fourth floor, Spell Damage Ward, number 41. It doesn't say she's allowed visitors yet, though."

"She's allowed me."

He moved as fast as he could through the corridor and up the staircase, barely registering the pain in his bad leg as he climbed the four flights. He was panting when he burst through the doors to Ward 41.

His magical eye scanned the room. Only two of the ward's six beds were occupied, both by women who weren't Minerva. Another bed was surrounded by a privacy curtain.

Alastor stumped over and pulled it back to reveal a familiar-looking and very startled Healer.

"Auror Moody? What..."

"How is she?"

The Healer looked back to his patient, who lay still, eyes closed, skin almost as white as the sheet upon which she lay. A blanket covered the lower half of her body, and her chest was wrapped in cotton gauze bandages.

"I'm sorry, but you aren't family, are you?"

Alastor almost couldn't find words. "I'm her...she's me . . ."

"I see," said the Healer, clearly taking pity on the terrified man staring, wide-eyed, at his unconscious patient. "She's stable. You know what happened?"

"Heard she was Stunned."

"Yes. Four times. Unfortunately, she took them all right to the chest. Aurors, I'm told, so the spells were strong."

Alastor looked up sharply.

*Aurors. What in the name of bleedin' Christ . . . ?*

"And will she..." He cleared his throat. "Will she be all right?"

The Healer nodded slowly. "I think she will, in a while."

"Why hasn't she woken?"

"We won't try to Rennervate her until her heart is more stable. She's holding her own now, but I won't lie to you, it was a little scary there for a few minutes. Even a single Auror-strength stunning directly to the chest would have done for many women Professor McGonagall's age. Fortunately, she's a strong, healthy witch, and Madam Pomfrey had the good sense to send her here rather than try to treat this herself.

"What about her heart?"

"It just needs a bit of time and care to recover from the shock and get back to a normal, consistent rhythm. We'll monitor her closely in the meantime. I can't promise, but I don't think there'll be any permanent damage." He looked back down at his patient. "She'll have some scars to tell the tale, though. Strong spells like that leave marks that we can't fully heal. She also broke a hip when she fell. That was an easy fix, but it will be a few weeks before she can put full weight on it comfortably.

Alastor rubbed the back of a hand over his mouth, and the Healer said, "Try not to worry too much. We're giving her the best care possible. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to tend to her for a moment."

"Do what you need to."

"You'll have to step out. I need to check the wounds and run some tests, and I'm sure Professor McGonagall would prefer some privacy."

Alastor was about to balk, but the Healer added, "You remember what it's like, Auror Moody. You don't want anyone else around when they're doing things to you."

Alastor recalled his intense desire to keep anyone from seeing his stump while it was still healing.

"Yeah, okay. Thanks Healer...Gudgeon, if me memory is working right?"

The young man smiled, pleased. "Right. Davey Gudgeon."

Alastor moved away from the bed, and Gudgeon pulled the privacy curtain around it. There were rustling movements, and Alastor heard a murmured spell. He had to stop himself from using his magical eye to look through the curtain.

Gudgeon stepped out.

"She's stable, and her rhythm is better. The burns are healing well."

Alastor gave a terse nod.

"I can send a message when she wakes up, if you like," Gudgeon said.

"I'm stayin'."

The Healer put a kind hand on Alastor's arm.

"There's nothing you can do. Really. Better you should go and get some rest and let her rest and recover."

Alastor considered, then nodded.

"Can I just ..." He gestured toward the bed.

"Of course."

Alastor passed through the curtain. He took one of Minerva's hands in his.

"Never thought I'd be the one at your bedside, prayin' for you to wake up," he said quietly. "Can't say as I like it much."

He released her hand and stared at her face for another moment. Its stillness made his chest ache. He kissed her cool forehead.

*I can't lose her now. Not after everything.*

*/\*\*\*/*

## **21 June 1996**

Alastor gave the password to Minerva's quarters. Two faces looked over at him when the door opened, and a wave of anger replaced the fear that had gnawed at his belly for the past half hour.

"What in Merlin's name were you thinking?"

"Hello to you, too, Alastor," Minerva said.

Ignoring the surprising presence of Severus Snape in her private rooms, he went over to her, leant down, and kissed her quickly on the mouth.

The McGonagall glare broke into a smile, and Alastor made the effort to tamp down his anger.

*She's all right.*

"Snape." Alastor acknowledged the other wizard without looking at him, and took a seat on the settee next to Minerva.

"Moody. If you're in no more need of assistance, Minerva, I'll take my leave."

"Thank you for the potions, Severus," Minerva said.

"I'll brew more of the Heart-Slowing Solution next week. Make sure you take the anti-nausea potion a few minutes before taking it, then have something light to eat directly afterwards."

"I will, thank you."

As Snape moved toward the door, Alastor called out to him.

"Oi, Snape."

Snape turned.

"Thanks for lettin' me know," said Alastor. "When herself was first taken sick."

Snape gave a short nod and left, closing the door behind him.

Alastor turned back to Minerva. "You never answered my question."

"Which was?"

"What the hell you were doing, leaving St Mungo's early."

He was peering at her, he knew, and she didn't meet his eyes.

"They were going to release me tomorrow anyway, and I thought, why wait? You know what it's like in there."

"Sure, but you should've waited for me to come get you, not Floored by yerself."

"It was perfectly safe, and anyway, you couldn't have Apparated me yet."

"Maybe, but how did you get here from the Hog's Head?"

Minerva fiddled with the selvedge of her robe. "I walked."

"All the way from the village? Are you daft?"

"I took it slowly. I was fine."

"Damn it, Minerva, yer supposed to be resting."

She grabbed the stick that was leaning against the settee and stood. It hurt to see how heavily she leant on it.

"I needed to move, to do something. I've been in that blasted bed for four days. They wouldn't even let me up to go to the loo for two of them."

"You gave me a hell of a fright when I went to Mungo's and you were gone."

Her face flushed, and her brow wrinkled. "I'm sorry. I didn't think. I should have sent a Patronus."

Alastor's anger dissolved with her distress. His fright was no longer important. She was here, they were together, and that's all that mattered.

"All right, all right, easy there, old girl," he said, getting up and going to her. He grasped the hand that was now wringing her robe and squeezed it. "I understand."

She looked him in the eye for the first time since he'd arrived. "I suppose I still have to get used to having someone care where I am."

He led her back to the settee, saying, "I do care. It isn't that I expect you to tell me where you're going every time, but..."

"You expected to see me, and I wasn't there. I would have been frightened and angry too."

"It's all right. I should have told you I was planning to come this afternoon instead of this evening."

She smiled wanly. "I suppose we both have a little adjusting to do."

*Adjusting is one way of putting it*, Alastor thought.

The days after she'd been Stunned, Alastor had had an almighty struggle with himself. All the old fears for her safety had come flooding back, along with the voices...the ones that told him that if he were any sort of a man at all, he'd protect his beloved, keep her out of the Order's risky business, away from Dumbledore's scheming, and far, far away from the Dark Lord's most desired target.

He'd let the voices go on and on, but he promised himself that this time, he wouldn't let his desire to protect her become more important to him than her needs.

Even if the voices finally drove him entirely 'round the twist, he wouldn't force her to choose between himself and her freedom. He could live with a little fear, a little uncertainty. He wouldn't live without Minerva. Not anymore.

When he'd shown up at Mungo's and the Welcome Wizard had told him that Professor McGonagall had gone, he'd almost lost it. He'd managed to calm himself some on the walk from Hogwarts' gates to the castle, but he'd still been afraid that something had happened to her on the way home, that he'd find her rooms empty.

But here she was, looking tired, but otherwise unharmed. And happy to see him, which went a long way toward restoring his equilibrium.

*Time to start takin' care of her properly*

He said, "We should owl Malcolm. Let him know you're home."

"Yes." She yawned.

"You go have a lie down, I'll take care of it."

It was an indication of her weakness that she didn't argue. Alastor watched her move slowly and carefully to the bedroom. He went to her desk and wrote a brief note to Malcolm.

"Elgar," he called, wondering if the elf would come to him.

A mild *pop* a moment later answered his question.

He asked Elgar to take the note to the owlery and reassured him that Mistress Minerva was well.

Elgar just stood there.

"Er...that's all, then," Alastor said.

"And when will Master Alastor and Mistress Minerva be wanting dinner?"

"Oh. Early, I guess. Around 6:30?"

"Of course, sir. Steak and kidney pie. It's good for Mistress Minerva's strength. And some strong ale," Elgar said firmly.

"Just tea for me," Alastor said.

"Of course, sir."

Elgar popped away, and Alastor wondered if Minerva had specifically instructed him to follow Alastor's commands or if he did so on his own counsel.

Alastor pushed open the bedroom door a crack and peeked in. Minerva was lying on top of the counterpane, eyes closed.

He started to close the door, but her voice called to him, "Come and join me."

He only hesitated a moment, then went in, sat on the bed and removed his shoes. When he lay down, she grabbed his hand and pulled his arm around her waist. She sighed contentedly.

"This is nice. I barely slept a wink in hospital after they woke me. I've got used to having you here."

"And when the kids come back for the fall term?" he asked.

"You can visit on weekends," she said. Then, quietly: "If you want to."

Alastor smiled into her hair and kissed the back of her head. "An army of Dark Lords couldn't stop me."

They both slept soundly until Elgar woke them gently several hours later for dinner.

## Chapter Forty-Four

*Chapter 44 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

### Chapter 44

7 July 1996

Years of being a head of house had given Minerva plenty of practice at forcing herself to full consciousness at the slightest noise, so the knocking that had awakened her didn't startle her until she remembered that it was summer, and the students wouldn't return for weeks yet.

Worry enveloped her as she pulled on her dressing gown and hurried to the door.

*Don't let it be about Alastor.*

Severus stood outside her quarters swathed in his usual black frock coat. Sweat formed beads on his forehead despite the Highland chill that always permeated the castle even on summer nights.

"I need your help. The headmaster is unwell," he said.

He volunteered no more information and Minerva asked no questions as they moved through the deserted corridors as fast as she could manage with the walking stick and rode the spiral staircase to the headmaster's office.

When she stepped into the room, she stifled a cry.

Albus sat slumped over his desk, his breathing shallow and rapid. Empty phials littered the desk around him.

Albus's right hand was a charred ruin. Wisps of thin, grey smoke snaked through the air above it.

She approached him and forced herself to look closely at the hand. Something undulated just beneath the blackened skin. She swallowed back her rising gorge. As she watched, a dark tendril prodded its sickening way a few millimetres into the healthy tissue above his wrist. It seemed to quiver, held in abeyance by some opposing force within Albus's magic. When she bent closer, she could hear a subtle hiss underlaid by a malign susurration. She caught a whiff of sulphur and flinched back.

"Albus."

He moaned in response.

"It's Minerva. I'm here." She put a tentative hand on his shoulder.

He lifted his head enough to look at her. His eyes focussed on something far beyond her, then closed again.

"So sorry," he croaked. "Foolish ..."

His body convulsed, and Minerva looked, wide-eyed, at Severus, who strode over, knelt beside Albus, and brought a phial of brownish-green potion to Albus's mouth.

"Hold his nose."

She did so, and when Albus opened his mouth to gasp for breath, Severus poured the potion in and held his jaw shut. Rivulets of viscous liquid oozed from the side of his trembling lips.

"Swallow it, it's to help you," Minerva said, stroking his cheek with her fingertips.

He did at last, and a few moments later, the terrible shaking stopped. She was alarmed when he let out a loud breath and went still.

"Severus..."

"It's all right. The potion is relaxing his muscles."

Eyes still closed, Dumbledore mumbled, "Thank you, my boy, thank you. Much better."

Minerva dabbed at the corners of Albus's mouth with a tartan handkerchief. Once she was certain he was resting comfortably, she drew Severus away.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Some sort of curse. A very Dark spell. There was a ring..."

"Severus!" Albus called.

The strength of his voice was both startling and reassuring.

"Headmaster?" Severus said.

Albus sighed deeply.

"Severus, you have been most helpful, but it is Minerva's assistance I need now."

"What can I do?" Minerva asked.

"I need you to Transfigure this ... rather unattractive item," Dumbledore said, nodding at his sickening right hand, "into something more presentable."

"You want me to Transfigure your *hand*?"

"Yes. I find myself a bit hampered at the moment, magically speaking."

"But Transfiguring a discrete body part is almost impossible."

"Which is why I trust only you to do it."

Her mouth opened, then closed again, her tongue seemingly unable to form words. He was asking her to perform incredibly complex magic on his hand, his ~~wand~~ hand. Griselda's long-ago warning echoed in Minerva's mind:

*"You can lose the use of the organ for good. I knew a wizard lost his John Thomas trying to transfigure it into... well, just don't try it, is what I'm telling you, Minerva McGon... Macnair."*

The memory of Griselda and her sturdy forthrightness helped Minerva calm herself enough to think.

"Even if I do manage it, we don't know what kind of effect it will have on the hand," she said.

"I don't think you can do much damage at this point," Albus said with a sad smile.

"But the curse ..."

"It will not affect the curse. Severus has already mitigated its effects. But the hand is beyond his help."

"Then why risk it?"

"Because no one must know that it is more than a cosmetic injury. No one must know that I am ... less able than I was."

She looked at Severus. An emotion she couldn't quite place slipped across his features, but it was gone again in an instant.

*What are they playing at?*

She looked from Albus to Severus, waiting for either of them to tell her something. *anything*...useful, but the only sound in the room was Albus's still-ragged breathing.

It was tempting to refuse to try the transfiguration unless they gave her more information about exactly what had happened when the hand was cursed, but Albus was not wrong that it could have serious consequences for the war if the severity of his injury was generally known.

She checked her emotional barometer to see how she felt, and settled on weary. She hadn't the energy to do battle against these two wizards, to one of whom she was bound by love and shared experience, the other by chains of pity and regret. She would do as Albus asked and think about it later.

She moved back to Albus and inspected the hand carefully, asking him to turn it over several times.

"May I touch it?"

It was Severus who answered. "Yes, but it may hurt him."

"Go ahead," Albus said. "I'll tell you to stop if I can't bear it."

She touched back of the hand very gently. When Albus didn't react, she ran her fingers gingerly over the blackened skin.

Albus grunted, and she pulled back immediately.

"I'm sorry."

"Not to worry, my dear. I'm fine. It's just a bit tender. Do whatever you feel you need to."

"No, that's enough. Severus, what do you think? Is it safe for me to try the transfiguration?"

"Safe is a relative term in magic," Severus answered. "I don't believe it will change the outcome, whether or not the spell works as you intend." He looked at her intently, not blinking.

A chill came over her, and she had to grasp the side of the desk.

*Albus is dying.*

That's what Albus wasn't telling her, it was why she'd been summoned. It was to be her job to hide that fact from everyone as long as possible, lest the knowledge embolden their enemies.

Minerva looked down at the stricken man. He had been her friend, for better and worse, for fifty years. She'd thought they were done with secrets, she and Albus, after all this time, yet he would not tell her this essential, impossible truth. That he was dying.

"Minerva," he said softly. "Do this for me. Please."

Her lips pressed together in a thin, grim line.

"All right," she said, and drew her wand.

"Thank you."

She looked at the hand, trying to separate her knowledge of it from her knowledge of Albus Dumbledore.

*Think of a what a hand is, in its essence.*

She pointed her wand at the hand and murmured the first spell.

Nothing seemed to happen, but that didn't surprise her. The spell she'd cast was merely the first layer, meant to empty the hand of as much residual magic as possible in order to prepare it for the complex magic to come. She knew she'd have to reach deeper into her mind and magic to effect any visible change.

She concentrated on the hand as she remembered it: the skin pale-beige with a tinge of healthy pink; the large blue veins running and twining like rivers and tributaries across the top; the bony knuckles, lightly dusted with white hairs.

With a complicated series of wand movements, Minerva whispered three spells in quick succession. As she cast, she visualised the bones, muscles, and tendons under the damaged skin, contracting and releasing them in her mind as her lips formed the Latin of the incantations that would, she hoped, fix the hand in her mind and magic as the anatomical tool it had been before the curse had changed it into something Dark.

The hand rippled and shimmered and became momentarily transparent, then more solid.

Satisfied that she'd addressed its objective *handness*, she now had to move on to the more difficult piece of it, the part that was ineffably *Albus's* hand. There were no words for this, Latin or otherwise, so she thought of her dear friend, and all the different ways she'd witnessed his hand wielding and expressing Albus's unique magic: the long, expressive fingers steepling and nesting under his chin as he listened to a student or faculty member presenting an idea or a plea; the delicate way he held his wand between his thumb and first two fingers, almost as one would hold a quill, when he cast; his palm; resting comfortably on Malcolm's shoulder as he reassured the boy that he would learn to control his invisibility.

Nothing was happening.

She needed to make a deeper connection with her understanding of *Albus's hand*.

She moved her mind methodically back in time until she could conjure up her memories of his hand, filled with the tenderness of a complex, ambivalent sort of love, moving over her body long ago, the night they'd made Malcolm. Albus's palm, moving over her breast; his knuckles brushing the sensitive skin of her thigh; fingertips touching her between her legs, stirring her to a pleasure she'd never imagined; the odd sensation of his finger entering her, feeling her where no one ever had ... a part of Albus Dumbledore, *her* Albus Dumbledore, who wanted so badly to give, to take in return, to share himself, but held back out of fear, shame and terrible, ruinous guilt ...

A mixture of love, pity, anger, and gratitude welled up in her.

She cast again.

Albus moaned, then screamed.

The rippling of the skin increased. Minerva could hear it more clearly now, and it made the hair on the back of her neck rise. Then the rippling and hissing abruptly ceased. A puff of deep grey smoke rose from the hand, and the sulphurous odour increased.

Severus hurried to Albus's side.

"Headmaster?"

Minerva held her breath, perspiration trickling down her back and between her breasts, while Albus panted.

"Thank you, my dear," he said in a hoarse whisper. "Sorry to have alarmed you. It was just a touch uncomfortable."

He held up the hand and turned it this way and that.

"Much better."

It didn't appear "much better" to Minerva. The skin remained charred-looking and the fingers stiff and skeletal. But when she mustered the courage to look at it more closely, she found that the awful rippling, hissing, and whispering were gone, and there was no more odour.

A leaden sort of exhaustion filled her. Her bad hip felt as if it were made of ground glass, and she collapsed into one of the poufy chairs near the desk.

"I'm sorry, Albus."

"No, no, it's an excellent transfiguration. I didn't expect the hand to look as it did before. The important thing is that the curse no longer appears active. No one else could have done it. Thank you, Minerva."

His eyes met hers and slowly crinkled into a smile, which she couldn't help returning. She was surprised to find how much his praise still meant to her.

"But the hand is still obviously damaged," said Severus.

"True," Albus said. "But it now looks like a burn from a strong, but ordinary, curse. And, if I may say so, I am almost as adept with a wand in my other hand, so we will be able to explain that it was a serious accident but that the hand will heal in time."

He looked sombrely at each of them.

"Minerva, Severus, I must ask you to say nothing of this incident. To anyone."

She said, "But surely the Order has to..."

"To *anyone*," he repeated.

His demeanour softened, and he stood on shaky legs.

He came over to her and put his good hand on one of hers, saying softly, "In the name of our long friendship, I must ask you to do this for me. ~~Tell~~ *to one*."

Minerva felt as if there were invisible strings drawing them together, her, Albus, and Severus, a sepia-toned trio of damaged people, in a tangled game for which only one of them knew the rules.

A memory came to her of Harry Potter's first year at Hogwarts, when Albus had insisted on the heads placing those absurd protections around the Philosopher's Stone.

Minerva had objected to the entire plan, of course. Using the Stone to lure Voldemort out of hiding was one thing, but allowing Harry Potter to place himself in harm's

way...to use the boy as *bait*...was something else altogether.

But Albus had been adamant that Harry be allowed to search for the Stone. He'd wanted the teachers to set a series of challenges that would require Potter to work together with his friends to overcome them.

"*He must learn that he cannot succeed alone, that he must trust in his friends*," Albus had told her.

She wanted to remind him of that conversation now.

"Albus..."

"Thank you, my dear." Albus smiled his beatific smile. "Severus, perhaps you could see me to my chambers?"

Severus helped him up the staircase and through the door to his private quarters. Minerva followed, carefully and painfully, and waited in the sitting room for Severus while he helped the headmaster to his bed.

They left the headmaster's chambers together.

Minerva leant heavily on her stick as they walked. Severus held out his arm for her, and she took it. A vague sort of lightening passed through her, and she had the impression he was using magic to help support her weight.

They made their way slowly down the corridor.

"When will he die?" Minerva asked quietly.

Severus didn't look at her or change his pace.

"When the time comes."

They said nothing more, and walked on.

~oOo~

Alastor stole a few moments to look at the woman lying on the bed. The dark cloud of hair haloing her face emphasized its paleness. Lines he was certain hadn't been there in previous months shot across her forehead. He smiled at the faint shimmer of saliva that made its way from the corner of her slightly parted lips to the white cotton pillowcase on which her head rested.

Fierce love for her washed over him.

He was still furious with Albus for letting that Umbridge bitch run roughshod over the school before he vanished Merlin-knew-where in the middle of term, letting Minerva take the brunt of it all.

It had almost killed her.

Anger re-possessed him as he watched the still-red fingertip of a scar peek and recede from above the neckline of her thin nightdress as her chest moved slowly up and down with each breath.

*Those bleedin' eejits should have their wands planted firmly up their arses alongside their brains.*

Two days after the stunning, Alastor had ambushed Dawlish as he was coming out of the pub favoured by the posher Ministry set. Dawlish swore he hadn't been one of the Aurors to cast a Stunning spell at Minerva, but after Alastor threatened him with a particularly nasty variation of the Instant Baldness Hex, he gave up the four mates who had.

Each of them had received a surprise visit from an extremely irate ex-Auror, which may or may not have been a factor in two of them opting to ride a desk for the remainder of their careers in Magical Law Enforcement. A third spent an afternoon in St Mungo's casualty department having the strong Sticking Charm that attached his wand hand to his testicles removed before leaving the Auror corps altogether.

Amelia had given him holy hell for that...*Do you think I can afford to lose any of my field Aurors at a time like this?* but Alastor had shot back: *"And since when are yer field Aurors so scared of a civilian schoolteacher that they have to hit her with four fecking Stunners just to shut her up?"*

Amelia had looked chagrined, and Alastor, who had half expected to have his Order of Merlin, third-class, taken away and his pension revoked, heard no more about it.

Now Amelia was dead.

And the last words he'd spoken to her had been in anger.

The thought of telling Minerva about Amelia's murder nauseated him, but he had to do it. Scrimgeour couldn't keep it out of the *Prophet* for too long, and she should hear it from Alastor before she read it with her morning cuppa.

He sat on the side of the bed and caressed her cheek with the backs of his fingers.

"Minerva."

She stirred.

A little louder: "Minerva."

Her arm shot under her pillow for her wand as she sat up, but his hand on her shoulder stopped her.

"It's only me, love," he said.

"Alastor."

She sighed, relaxing her wand arm and flopping back against the pillow.

"And who else would be lookin' for you in your bedroom, I'd like to know?"

She gave him a sleepy smile.

"Only you, thank Merlin."

"You need to work on your reflexes, though," he said. "If it *had* been someone else, they'd have had you before you could cast."

"Since you reinforced the wards to my rooms, I sincerely doubt anyone but you could get in here."

"Doesn't matter. How can you even be sure it's really me?"

She leant up, put a hand behind his head, and kissed his mouth until he couldn't help but kiss her back.

"It's you," she said, releasing him.

"Cheeky."

She yawned and stretched. "What time is it?"

"About half-ten."

He wondered what had kept her up so late; she hadn't had any recon or surveillance duties for the Order last night but the thought vanished when she moved to get up.

He put a hand on her arm as she reached for her cane.

"I need to tell you something."

The lines on her forehead deepened.

"Tell me."

"It's bad."

The fear reflected in her features was an expression he'd seen on too many faces lately. Everyone he knew spent most of their days in a state of ambient panic. The disappearances and outright deaths hadn't abated since the Ministry had finally twigged to Voldemort's reappearance. On the contrary, the Death Eaters were becoming more brazen, as if they were taunting the Ministry, taunting the whole wizarding world.

To make matters worse, over the past few years the younger Aurors had become a load of lackeys and political jockeys; recruits now saw the corps as a stepping-stone to higher office, always looking for a chance to add to their chips by sucking up to their so-called "superiors" rather than using any brains or initiative. Amelia was nearly at her wits' end ...

*Jaysus, Maria, 'n Joseph. Amelia.*

He took a deep breath and fixed his good eye on Minerva.

"Minerva. Love. Amelia Bones has been killed."

She blinked at him for a moment as if she hadn't understood his words.

"Oh. Oh, no."

It was a deflated sound, not at all what he'd expected.

She squeezed her eyes tightly shut as he stroked her arm, waiting for the storm, but when she opened them, her eyes were dry. Her voice was soft but steady.

"I was afraid you were going to tell me it was Malcolm."

He mentally kicked himself for ham-fisting it. He should have told her right off it wasn't that.

"Christ, I'm Sorry. I should have..."

"It's all right. It's just that that's where my mind seems to go these days. I hate to admit it, but I'm actually relieved." She struck the mattress with the side of an impotent fist. "This bloody war ..."

Now the tears gathered in the corners of her eyes. He handed her a handkerchief, and she dabbed at them before they could fall.

"Poor Amelia. What happened?" she asked.

"They don't know exactly. It's early days in the investigation, but they think it was You-Know-Who himself."

"Merlin!"

"Nobody else could've got through the Ministry's protections and Kingsley's wards. He blames himself, of course, poor sod."

"I'm sure it wasn't his fault."

"Yeah, I've told him. He's even better at wards than I am, but nobody can protect against everything. We know that the Dark Lord has developed new offensive spells; the Azkaban breakout made that too clear. What worries me more is the intel angle. How did they find her in the safe house?"

Amelia Bones and other important Ministry leaders had been provided with personal protections...often supplemented with Order of the Phoenix surveillance...and those who had been particularly involved with anti-Death Eater activities had been moved from their homes and flats to safe houses around London. Alastor, via Kingsley and Amelia, had pushed for Fidelius Charms to safeguard the locations, but newly elected Minister Rufus Scrimgeour had banjaxed the idea, insisting he trusted his top-level staff to keep things secret without the complexities of Secret Keepers and blood charms. A good Auror, Rufus, but too fond of control to be an effective leader, Alastor thought. It should have been Amelia in the Minister's seat and Rufus in the safe house. Not that he wished his old training-mate dead in her place, although she wouldn't *be* dead if Rufus had just listened ...

Renewed fury bubbled up in Alastor again, but he banked it. There was too much to be angry about, and there were more important things right now.

"Was it the spy in the Ministry?" Minerva asked, reading his thoughts.

"Possibly."

"Any progress on finding out who it is?"

"Yaxley's still the prime suspect, but his security clearance doesn't give him access to safe-house locations."

"Who else, then?"

Alastor hesitated before speaking.

"Someone in the Order."

Her breath hitched audibly.

"You think there's a spy in the Order itself?"

"I think we have to consider it a possibility. It happened last time."

He hated to bring it up. He knew that the idea that Sirius Black, one of her students, had been a turncoat had tormented her during the years after the end of the first war. The discovery that the traitor had been Peter Pettigrew rather than Black was hardly any better. It wasn't something he enjoyed reminding her about, but he needed her keen mind working on the problem now that it had graduated from Alastor-paranoia to an almost-certainty.

"Mundungus?" she said, almost hopefully.

"No. He never did any protection detail. Dumbledore didn't trust him not to talk if he got in a bad spot."

"Who else knew the where the safe houses were?"

"Besides me? Kingsley, Arthur, and Tonks."

"No. I can't believe it was any of them," she said.

"Me neither. Dumbledore knows the locations, of course," he said.

There was a pause, and then he dived in.

"Did he tell Snape, d'you think?" he asked

Minerva shook her head.

"It wasn't Severus."

Alastor shifted on the bed. "He was a Death Eater, Minerva. No one really leaves them. Not unless You-Know-Who lets them."

"No. He's on our side."

Alastor sighed. They'd had this argument before. He thought she was naïve about Snape, and she thought Alastor was paranoid. He acknowledged that there might be some truth to both positions.

Given what had happened to Amelia, Alastor had hoped Minerva would come to see things his way. She was best positioned to keep an eye on Snape.

But could tell by the way she was rubbing her temples that pushing her on the issue wouldn't help at the moment.

"Anyway, we'll need to discuss it with Dumbledore," he said.

"Oh, gods. Albus ..." she whispered.

"What about him?"

There was a pause, and he waited while she turned something over in her mind.

"He's dying," she said.

The air seemed thin, suddenly, and Alastor had to take a deep breath before uttering his next words.

"What? How?"

"You're not meant to know. No one is."

"Tell me anyway."

So she did.

When she'd finished, he was quiet for a few moments, sifting everything around in his brain, trying to weave it into the fabric of his universe.

Dumbledore dying. Of a curse.

Impossible.

"The curse," he asked, "you're certain it's fatal?"

"I'm not an expert, but it looked very bad."

Alastor rose from the bed, and Minerva followed.

"That seals it. Snape is the spy. He's got to be. Whatever he did to Dumbledore..."

"He saved Albus's *life*!"

He was trying to keep his voice calm. "So he told you, but is it true? How do you know he didn't take advantage of the situation to make it worse? That those potions weren't poison?"

"Albus said so. Besides, I was there. It was..."

"I know you feel responsible for Snape in some way, but..."

"No! It isn't that. He has changed. After the first war, he came back different."

"A Nundu doesn't change its spots."

She let out an exasperated puff of air and threw her free hand up in the air, thumping the ground with her cane. Her face was turning pink.

Alarm bells sounded in his head.

*Her heart!*

Over the past year, they'd slowly found their way back to a place where they could enjoy arguing careful never to let things spill over to a fight, but still challenging one another as they had in the past. It was one of the things he'd always enjoyed most in their relationship, and he thought she'd say the same.

But since her injury, it had alarmed him when she got excited in any way, despite the clean bill of health the Healers had given her heart. He couldn't help picturing it banging away in her chest the way his did, pumping with equal parts ire and arousal, when they sparred. Now the image was superimposed with one of her lying in the bed at Mungo's.

The voices in his head hissed at him.

*You're killing her ... killing her ...*

He bit his tongue hard to shut them out. The coppery tang of blood in his mouth was perversely soothing, and the voices quieted to a barely perceptible murmur.

"Look, love," he said. "It's been a long night for both of us. Why don't we have a lie-down together and we can talk about it when we're both more rested. I can barely think straight, I'm so tired."

Her glare softened and she nodded.

"Good thought."

He stripped down to his skivvies and removed his wooden leg.

They nestled together under the bedclothes, arms around one another, Minerva's head resting comfortably on his chest.

She was restless, though, and shifted several times.

"What's the matter, love?" he asked. "Besides all the obvious?"

Her hand found its way under his vest and stroked his chest for a moment before she answered.

"Is it terrible of me to be relieved that it wasn't Malcolm?"

He gave her shoulder a squeeze.

"Not at all. Doesn't mean you don't grieve for Amelia."

"I know I should be more upset, but with everything that's happened ... I just don't feel I have the energy for more grief just now."

"I understand. I know you've been worried about Malcolm." Alastor chuckled. "He's made a pretty big splash in the European papers."

"He's put himself in danger, for all the good it's done us. He says the *Ministre de Magique* has managed to convince herself that it's a British problem, that pure-blood mania doesn't have a major French presence." Minerva grimaced. "She doesn't remember the Grindelwald years."

"Wasn't even born yet."

"Exactly. And the *Conseil* are afraid any whiff of war will send the value of the *Livre* tumbling, just like our Galleon."

Despite her agitation, she yawned again.

Alastor said, "Sleep now."

Within a few minutes, she was breathing heavily and steadily again. She'd reluctantly admitted to him that she still tired easily, which Madam Pomfrey had said would be the case for several more weeks, to Minerva's disgust.

She pushed herself too hard. He'd wanted to urge her to slow down, take things easy, but he'd promised himself he wouldn't try to bully her into anything. He'd just be a shoulder to lean on, and it pleased him that she did so, more and more. She'd mellowed a bit over the years as had he, head-voices notwithstanding but she was still a woman who resented feeling backed into a corner. The more space he gave her, the more comfortable she became.

*Wish I'd figured that out years ago.*

He let his eyes flutter shut, but he couldn't seem to drift off.

His mind kept churning things around and around: Dumbledore was dying.

He'd need to figure out what that meant, both strategically and personally.

He kissed Minerva's hair. It would be hard on her in lots of ways, no doubt. And once the autumn term started, he wouldn't be here to provide support. They'd have only stolen moments, probably at Grimmauld Place, surrounded by Weasleys and sundry Order members. If only she'd marry him ... but he let the old thought go.

They'd make do. Once the war was over, they could see about a more permanent arrangement.

His thoughts turned to Snape.

Alastor knew why Minerva took up for Snape. Aside from Dumbledore's apparent confidence in him, Minerva wanted to believe in Snape's redemption. She felt guilty over failing to see the abuse her "Marauders" had heaped on the boy at school, and she enjoyed his company at the school, she'd said. Alastor didn't get it, but then, he couldn't figure how she'd come to love Alastor himself, so no accounting for taste, he supposed.

But Snape made him nervous, even before the disaster of Amelia's murder. True, he'd let Alastor use his lab to brew his own potions an unheard-of precedent, according to Minerva after his trunk ordeal, but Snape had lurked about. Spying, Alastor had figured, not that there was anything to be learned by watching an old cripple brew some Strengthening Solution and vitamin potions. Snape had made a couple of suggestions, through Minerva, for improving the potions, which Alastor had run by Malcolm before trying. They'd helped, but that didn't mean Snape wasn't the spy. He could've been trying to ingratiate himself to Alastor to get him to let down his guard.

*Not ruddy likely!*

He'd be keeping his eye...both eyes...on Severus Snape.

# Chapter Forty-Five

*Chapter 45 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**4 July 1997**

"Alastor."

Malcolm pulled Alastor into a tight embrace and held him there for a few moments before releasing him.

"How's she holding up?"

"You know yer mum. Working too hard and won't let anyone know how she's feeling, but I think she's managing."

In truth, Alastor was worried about her. Since Dumbledore's death...since he'd been murdered by that fecking traitorous snake...he'd not seen her shed a tear. In fact, he'd barely seen her after that madness five nights ago when her Patronus had summoned him with the unbelievable news.

After the chaos had died down, he'd wanted to stay with her, but she wouldn't hear of it.

"It wouldn't be prudent," she'd said. "Hogwarts will be crawling with Aurors, governors, reporters, and Merlin knows who else for the foreseeable future."

"Bugger the governors and everyone else," he'd growled, but she'd grasped him again and held him hard against her.

She whispered in his ear, "Let me get through the funeral. Then come. I'll need you."

He didn't argue.

She was doing her pillar-of-strength act, he knew, but he also knew she needed it. And he was willing to let it be, as long as she knew she could lean on him afterward, after she'd comforted every student, reassured every teacher, cossetted every governor, and chivvied every Ministry official into doing what they should've been doing for the past year to face the mounting danger.

They'd held each other for a few stolen minutes in Dumbledore's office...now hers, he supposed...and he'd gone, throwing himself into the search for Snape.

He'd seen Minerva during the hurried, panicky Order meetings they'd had in the ensuing days, but they'd hardly spoken privately. When he'd shown up in her quarters early that morning with his trunk, he'd been ready for an argument, but she'd merely sighed and asked him to use his invisibility cloak when entering or leaving her personal quarters, for propriety's sake.

He'd spent most of the rest of the day inspecting the security arrangements. He was haranguing Gawain Robards about setting a couple of Aurors to guard the Whomping Willow when Elgar popped in to tell him Minerva had received an owl from Malcolm about his family's planned arrival in the late afternoon.

At 4:30, Alastor went to the Hogwarts gates and found Malcolm in a heated conversation with one of the Aurors there. Alastor pulled the Auror aside and showed him the special pass Robards had scribbled for him to give to Malcolm.

"Thanks for meeting us," Malcolm said after the group had been admitted to the grounds and they'd exchanged their greetings. "I don't think those Aurors would've let us in if you hadn't been there."

"You'd better believe security's tight around here," Alastor said. "No Apparating to within a mile of the gates, and absolutely no one gets in who hasn't been cleared ahead of time. So everyone who's going to the funeral has to get here early, and most of them came today and are stayin' in the castle. I got yer clearances expedited with MLE. Still got a little pull there, anyway."

"Thanks."

"I'm glad you're here. It'll be a comfort to Minerva."

"I hope so."

"Alastor," Eliane said, stepping forward and squeezing his free hand.

"Good to see you, dear, circumstances notwithstanding. You look even younger than the last time I saw you. Himself givin' you an anti-aging potion?" Alastor said with a nod toward Malcolm.

Eliane smiled and kissed him on each cheek.

"And you three," Alastor said, turning his attention to the children and ruffling Maximilien's sandy hair, "a scruffier pack of pixies I've never seen. Don't yer mum and dad take care of you?"

"No, Uncle Alastor. Papa doesn't even feed us most of the days," Rosemonde answered with a cheeky grin.

"I suspected as much," Alastor said. He grasped H  len   by the waist and lifted her high in the air with his free hand and the assistance of a light Levitating charm.

"You're practically floating away, lass!"

The child answered with a fit of giggles.

He set her down and spoke to Malcolm and Eliane.

"Minerva's sorry she couldn't give you one of the guest rooms. Full of *old dignitaries*, apparently," he said, sniffing his disdain. "You're bunking in with the Weasley family in one of the empty classrooms."

"Those are the red-headed ones, yes?" Eliane asked.

"Right. But don't worry. Molly'll keep everyone in line."

"Oh, I am not worried. In fact, I think Rosemonde is very 'appy. At our last visit, she was quite impressed by one of those twins, which one was *itna petite*?"

"*Maman!*" the girl cried, reddening.

"It was Fred," Maximilien said.

"*Tais-toi!*" Rosemond punched her brother on the shoulder.

"*Assez, assez,*" their mother admonished. "*C'est une occasion solennelle.* Please remember that we are 'ere to mourn your Uncle Albus."

The children sobered at that, and the little group walked on up the path to the castle, Malcolm Levitating their bags ahead of them.

Once Malcolm and his family were comfortably installed in an old classroom that had once been used for alchemy classes and was now fitted with camp beds and a large partition that was presumably to separate Malcolm's family from the Weasleys, Alastor took them to Minerva's quarters, where they shared a brief but happy reunion with Elgar. They were in the sitting room, enjoying the tea and scones with lemon curd the elf had insisted on bringing them, when the door opened to reveal a haggard-looking Minerva.

Malcolm went immediately to her and folded her in a tight embrace.

"Mum. I'm so, so sorry," he said.

"I'm sorry too. Thank you for coming. I know it's difficult getting here."

"Of course we came."

Minerva released him and looked eagerly over to the table at the rest of the family.

Rosemonde met her halfway across the floor and hugged her. Max and H  l  ne followed suit.

Alastor found himself tearing up at the sight of Minerva surrounded by her grandchildren.

"*Grand-m  re*, 'ow are you?" Rosemonde asked. At fifteen, she sounded very grown up to Alastor in her concern for her grandmother.

"I'm fine...much better now that you're all here," Minerva said, looking around, eyes glittering. "Have you settled into your room? Are you comfortable?"

"Very comfortable, thank you for arranging it," said Eliane. She and Minerva exchanged a double cheek-kiss.

Afraid she'd try to flit away to attend to more of her relentless duties, Alastor said, "We're just having some tea. Sit down for a few minutes and join us."

She looked torn, but after a moment's hesitation, she sat.

Alastor knew Malcolm was itching to talk about the circumstances surrounding Dumbledore's death, but with the children there, they couldn't say much, so Malcolm asked his mother about the arrangements and who would be attending tomorrow's funeral service.

She told him, then changed the subject abruptly, asking the children about their studies. The worry lines that deeply etched her forehead seemed to relax a little as Rosemonde chattered to her in a mixture of English and French about her Transfiguration lessons. From what Alastor could gather, Rose was a bit of a prodigy and was getting additional lessons from the Beauxbatons Transfiguration master, Alphard Bienbon.

Rosemonde resembled her grandmother in other ways. Her hair was darker than Malcolm's, and she had Minerva's high cheekbones and thin lips. Alastor thought that, for Minerva, it must be like looking in a slightly fuzzy mirror.

"Professeur Bienbon thinks I could become an Animagus," Rosemonde told her grandmother. "But *Maman et Papa* think it is too soon to start."

"I agree with them," said Minerva.

"But you were only sixteen when you began!"

"No, I was nineteen and had completed school before I started my Animagus studies," Minerva corrected.

At Rosemonde's dejected look, Minerva added, "But you may have some of my books on Animagus theory to read while you're waiting."

"That's very generous, Minerva," Eliane said.

"Not at all. And once you are ready," Minerva said to her granddaughter, "with your mother and father's permission, I would be delighted to help you."

"Thank you, *Grand-m  re*," Rosemonde said. "I look forward to it."

"So do I," Minerva said. A pained, wistful look clouded her features, but she quickly hid it with a warm smile at Rosemonde.

It hurt Alastor's heart. Looking forward to a time when they could all worry about normal things like Transfiguration lessons and family gatherings felt as futile as trying to conjure love, what with Dumbledore encased in his shroud and Death Eaters around every corner.

*And under our noses*, Alastor thought, his mind turning back to one Severus Snape.

There was no comfort in having been right about him all along.

It felt wrong to Alastor, the way everything had unfolded. The curse to Dumbledore's hand had already been killing him...presumably Snape had told his lord and master all about it. So why send a bunch of Death Eaters into the school? There was no sense to it. Even if that motley crew had managed to fight off the staff and take over Hogwarts, how were they going to hold it when the Ministry was still, however tenuously, under the control of the Light?

Snape could've sat out the Battle of the Astronomy Tower, as the *Prophet* had taken to calling it, and remained in the bosom of the Order, spying for Voldemort, at least until the Ministry fell. Killing Dumbledore had, in fact, rendered Snape less valuable, now that he had to go into hiding.

The so-called Dark Lord was a mad bastard, but he wasn't stupid. He wouldn't have outed his prize spy just to kill Albus. Not when Snape had already arranged a much

less public murder...or at least hadn't prevented a premature death...for Dumbledore, and Alastor didn't judge Snape a man who felt he had things to prove to his fellow Death Eaters.

*A slimy snake, always hissing in Dumbledore's ear, that's what he was.*

Now the snake was no more useful than a lapdog, and the question burning up Alastor's brain was, why?

His attention snapped back to Minerva, who had stood, saying she had to get back to work.

"Will we see you at dinner?" Malcolm asked.

"Probably not."

"And when are you going to eat?" Alastor asked her.

"Elgar will make sure I get something in my office."

Alastor made a mental note to speak to the elf to make sure of it.

They all said their goodbyes, and Minerva bustled off to her next chore.

The remaining group stayed in Minerva's sitting room for another half hour, talking around the subject most on everyone's mind. When little H  l  ne yawned, Eliane rounded up the children and took them to their makeshift quarters for "a rest and a wash" before dinner. Malcolm remained.

Alastor heated the teapot with his wand and poured out two more cups

"Mind if I add a little something to mine?" Malcolm asked.

"Fine by me."

Malcolm went to the small drinks cabinet, picked out a bottle of whisky, and added a dram to his teacup.

"Yer mother would have yer head if she saw you puttin' her Cardhu into yer tea," Alastor said.

Malcolm chuckled.

"Have they found Snape yet?" he asked.

"No. He's gone to ground with his master."

"Mum was so certain he was on our side."

"Yer mum tries to see the best in everyone," Alastor said. "And she believed Dumbledore when he said Snape was all right."

Malcolm set his teacup down on the table, sloshing some of it over the rim. "How did he fool us all so completely?"

Alastor didn't say that Snape hadn't fooled him.

"He spent a lot of years working for Dumbledore, pretending to spy for him. Some of the intel he gave us seemed good. Probably was good. I don't reckon he minded givin' up one or two of his Death Eater pals to the Order so he could stay in Dumbledore's good graces."

There was a silence as the two men sipped their tea.

"Are you going to lead the Order now?" Malcolm asked.

At the meetings after Dumbledore's death, everyone had looked to Alastor for direction, which disconcerted him. He was a pretty good fighter and a bloody good investigator...still, he thought...and he was canny enough, but he wasn't a military strategist. They'd left that to Dumbledore. And look where it had got them. Alastor, Minerva, and Kingsley had done most of the talking and deciding at the last meeting, but realistically, none of them could fill Dumbledore's fancy boots.

*Christ, what a cockup. Damn Albus Dumbledore!*

"Alastor?"

Alastor realised he had spoken aloud.

"Ah, sorry. I was just thinkin'. Dumbledore didn't prepare us for something like this. Stupid of all of us not to have a plan. I don't know who's going to lead the Order. Maybe Kingsley or Arthur. Not me, any road. I'm better in the trenches."

"Mum?"

"No," Alastor said quickly. "Not that she couldn't do it, but she's going to be Head of Hogwarts. Her focus will be here."

"Protecting the students," Malcolm said. He rose, went over to the window, and gazed out at the grounds, the early evening light slanting through the window illuminating his face. In the light, Alastor thought, he resembled Dumbledore more than Minerva.

Malcolm turned back to Alastor.

"Don't say anything to the children yet, but Eliane and I have been talking about my coming back here for a while."

Alastor's belly gave a hitch.

"You're daft. It isn't safe," he said. He struggled out of the chair and stumped over to Malcolm. "Trust me, it's only going to get worse. You won't want them anywhere near Britain."

"I know that. They wouldn't be coming with me. But I'm not doing much good in Paris. A few of the *Conseil* have been listening to us, but most of them aren't going to believe You-Know-Who is a threat to France until he marches down the Champs   lys  es leading a pack of goose-stepping Inferi behind him. If I'm here, I can fight. I can help the Order."

"You're not a fighter, Malcolm."

"I'm still a decent duellist. And my special talents could be put to good use."

To emphasize his point, he wavered out of focus and Disappeared.

Malcolm's voice came out of the æther. "You said some of the Death Eaters could see behind invisibility cloaks."

"Yeah. I can do it too, when I concentrate," said Alastor. The sound of Malcolm's disembodied voice made the hairs rise on the back of Alastor's neck.

"Concentrate now. Can you see me?"

Alastor focussed both eyes on the space where the voice had come from.

"Nothing. Not even a shimmer."

There was a sound behind Alastor, and he whipped around, wand drawn.

Malcolm was standing close behind him.

"Easy, there," he said.

"Jaysus, boyo. You almost got yer nose hexed off."

"Sorry to startle you. But you see how I could be useful to the Order."

Alastor gave a grudging nod.

He said, "Yer mum won't be happy to have you in the thick o' things. It'll be one more thing for her to worry about."

"I know. But I have to do this."

Alastor peered at him.

"What?" said Malcolm.

"You're just like her, you know."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"On the contrary. But it's not exactly a safe thing. Not too reassuring for the people who love you."

"I know." Malcolm put a hand on Alastor's shoulder. "But it's war. Nothing's safe."

"No. It isn't."

Suddenly exhausted, Alastor limped over to the settee near the fireplace and dropped onto it.

"Tomorrow's going to be a long day," Malcolm said.

"Yup." Alastor massaged his bad leg.

"Before I leave you to get some rest, I should tell you, though. There's one little hitch about me coming over here," Malcolm said. There was a brief pause before he said, "Max has it too. The Invisibility trait."

Alastor looked up sharply.

Malcolm nodded. "It showed up just after Easter. He'd got into a scrape with some of his mates at school, and Madame Maxime was giving him hell. She said she nearly fainted when he just ..." Malcolm snapped his fingers.

Alastor barked a laugh. "I'd like to have seen that."

Malcolm grinned. "Me too."

"How long did it take him to get back?"

"A few hours. Madame Maxime owed me immediately, and I was able to talk him back, just like Albus did with me. It hasn't happened again, but I haven't really had the chance to work with him on it."

"Was he scared?"

"He says not. We've talked to the kids about me, so he knew right away what was happening."

Alastor stood up. leaning heavily on his stick.

"You've got to be firm with him, now. No using it for pranks or tricks. It's too dangerous."

"I know, I know. We've had a serious talk. I was hoping you could reinforce it a little while we're here. I plan to work with him as soon as we get home, but in case it takes a while to get things under his control ..."

"You don't want to leave him."

"Exactly."

"Then don't."

Malcolm started to argue, but Alastor held up a hand to stop him.

"Look, I'm not tellin' you what to do. I'm just sayin' don't rush to decide. The war's going to be here, I'm sorry to say, for the foreseeable future. There'll be plenty of chances for you to fight it once you've tended to your boy. He's a canny kid. He'll catch on quick enough, then you can come. If you think you have to."

Malcolm smiled. "You always make me feel better about things, Alastor."

"Oh, sure, that's the effect I tend to have on people."

"You do," Malcolm insisted.

"You're the only one, then."

"I don't think so. I'm really glad Mum has you."

Malcolm's words flushed Alastor through with warmth that had nothing to do with the tea or the crackling fire in Minerva's grate.

*Going soft.*

He took out his handkerchief and wiped his nose.

"Get on with you" he said. "Dinner's going to be soon, and you need a bath. Lots of Ministry hoi polloi'll be there tonight."

"Sure, Alastor."

~oOo~

Alastor sat with Malcolm and his family at the funeral. They'd had breakfast together in Minerva's quarters while she went to the Great Hall with the staff, students, and other visitors to the castle. He'd waited up for her the previous night...she hadn't come in until a quarter of two, and she'd risen before six. Alastor intended to see that once this circus was over, she got some real rest.

He watched her as she led her House to their seats in a section near the front and took her place in the first row alongside Rufus. Alastor's magical eye spun in his head to scan the crowd. He'd rather have been with the cadre of Aurors on the perimeter, keeping an eye on things, but he reckoned his place was there, beside Malcolm, as they buried his father.

Alastor's eye fixed on the Potter boy, who'd sat in the last row of Gryffindors. Merlin only knew what was going through his head. Minerva was worried about him. He'd refused to tell her what he and Dumbledore had been doing before Dumbledore's death, and she was very much afraid that the boy intended to attempt to find Voldemort alone. Alastor reckoned the Granger girl would go with him, and Ronald Weasley too, if he could get away from Molly.

When Hagrid laid Dumbledore's body on the plinth, Alastor glanced at Malcolm. Malcolm's eyes were dry, though his jaw was set in a way that told Alastor that he was keeping a tight rein on his emotions.

Alastor was among the few present who was prepared for the flames that sealed Dumbledore into his white marble tomb. At the last meeting, the Order had decided that a small but symbolic show of the Order's magical power wouldn't go amiss at the ceremony, and unanimously elected Minerva to do the deed.

Alastor had worried about her in the moment...afraid not that she couldn't manage the complex spell to form and close the tomb, but that it would take too much out of her to do it. She'd loved the old man, and asking her to be the person to forever seal his corpse into the sarcophagus was cruel, he thought. But he'd had to agree that a show of might from the new Head of Hogwarts was a good idea. Sure, a lot of folks wouldn't recognize the complexity of the magic involved, but the ones who mattered...the Ministry folks and any of Voldemort's secret followers in the crowd...would understand. Minerva McGonagall was a powerful witch, and anyone who tried to fuck with Hogwarts or any of her inhabitants would do so at their peril.

Alastor smiled at the collective gasp when the flames engulfed the old wizard's body. Minerva remained seated when casting the spell, but Rufus could not have missed the message.

Alastor was surprised, however, at the armed salute from the centaurs. The arrows landed pointedly next to where the Parkinson, Bulstrode, and Crabbe families were sitting in the little area reserved for significant donors to the school. He wondered when Minerva had found time to go into the forest to talk to them.

He knew she still had lots to do after the funeral...there were the children to see safely onto the Hogwarts Express and the many visitors to the castle to be politely invited to leave...so he and Malcolm returned to Minerva's sitting room while Eliane took the children for a walk around the grounds in the early summer sun.

"That was quite a show," Malcom said as Alastor heated the teapot with his wand.

"It was. I don't know how yer mother arranged it all so fast, but she pulled it off."

"I'm sure she's exhausted. I hope she gets a chance to get off her feet soon."

"Me too, but it's not bloody likely, what with the school in chaos and worryin' about protectin' Potter."

"The one who's supposed to be able to defeat You-Know-Who," Malcolm said.

"Right. Minerva's in a state because she thinks he isn't coming back to Hogwarts after the summer."

"What do you think?"

"I think she's right. I wouldn't come back if I were him. Better if Lord Snakehead has no idea where he is. Besides, yer mother thinks Dumbledore set Potter on some mission."

"What kind of mission?"

"No idea. Dumbledore wouldn't tell her anything, and if he didn't tell her, odds are he didn't tell anyone. Certainly not me. Bloody, buggery fool that he was."

"I see," Malcolm said quietly.

"Shite, I'm sorry. I forgot for a minute that he was yer dad. I shouldn't speak ill of him to you."

"It's all right. I loved him in a way, but he wasn't exactly a dad to me."

"As close as you had."

Malcolm looked at him, cocking his head queerly.

"Alastor, *you* are the closest to a father I ever had. Don't you know that?"

The words hit Alastor in the chest with the strength of a Stunner. A lovely, shocking Stunner that flooded him with warmth and made the tears jump into his eyes.

"Sure, yeah," Alastor said, turning away from Malcolm, afraid he'd give away too much of his feeling.

Malcolm put a hand on his arm. "Alastor..."

Alastor turned. "I wasn't exactly around all the time, was I?"

"You were around when you could be."

"Dumbledore was here, teachin' you things I could never have done."

"He taught me esoteric magic. You taught me things he never did maybe never could. You taught me to be a man. You made me feel safe and loved. I felt like my mother was safe and loved when she was with you."

A trembling Alastor made his way over to the settee and leant on it, overcome.

Malcolm followed, saying, "Whenever I'm having a problem with one of the kids, I ask myself, 'What would Alastor do?' Not, 'What would Albus Dumbledore do?' Because the father I want to be is the one you showed me how to be."

Alastor turned to look at him, his tongue paralysed by the strength of his love for this young man and by his own stupidity.

*All this time.*

All this time, Alastor had been jealous of Dumbldore for having something he didn't. When it was his, Alastor's, the whole time.

Malcolm said, "I thought ... I thought that you felt the same ... that you and I were as good as family."

"Oh, Malcolm, you've no idea how much ..."

But he couldn't finish before the tears overcame him.

Malcolm pulled him into his arms, and when they broke the embrace, Alastor saw that there were tears on Malcolm's cheeks too.

"A couple of right girls we are, cryin' over our tea," Alastor said. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his eyes, then offered it to Malcolm, who took it and did the same.

The looked at one another for moment, then both broke out laughing.

Oh, but it was good to laugh!

Alastor was filled with light and hope and all sorts of emotions that he'd always made fun of but secretly desired more than anything.

It was a lark, all this coming to Alastor Brendan Moody...Minerva, Malcolm and his family...and Alastor, ruddy top Auror that he was, only just figuring it out now.

He told himself, *By Jaysus, I'm going to enjoy it, Dark Lord or no.*

## Chapter Forty-Six

*Chapter 46 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**27 July 1997**

Minerva's eyes opened, and she blinked twice, the wisps of her dream retreating into the fog from which she'd awakened. The sun slanted in through the curtains at an angle that told her it was nearing six o' clock. She rolled over to find Alastor's natural eye open, looking at her.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning."

She was glad he no longer insisted on wearing the uncomfortable patch to bed, but this morning, the empty socket of his missing eye reminded her of his vulnerability.

She reached over to brush a straggle of grey hair from his cheek, and he leant over to kiss her. Despite her need to get up and face a busy day, the kiss turned heated and serious...at whose instigation, Minerva couldn't have said.

Alastor's lips travelled from her mouth to her neck, and she pulled herself closer to him, tangling her top leg with his, careful to avoid jostling his stump too badly. His hands wandered under her nightdress, ghosting over her thighs and bottom and skimming across her belly, finally finding her breasts, to send electric shocks of pleasure through her. Already breathless with need, she removed their clothes with a wandless spell.

"Love it when you do that," he murmured into her neck.

Minerva's fingers moved over his scarred body almost frantically, as if trying to memorise him by touch, and he stroked her face with one hand, the other dipping between her open thighs to discover just how badly she wanted him again, despite his having taken her enthusiastically to bed the previous evening.

His good eye stayed steady on her face, and her eyes remained open while her tension grew in response to his fingers' knowing dance.

She made him stop before sensation overwhelmed her.

"Now, please," she said, her hands urging him to complete their union.

They made love like that, facing one another, Alastor clutching at her hip for leverage. Near the end, Minerva stopped moving and let him control the rhythm. When she fell apart around him, Alastor's lips took hers again, and his moans disappeared into her mouth.

When it was over, they lay in one another's arms, Alastor's hand stroking up and down Minerva's leg as their perspiration mingled and cooled their heated skin. Neither spoke.

A harsh ringing sound interrupted their idyll, and she groaned. The day had come, as days do, whether she wanted it or not, and this particular day was one she'd been dreading for more than a week.

Alastor growled a *Finite*, and the *Tempus* charm Minerva had needlessly set the night before stopped its infernal noise. After another stolen moment enjoying the solid feel of his arms and his steady breath across her cheek, she sighed.

"I should get up," she said. "I'm meant to be breakfasting with the chairwizard of the board of governors in London at seven."

"Tell him to bugger off."

"I'd love to, but if we're to have a school ready to open in September, I'm afraid I can't."

She tried to sit up, but his arm tightened around her.

"Forget the school. We'll run away to an island, somewhere with no governors, no spotty teenagers, and absolutely no Dark Lords."

"That sounds heavenly," she said. "Shall we take your broom or mine?"

He kissed her again, and it was a long few seconds before he released her.

She got up, and when she had closed the bathroom door behind her, she leant against it, letting out a shaky breath.

*Wishing it away won't make it so*, she told herself. The evening would come, the sun would go down, and Alastor would be off on his mission, and nothing she could do would forestall it.

She showered and dressed, and when she emerged from the bathroom, he was having a cup of tea in her sitting room.

"Join me?" he asked.

"I can't. It's late."

"I know."

She felt suspended in thick gelatine; it was impossible to take the six or seven steps that would lead her to the door.

He stood and went to her, taking her face gently between his meaty hands.

"It'll be all right," he said softly.

"I know. Just be careful."

"I will." He let her face go. "I'll see you back here after we know Potter's safe at the Burrow."

She nodded, and he pecked her on the lips again, and she somehow found her way out the door to begin her long day.

~oOo~

Alastor dismounted his broom and rubbed his jaw, which ached from clenching, and surveyed the small garden. He and Kingsley cast a series of Muggle-repelling charms, and Alastor scanned the perimeter, letting his magical eye penetrate the fence.

*Good.*

No nosy neighbours were trying to peek into the Dursleys' backyard to see what all the din was about.

His eye swivelled to look through the back of his head when he heard *abang* from behind him. Potter came hurtling out the door, and the joyous cries from the kids made Alastor's fists tighten.

They were acting like this was a ruddy joyride.

Yes, they'd all miraculously managed to get to Privet Drive unscathed, and Potter was waiting for them, as arranged, but it was far too early for celebrating. The real danger lay ahead, and all the noise could only help anyone skulking about trying to pinpoint the boy's location.

Alastor herded the group inside, his agitation increasing with the kids' laughing and chattering.

Bill and his French girlfriend took to a corner of the kitchen to canoodle as if they were in a booth at Madam Puddifoot's. The Weasley twins kept up a constant and irritating jokey patter, and their younger brother made cow-eyes at the Granger girl, who giggled at whatever he or Potter said to her.

*Just like before. They think this is a game. And just like before, some of them will die.*

Alastor pushed the thought away and tossed the sacks of clothes he'd been carrying onto the gleaming table.

The ones who had been through the previous war, Kingsley, Remus, and Arthur, were sober and quiet, and Alastor thanked Merlin for them. Dung sat, hangdog and fidgety, at the end of the table. Hagrid ambled in last, ducking under the doorframe.

*Christ.*

Here they were, on a dangerous mission to move their most valuable asset to a safe house, and the Order had only managed to scare up five actual veterans. Well, six, if one counted Dung Fletcher, but Alastor didn't. And Hagrid couldn't even cast a proper stunner.

Which was one reason Potter would be safest with him, Alastor thought. No one would expect Hagrid to be guarding the Chosen One, and, though the man might be a menace with a wand, he wouldn't endanger the boy with stupid heroics, and it would take more than one strong spell to kill the half-giant or even knock him off the motorcycle. Alastor was certain he'd give his life for Potter, if it came down to it, which he sincerely hoped it wouldn't.

When Tonks...Tonks!...started in on her recent marriage, blathering like a schoolgirl, Alastor lost it.

"All right, all right, we'll have time for a cosy catch-up later!"

The group quieted, the kids looking nervously at one another like firsties at the Sorting.

After Alastor had explained the plan to Potter, and all the would-be doppelgangers had taken their allotted dose of Polyjuice, Alastor hustled the group back out into the garden, anxious to get the hell on with it. Even the Thestrals seemed to have a case of the ab-dabs; they snuffled and pawed the ground, tearing ragged divots into the immaculate lawn.

Merlin, but Alastor hoped this cockeyed plan would work. Mundungus Fletcher's suggestion of the Polyjuice ruse had surprised everyone at the Order meeting the week past. Dung almost never spoke up at meetings, except when called upon to share information gleaned from his dealings with the Wizarding underworld.

Alastor had wondered if Dung had let someone in on the plan to move Potter early and was trying to cover for a slip-up, so Alastor had cornered him one evening several days after the meeting and, for the first and only time in his career, used Veritaserum, slipping a dose into the Firewhisky he'd bought Dung.

When Alastor had asked if he'd told anyone about the plan, Dung had denied it, and, asked about his suggestion to hide the real Potter among several Polyjuiced imposters during the move, Dung had said the idea had occurred to him in a dream.

Alastor believed him; he was certain Dung hadn't mastered the ability to defeat the potion's imperative to tell the truth, and at the last Order meeting, when Alastor had endorsed the Polyjuice plan...without mentioning the Veritaserum...the other Order members had fallen in line too. It had frightened Alastor a little how willing they were to agree with him. It demonstrated that the leadership vacuum created by Dumbledore's death was still a huge problem.

Despite Alastor's grudging belief that Dung's plan was legit, Alastor had insisted Dung be one of the imposters. It made it less likely that Dung would jeopardise the plan with loose talk, and it would allow Alastor to keep a close watch on him during the operation.

Alastor was under no illusion that Dung would stick around if the Death Eaters showed up, so he assigned himself as Dung's partner. If anyone was going to be left without an extra wand during a fight, it would be Alastor himself, although everyone in the Order knew he'd likely be the main target if the Death Eaters attacked during the move.

The whole plan was risky, but he'd discussed it at length with both Kingsley and Minerva after the meeting, and they hadn't been able to formulate anything better.

The sooner this was over with, the better for everyone.

Alastor's eyes moved over the group. They were so very young, some of them: the Weasley boys, Fleur and Hermione, and Tonks, too, only 23 or 24, if Alastor remembered rightly. If things went tits-up...entirely likely, in Alastor's estimation...some of them might be dead before the hour was out.

He shook the thought off and mounted his broom.

He hoped the strong Disillusionment charms he, Kingsley, and Tonks had cast would hold and any Muggles in the area would be spared a strange sight: several brooms, including Alastor's tricked-out Comet; two Thestrals, and one oversized motorbike, complete with sidecar, rose above Privet Drive and up into the high cloud cover.

Within 20 seconds of take-off, Alastor knew they'd been betrayed.

The moment the group passed out of the range of Lily Potter's protective charm, the Death Eaters surrounded them. Alastor's quick count put their number at around a dozen black-clad figures. They'd obviously been waiting, and if they'd heard the arrival of the Order members, they'd been smart enough to let them get to the Dursley house unmolested. They'd evaded the detection charms Alastor and Kingsley had cast on the way in, which meant they were a canny and magically powerful group. And they wanted Potter.

Alastor girded himself for an almighty battle.

Everyone seemed to remember the plan, thank Merlin, and shot off in different directions, forcing their enemies to choose whom to follow. Alastor watched the dark figures swoop after them, at least one on each Order member's tail, until they disappeared in the mist.

*Mother of God be with them on the battlefield during life and at the hour of death ... watch over Thy children ... Harry, Nymphadora, Kingsley, Remus, Hagrid, Arthur, Mundungus ... Hermione, Ronald, William ... Fleur, George, Fred ...*

Three Death Eaters appeared next to him, two on his left, the other on his right. Merlin, but they were fast!

*Father, I give to You my sins and thank You for Your forgiveness and Your love.*

It was a hodgepodge of prayers he'd learnt in his childhood, and he'd hardly been a religious man since, but he hoped God would understand. At least his mam would be pleased with him when she met him on the other side of the Veil, which was likely to be very soon, he thought as the Death Eaters drew closer, trying to squeeze him.

He performed evasive manoeuvres to duck their spells. Alastor's *Protego* kept several from hitting Dung, and the blue light that bounced off of the charm told Alastor that the Death Eaters weren't duelling to kill...not yet, anyway. Their Dark Lord wanted Potter alive, which was good news for the doppelgangers, less so for the protectors.

Alastor didn't mess about with Stunning or any other disabling spell. He fired an *Avada Kedavra* at the nearest Death Eater and missed, but his next one connected, and the Death Eater toppled from his broom, his cloak fluttering in the wind above him like a black sail.

As he had on the few occasions he'd killed in the past, Alastor muttered, "Jaysus fergive me."

His remaining two pursuers tried a flanking move, flying below him, then up on either side. Fortunately, he was able to keep tabs on both of them, using his natural eye to follow one, his magical eye the other. He silently thanked Gordon Mulciber for the curse that had taken his real right eye all those years ago. It might just save his life now. Alastor's next Killing Curse missed the Death Eater to his left but set fire to the tail of his broom, slowing him down. The bastard to Alastor's right dropped out of sight, and Alastor scanned the sky below them, looking for him.

"He's right behind us!" Dung shouted, and Alastor felt him fire a spell.

"Hang on!" Alastor yelled. He let his broom drop suddenly, prompting another cry of protest from Dung. Now the Death Eater was in front of and above them, and Alastor's fast curse hit him squarely in the back with a small burst of green sparks. The stricken Death Eater seemed to hang in the air for a second before losing his mount and hurtling down and disappearing into the clouds below them.

"Two more coming up on our left," Dung cried, and Alastor's eye swivelled to see two black blurs zooming their way. They were still about ten or fifteen yards away and moving fast, so Alastor couldn't get a bead on them; he hoped they couldn't get one on him either. He pushed his broom higher, hoping to lose them in the thicker clouds above.

But no, they kept closing in, and Alastor's mind raced ahead to his next move, but they suddenly drew off.

*Shite.*

They had somehow figured out that Dung wasn't the real Harry Potter.

Alastor searched the sky.

Even his magical eye couldn't see very far in the mist that hovered in the air high above Surrey, but he could just make out a shape in the distance. He thought it was one of the Thestrals.

The motorbike was nowhere in sight, and Alastor prayed that Hagrid had got Potter far away before the Death Eaters had twigged to the imposters. The Thestral seemed to be coming closer, and Alastor thought, *No! Move away, damn you!*

A high-pitched scream from behind him made Alastor's magical eye swivel around.

A funnel of black smoke chased them, a terrible reptilian face seeming to bloom and coalesce from the vortex. Alastor's belly turned over.

*Jaysus, Maria 'n Joseph, he can fly.*

Alastor didn't know if even his strongest *Avada Kedavra* could harm Voldemort, so he prepared for defensive action.

"Hang on tight!" he yelled at Dung.

"I'm getting out of here!"

Alastor felt Dung shift on the broom.

"You can't Disapparate at this height! You'll never make it!"

He turned and clutched at Dung, but with a loud *crack!*, Fletcher was gone.

The smoke trail was gone too.

Alastor turned back around in time to see the smoke-shrouded snakehead crack a ghastly smile. The spectre's wand was pointed straight at Alastor.

The world seemed to slow to quarter-time. Alastor let go of his broom handle and pulled his charmed cloak tighter around him as he prepared to deflect the curse, and summoned all his magical strength.

It was aeons before the ghastly green light reached him.

There was no pain, oddly enough, though Alastor could feel enormous energy enter his body through his already-mangled right cheek. He tried to direct it away from his heart and brain. Heat lightening through him, and he felt as though he were dissolving into a vat of warm oil. He couldn't move, and it wasn't bad; in fact, it was just fine.

A strong wind soothed his overheated face, and he realised he was falling ... falling ...

Despite the warmth and the comforting breeze, a pang of regret broke over him.

*I'm sorry, Minerva ...*

His body swivelled in the air, and he could see the ground rushing up below him. A dirt road bisected a clump of trees and grass that surrounded a low, industrial-looking building.

*Hope I don't fall on anyone.*

His body rotated again, and he was surprised by the sight of a dark figure hurtling towards him.

*Wha...*

An jagged burst of pain tugged at Alastor's bones, and he thought he must have hit ground, but, strangely, he could still feel the cool wind.

He was contemplating this mystery when he did hit.

*Oh.*

All breath had left him, and he wondered if he was already dead.

A sickeningly familiar face appeared just above him.

Thin, cold fingers touched the side of his neck, and a wand pointed at him.

The face said, "*Obliv...*"

And Alastor Brendan Moody knew no more.

## Chapter Forty-Seven

*Chapter 47 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

**31 May 1998**

A chill that had little to do with the wind sweeping through the room passed through Minerva as she surveyed the damage to the formerly impressive room.

Despite the collapse of part of the second-level library, Minerva could see that Snape hadn't changed much about the Headmaster's office during his months in residence. She'd expected the Head's desk and chair to be as they had always been, and so they were, but the presence of the many magical instruments Albus had collected over his long life surprised her. They would have been a constant reminder to Severus of the man he had killed and the devil's bargain he'd made with him.

Of course, Albus's magical portrait would have been an even more pointed reminder. She glanced up to where the most recent portraits had been hung. Many were missing, casualties of the enormous, jagged hole that had been blasted through the Head's tower when the battle had taken to the air, and those that remained were askew.

Albus's portrait was gone.

Minerva approached the damaged area. She could make out fragments of broken picture frame scattered among the heaps of broken stone and glass that filled that part of the room; flashes of gilding glinted like hope in the sunlight despite the dust that coated everything.

After casting a charm on her hands to protect them from broken glass, she began to pick her way carefully through the detritus. The first recognizable portrait she came across was Dillys Derwent. Her frame was broken on two sides, and a ragged tear marred the centre of the canvas, right through Professor Derwent's abdomen.

Minerva was startled when the painted Derwent opened her eyes and coughed.

"I'm so sorry to have left you this way, Headmistress," Minerva said, brushing the dust from the canvas. "I've only just been able to get in here."

"It's all right, child, it doesn't hurt. It's just a bit draughty. And my knitting is gone," Derwent said sadly.

"I'm going to put you in the far corner for the moment, out of the wind, then I'll take you to a safe place while we see about having you repaired."

It occurred to Minerva that she had no idea if either of the two magical portrait-painters in Britain had survived the war. The Death Eaters had rounded up seemingly everyone with special magical skills, and many hadn't been heard from since.

*Put it on the list of problems to deal with when I come to them.*

Minerva's next find was Brutus Scrimgeour, whose frame was cracked, but who was otherwise unharmed. He joined Professor Derwent in the sheltered corner.

Minerva's heart fell when she found Armando Dippet's portrait. Shreds of canvas hung from the painting's upper half, obliterating the round, kind face she remembered from her school days. There would be no repairing it; whatever wisdom of Professor Dippet's the portrait-painter had managed to capture was gone forever. Like so much else that was good in the world. And Albus's portrait had hung directly under Professor Dippet's ...

She put the damaged painting gently aside and dug a little further.

*Oh, no ...*

She stared for a moment at the charred remains of a large canvas that lay face-down on the pile, partially covered by crumbled masonry. She forced herself to turn it over swiftly. The image had been seared away, and there was no telling who it had been.

She hadn't seen Albus's portrait many times. It had just been hung the day before the Ministry fell to Voldemort's forces and Snape had been summarily installed as Headmaster of Hogwarts. The portrait had been sleeping on the few occasions she'd been summoned to the Headmaster's office during Snape's tenure, and she'd wondered if Albus's portrait really hadn't wakened or if he were feigning sleep to avoid speaking with his murderer.

*Except he wasn't a murderer.*

She pushed the thought away.

The work of clearing up the human destruction wrought by the final battle had taken weeks, and by the time she'd had a chance to turn her thoughts towards the Headmaster's Tower and getting into the office, she'd almost forgotten the portraits, but once she had in hand the board of governors' hastily ratified decree confirming her as Headmistress, she'd thought immediately of Albus's portrait. When the gargoyle had bowed its head and acknowledged her right to enter the office that was now hers, she'd tried not to let herself hope the portrait would be awake.

She peered at ruined canvas, looking for a hint of who it had been. But the blackened chips of paint that flaked off at her slightest touch revealed no clue.

Blinking back tears, she placed it with the other badly damaged pictures and forced herself to go on digging through the rubble. The bloated and warped shapes of several books that had suffered from exposure to the Highland mists that crept in each morning obscured the bottom layer of the pile. She cleared them away with her wand and lifted the corner of a small, filthy tapestry that lay under them. Her hand met something hard, and she flipped the tapestry back to find Albus Dumbledore blinking up at her.

"Albus! Thank Merlin."

She knelt and ran her hands over the canvas. It was dusty but otherwise unharmed.

"Is it over?" he asked, his painted eyes seeming to search her face.

"Yes."

"We've won?"

"Yes."

"And the boy? Harry?"

"He's fine."

A smile broke over the portrait's face.

"Wonderful. Wonderful! And you, Minerva, you are well?"

"Yes, fine."

The portrait's face darkened. "And Severus ... is he ...?"

"Dead."

"Ah. Poor boy."

"Yes. Poor boy."

Long-banked anger at Albus mingled with Minerva's relief at finding his portrait unharmed.

The portrait seemed to be waiting for her to say more, and finally, she did.

"How could you?"

His brows knit together. "How could I ...?"

"Severus. What you made him do. I could have stood the rest. War is a bloody waste, but I could have stood it. But not what you did to him."

It occurred to her that the portrait might not have any idea of the terrible sacrifice Albus had forced on Severus Snape. It would only know what the painter had known and been able to Charm into the painting. And whatever Albus's portrait had seen once it had been hung in the Headmaster's office.

She struggled to explain. "You ... Albus ... made him kill you ... Albus. Made everyone believe Severus the worst sort of traitor and coward. But he wasn't. He..."

"I know," the portrait said quietly. "Before the real Albus died, he woke me and told me the things I would need to know in order to guide Severus."

Fury filled her mouth, and she could barely get the words out.

"Albus told you what he was going to do? You, and no one else?"

"Yes. And I'm sorry, Minerva. The circumstances were less than ideal. Severus had to stay close to Voldemort, to slow him while Harry did what he had to do. I did try to help him. All this past year ... we spoke frequently, and I guided him, where I could. No one could know. Severus insisted upon it."

Yes, she thought, he would have done. Severus had never been someone, boy or man, to accept help, no matter how much he needed it. His terror and remorse back during the first war must have been intolerable to have asked Albus to protect the Potters. The brilliant, bitter man Minerva had known would almost have savoured the isolation of those final hideous months of the late war as just punishment for the boy he'd been, a boy who had made a terrible mistake out of those too-common adolescent scourges of neglect and bullying and envy.

Her anger gave way to unutterable sadness.

"He must have been so very lonely," she said.

"Yes," said the portrait. "In the end, I think that's all I was really able to do for him...provide a sympathetic ear and remind him that there was someone who knew who he really was. I'm sorry he's dead."

"So am I," she said. "Even after Harry saw him kill you on the Astronomy Tower, I wondered about him. He knew you were dying...why would he kill you? But when he returned as Headmaster with those ... those *creatures* in tow, I thought, that's why. He was still so angry that he wanted to utterly negate everything you had built, everything about the place that should have been a home to him. But now I find it was just another lie. And to preserve it, Severus died without comfort in that horrible shack, his throat torn out."

The portrait had the good sense to look ashamed. It cleared its throat and said, "How ...?"

"Voldemort set the snake on him."

Albus closed his eyes for a moment, and she was savagely glad to have caused him this grief.

"But Severus told the boy what he must do?" he asked.

"Yes. Harry walked right into the forest to let Voldemort kill him."

*Another sacrifice.*

"But he returned," the portrait said.

"Yes. No ... I'm still not entirely sure what happened...Harry has been understandably reluctant to speak publicly on the matter, other to tell anyone who will listen about Severus."

"Ah. I'm very glad he is all right."

Minerva's eyes narrowed. "You knew he would not die."

"Oh, I believed he would die. But I also had a reasonable hope that it would not be a permanent state of affairs."

The painter had done an admirable job of capturing Albus's penchant for drawing out a mystery, she thought.

"How?" she asked.

"Albus told me he had come to believe that Harry was protected by some of the oldest and strongest magic in existence. A magic I believe you know something about. His mother's love."

Malcolm's face flashed into her mind, followed too quickly by Molly Weasley's, wrung out with grief as she knelt over the body of her son.

"But what of all the other sons and daughters who died that day?" she asked "Did their mothers not love them too? Why were they not protected?" Her voice sounded shrill in her ears.

The portrait gave her the look Albus had given her in school on the few occasions on which her work had disappointed him.

"The kind of protection Harry had was only possible through his mother's enormous and deliberate sacrifice. Unfortunately, most parents are not able to foresee their children's moments of greatest peril, and those who are rarely have the magical ability to channel their love or know how to make the sacrifice at just the right moment. Were it not so, I'm certain few Muggle children would ever have died of diphtheria, and even fewer magical children would have succumbed to magical accidents. I have no doubt that Lily Potter, knowing that Harry would be targeted by Voldemort, researched blood magic and made some arrangements of her own."

"Arrangements?"

"She would have endeavoured to put herself between Voldemort's Killing Curse and Harry at exactly the right moment, with a complete willingness ... an intense desire, in fact ... to die in his place at that moment. Even for the most doting parent, that sort of ... self-hypnosis, if you will, takes practice. I believe she would have practised making smaller physical sacrifices in anticipation of an attack. Severus told me that when he found her body, there were scars on it that he did not believe came from Voldemort's attack. She was missing several toes..."

Minerva put a hand up to stop him from telling her any more about Lily Potter's corpse.

He said, "That was what led Albus to believe that it was imperative that Harry have the Resurrection Stone just before his death."

"The Resurrection Stone? Isn't that a fairy tale?"

"Oh, it is real enough. Albus found it among the possessions of Tom Riddle's grandfather. Unfortunately, he could not resist trying it out, which is how his hand came to be cursed."

"But..."

"But that is a tale for another time. The important thing is that Harry had the stone when he ultimately faced Voldemort. If he used it, as Albus believed he would, Lily Potter's spirit...and James's, too, probably...would have been with him once again, recreating that willingness to sacrifice for Harry at the moment Voldemort cast another Killing Curse. It was Albus's hope that he would not actually have to die to defeat the Dark Lord."

"But he didn't know?"

"Not with any certainty. And, of course, the entire plan could have gone amiss at any crucial point. Which is one reason I am so very delighted to see you here, Minerva, as well as for your own dear sake, and to hear that Harry is alive and well."

She wasn't so certain about "well," but she left that for the moment.

"And you, Minerva. Is your family... are Malcolm and the children all right?"

"Yes, thank Merlin. Malcolm was here. He came to fight. He used his Invisibility to act as a spy for the Order and led a contingent of villagers on brooms during the battle. They managed to Stun several of the giants and keep the castle from being totally destroyed."

"Good lad."

"There were losses."

"As there are in any war. I know you and the others did what you could to prevent them."

"Alastor is dead."

It was the first time she'd said it aloud since Apparating to Paris in the middle of the night to deliver the awful news in person to Malcolm. She'd thought she'd never want to say it again, but it felt good to tell Albus...even this painted facsimile...something of what this war had cost her personally. She realised she was still angry with him, not just for Severus, but for leaving her alone to watch a new generation of children, friends, and lovers die.

But incredibly, Albus's painting broke into a smile.

"He isn't dead," he said.

Minerva's brain seemed to fog over. She reached out for support and found herself grasping at thin air for a few moments before her mind cleared enough to speak.

"He *is* dead. Voldemort killed him. Order members saw it happen."

"They saw him cursed. But he survived the curse."

She shook her head violently. She couldn't afford to allow a single tendril of hope to penetrate her armour. Not now, not after everything.

"That's impossible. He fell... it had to be a thousand feet, Bill said."

"But someone was there to arrest the fall. Severus."

*Severus ...*

"No," she said. "Someone would have found out. If Alastor were still alive, he'd..."

"Minerva, Severus swore to me that Alastor was still alive after Voldemort's curse." The portrait spoke patiently, and his eyes stayed steady on Minerva's face.

She forced back the lump that was rising in her throat. "But he took a Killing Curse right to the face. Bill Weasley said so."

"Yes, but Alastor was well trained in deflecting curses. It still might have killed him, but I believe Voldemort was distracted by his desire to kill Potter, and the wand Voldemort was using at the time was not his own. It was Lucius Malfoy's, and it may have resisted doing the Dark Lord's bidding. It was, in fact, destroyed later the same evening when he tried to curse Harry with it.

"Severus didn't see the curse being cast, but he did see Alastor falling. He was able to arrest the fall at the last minute, but there were extensive injuries, he said. Nevertheless, Alastor was alive and remained so when Severus delivered him to a Muggle hospital."

No. She refused to hope that it could be true. Alastor was dead, and that's all there was to it. Her grief had been something feral, and she'd only managed to cage it at great cost. She could not afford to let a painting's fairy story give it a chance to get loose again.

Only ... if what the portrait was saying was true ...

No. *NO.*

But she found herself asking, "If Alastor has been alive all this time, why didn't he send word?"

"He couldn't. Severus Obliviated him."

Minerva's mouth opened and closed, but no sound escaped.

The portrait continued, "Alastor was injured...Severus wasn't sure how badly, but it seemed clear that he would be incapacitated for a long time, perhaps months. If, as Severus thought likely, he tried to escape the hospital, there was a great risk that someone...the wrong someone...would discover that he lived. Which would pose a danger not only to Alastor himself, but to Severus, who had told the Dark Lord that he had disposed of Alastor's body. To prove it, he brought Voldemort Alastor's magical eye."

The room seemed to turn in slow-motion in front of Minerva's eyes. Her knees gave way under her, and she sat heavily on the stone floor.

"Minerva, my dear, are you all right?"

"I ... No, I'm ..." Panic gripped her chest. "Where is he?"

"Severus took him to ... wait a moment ..." The portrait searched in his voluminous purple robes and withdrew a slip of paper. "St George's Hospital in Tooting."

Minerva got to her feet.

"I have to go..."

His voice stopped her as she hurried towards the door.

"Minerva, wait! He won't be there. It's been months."

She turned back to him, eyes wide and alert.

"Where is he, then?"

"I don't know... Severus didn't know. He knew they'd discharged him, but they wouldn't tell him where, as he wasn't family."

A feeling of awful impotence enveloped her, and her mind travelled back to the day her father had told her she was to marry Gerald Macnair. The sensation was eerily similar.

"I have to go."

"Of course. Godspeed, my dear."

"Thank you."

**4 June 1998**

"Bugger."

John slammed the cupboard door.

He was out of teabags.

The kettle sang out its merry whistle, but he crutched over and pulled the plug with a sigh of disgust.

His DLA payment wouldn't be in for another four days, so he'd have to go without unless he wanted to live on two cans of Heinz baked beans until then. Maybe he could cop a couple of teabags from Mrs Cobb next door. But he didn't feel like making his way over there and listening to her natter on about the bloody Princess Diana concert. Where a pensioner living in a council flat found the money for tea towels and commemorative plates with a dead toff's face plastered all over them was a mystery John didn't care to contemplate.

And of course, she'd offer him a drink.

He'd pegged her for a souse the first time he'd met her; she'd smelt of gin under the general odour of cabbage and diesel that seemed to permeate the estate. Sure enough, once she'd managed to get him into her flat for a cuppa, that cuppa had come with the offer of a bit of whiskey "to sweeten it," despite the fact that it hadn't yet gone 10 in the morning.

The fact that he'd wanted it so badly rang alarm bells in his head. The sudden thirst that had almost overwhelmed him suggested to him that a tot of Bell's Original in his tea was a very bad idea indeed. Shaken, he'd demurred, and got through the visit relatively unscathed save for the scalded tongue he'd got when he'd gulped down the plain, but very hot tea Mrs Cobb had given him.

Well, it was no great surprise that he'd been a drunk. The fact that no one had come looking for him in hospital told him all he really wanted to know about his former life. He only wondered if the scars had come before the whiskey or because of it. They were old, the scars, or so said the doctors who'd patched him up after his accident. And, of course, the leg and the eye had been gone long before St George's trauma unit had ever heard of John O' Connell, Mystery Man. John had known that without their having to tell him. His body's memory was better than his own, apparently.

He poured himself a cup of hot water and sliced an anaemic-looking lemon into it. Sipping the water, he stared out the small, dirty window to the so-called community garden behind the house.

The telephone rang, and he cursed under his breath. Leaving his crutches leaning against the cooker, he hopped over to the tiny kitchen table and, balancing on his good leg with one hand on the ugly plastic table top, grabbed the receiver.

"Yeah?"

"Mr John?" came a cheerful voice on the other end.

"Yeah."

"It's Rafi. From the transport."

"Wotcha, Rafi."

"Hello, Mr John. I am calling to confirm that I will be picking you up tomorrow morning at 9:15. Is that still correct for you?"

"Yeah, Rafi, that'll be fine."

"Big day for you tomorrow. I hope you will be getting plenty of sleep tonight."

"Sure, Rafi."

"Okay, then. I will see you tomorrow at 9:15."

"I'll be here. Bye."

"Okay. Bye-bye."

John smiled in spite of himself. Rafi was one of the few people who had that effect on him. His chatter during the twice-weekly van rides to the hospital for therapy had become the high point of his days, and John had been fascinated by the young man's tales of his family's life in Bangladesh before they'd been forced to flee the massacres led by Pakistani forces during the liberation war. The stories took John's mind off the pain that still clawed at his poor pinned-together spine much of the time. He'd be damned if he'd get himself addicted to pain-killers on top of everything else, so the bottle of tramadol sat in his bedroom drawer unopened.

Rafi, John had learnt, was supporting his aging father...who'd been a doctor and professor of medicine at the Dhaka University before the war...and three sisters, all of whom lived in a small flat in Whitechapel. Nevertheless, Rafi seemed to have endless patience and compassion for his crusty Irish passenger, and seemed genuinely interested in John's rehabilitation progress. In fact, John could swear that Rafi was more excited than he was about the new prosthesis John was about to receive.

"You'll be dancing again in no time, Mr John!" Rafi had declared when John had made the transport appointment for tomorrow's fitting.

John rather doubted that. He looked down at the stump of his right leg. Would he really learn to walk with the new prosthesis? The therapists were optimistic. He'd had one before his accident, apparently, but it hadn't been like any they'd ever seen, they'd said; it had no hydraulics, and no one could figure out how to reattach it. Getting it off John in the trauma room had been quite a chore, apparently, and in the mad attempts to save his life, no one had bothered to pay too much attention to how it adhered to the stump.

A man of many mysteries was John O'Connell. Half the staff at St George's were fascinated by him and the other half were terrified. On the whole, he thought he preferred terrified.

As he started to hop back over to where his cup of hot water and lemon sat on the counter, ~~a~~*crack!* from just outside in the garden startled him, and he lost his balance, going down hard on his bum and jarring his glass back badly.

He gritted his teeth and waited for his heart to stop its wild galloping. When it did, he struggled to get himself off the floor, but the pain in his back kept him down and panting.

He looked over to where his crutches leant against the scratched Beko, and suddenly, he was furious. Furious with the world, with the doctors who couldn't help him, and most especially with himself for being a pathetic old cripple whom nobody cared about enough even to come looking for him.

A feeling of warmth rose in him, and his right hand started to tingle. A moment later he found himself holding a crutch in his lap. He blinked several times and shook his head to clear it.

It wasn't the first time something odd had happened to him. Lights in the flat sometimes turned themselves on just when he wanted them, and once, when he'd been in bed and thirsty but too tired to struggle downstairs and get something to drink, an empty glass on the bedside table had seemingly filled with water right before his disbelieving eyes.

*I really am mad*, he thought. He hadn't told anyone about these ... incidents, afraid they'd lock him up in the local looney bin. They were just blips of the brain, that's all. Jaysus knew his head had been scrambled enough to make it wonky as hell.

The doctors had said his scans looked as if he'd had some kind of "cerebral accident," as they'd called it, in the past, but there'd been no sign of fresh trauma when he'd come in through A & E and they'd run him through the first of about a million CT scans.

He must've had quite a life, they'd all said, but he found he was glad enough that he didn't remember it. *Dissociative fugue*, they called his amnesia. They'd seemed to expect that eventually he'd recover his memories, but as the weeks had worn on and he still had no clue about who'd he'd been or how he'd come to be so battered, they'd had to release him into the bosom of the UK welfare state with a made-up name and a new, but well used, NHS number.

Whoever he'd been, he guessed that being a disabled pensioner on a large council estate outside London was better. Although, at night, when he lay in bed, a strange wistfulness would sometimes take hold of him, as if there were something worth remembering, if only he could catch it before it shimmered away again.

He used the single crutch to support him as he got up, and hopped back over to the counter. He would have liked to take the not-tea back to the table, but carrying it without spilling would be nearly impossible, what with the crutches. He tried not to think about the new prosthesis and whether he'd finally be able to leave the crutches behind and get the free use of his hands.

The harsh buzz of his front bell sounded.

Bugger.

Who'd be at John O'Connell's door at 5:15 on a Thursday afternoon? Mrs Cobb, maybe. She seemed to have taken a liking to him, Merlin only knew why. General lack of available men of the right age, John supposed, made even rude old codgers with half a nose and a missing eye and leg seem like a decent bet. Well, he'd best get rid of her if he didn't want ...

*'Merlin'*? Where had that come from?

Strange words sometimes popped into his head. Another artefact of a head injury, he supposed.

The bell rang again, and he growled, "I'm comin', I'm comin. Hold yer water."

The familiar anxiety that always grabbed him when he was about to open his door came flooding in. Given the general state of himself, John figured it was even odds that eventually someone'd be coming to kill him. On his better days, he hoped it meant that in his former life he'd been a spy, maybe IRA, or some kind of informant, but more often he guessed that he owed someone money and hadn't paid. Either way, he tried not to be too fussed about it.

He undid the chain and the deadbolt and opened his door to find two people standing on his doorstep. They didn't look like assassins. One was a tall young-ish man with curly brown hair and a trim beard skimming his chin. The other was a woman, middle-aged, he guessed, tall and slim, with dark hair pulled back in a severe-looking bun. The man was dressed casually in dungarees and a black jumper, but the woman looked oddly out of place in this neighbourhood. She wore a grey suit with a tailored jacket and a skirt too long to be fashionable, plus black lace-up boots that covered her ankles. A silver-and-agate brooch sat at the high neck of her blouse.

Religious campaigners. They had to be, with her dressed like that.

He was about to tell them to sod off, but the woman said, "Alastor."

Something about it...her voice, with its rolling "r"s, not the name, which he barely registered...stopped him.

She took a step towards him, but the man put a hand on her arm.

"Mum," the man said in a low, warning tone.

"Please don't be alarmed, Mr O'Connell," he said to John. "The hospital gave us your address. We're friends. From before your accident."

"Friends," John repeated, still in thrall to the mental echo of the woman's voice.

"Yes. Here ..."

The man reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a small snapshot. He handed it to John.

It showed a younger version of the woman and a teenager who might have been the man. They stood on a beach in front of a sailboat with a bright orange-and-blue sail. Next to the woman, with one arm around her, was another man. A man with two eyes, an intact nose, and two pale legs sticking out from a pair of long shorts.

"Jaysus," John whispered.

"It's us, Alastor," said the woman softly. "Alastor...that's your name. Alastor Moody."

Her voice broke on the last word.

The man gave her a worried glance.

To John, he said, "May we come in?"

## Epilogue

*Chapter 48 of 48*

Before she was Professor McGonagall, she was Minerva Macnair. After an arranged marriage forces her into an impossible situation, Minerva does what she must to survive. When she makes a new life for herself, her secrets follow and threaten everything, including the only love she has ever found. The tale of a woman, her secrets, and how she keeps them.

**Winner - 3rd Place, Best Drama-Angst WIP - Fall/Winter 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Awards**

### Epilogue

**24 December 1998**

"I thought I saw young Mr Weasley here," Horace said as he led Minerva to the dance floor. "Has he decided to return to school after all?"

"No, I believe he's Miss Granger's escort," Minerva said.

They settled into the rhythm of the music, Minerva easily following Horace's strong lead.

"I would have thought Harry more to her taste," he said.

"No, I think it's always been Ronald. Those two have been dancing around one another for several years. It's nice to see they've figured things out. I was beginning to despair of them."

Horace spun Minerva in a dizzying twirl. His meaty hand reconnected with her waist and manoeuvred her expertly around the couple to their right. "They're fortunate to have found love so young. Some of us don't manage it until much later in life. If at all," he said.

His eyes misted over, and she looked away.

They danced without speaking for several minutes before the song ended. Strings swelled and swooped, and Ella Fitzgerald's sultry contralto filled the room. Minerva had intended to excuse herself from Horace's embrace at the song change, but instead she just adjusted her steps and took pleasure in his fine sense of rhythm and sure hand at her waist.

He said, "I'm glad the students deigned to include some music in the line-up that we old codgers could dance to."

"Indeed. I was afraid my eardrums would burst when that band started up. This is a blessed relief."

"Well, the young will have their fun. We can't begrudge them that after all they've been through. Besides," he said, "I recall that my father thought Celestina Warbeck an atrocity when I started listening to her on the wireless back in the '30s."

Minerva privately thought that Horace's father had a point. Although almost anything was better than the noise made by the quartet calling themselves "The Pure Mudbloods," which Minerva thought was almost as tasteless as their music. She sincerely hoped they had finished for good and not just buggered off for a smoke or a nosh.

With the so-called band on a break, the music had taken a turn for the old-fashioned, and most of the students had fled the dance floor in favour of the punch table or had found perches on the purple velvet cushions that dotted the room's perimeter, but a few determined couples still swayed in one another's arms. Minerva noted with satisfaction that Neville Longbottom continued to show up his schoolmates, moving Miss Lovegood surefootedly and smoothly around the floor. He saw Minerva watching and flashed her a cheeky grin.

The music, combined with the general din of teenagers making merry, made it hard to hear. Horace said something Minerva didn't catch, and she shook her head.

He leant down. "I say you look exceptionally lovely tonight, Headmistress."

"Thank you."

It was a true compliment coming from him, with his famous good taste. He was also, despite his size, a superb dancer, leading her effortlessly, and she was vaguely surprised to find she was enjoying herself.

She'd dreaded this, the first real celebration at Hogwarts after the war, but the students seemed to be having a good time. Even the staff were relatively relaxed, although that might have had something to do with Minerva's provision of a small but fine selection of whiskies and wines in the staffroom before the official start of the Yule Ball.

They'd needed this bit of frivolity, all of them, after the horrors of past year and the austerity of the months immediately following the war's end, and Minerva was glad Horace, Filius, and Pomona had convinced her to do it. The sixth- and seventh-years, not to mention the seven-plusses, had thrown themselves enthusiastically into the planning, with Horace's guidance, and, as it had turned out, Minerva had had to do little but approve the modest budget for the ball.

She looked over Horace's shoulder across the Great Hall. It seemed the entire school had turned out, and she was happy they'd decided to allow all years to attend. All the students in second year and above were war veterans, and it would have been beyond ridiculous to pretend one late night and some loud music would do any harm to 12- and 13-year-olds who'd seen the Cruciatus deployed in their school the previous year.

A flash blinded Minerva momentarily. When the spots cleared from her eyes, she saw Dennis Creevey wielding his late brother's camera.

As it sometimes did, the weight of the missing pressed in on her, crushing in their absence. She could almost hear Severus's waspish whisper about some Gryffindorian infraction of rules as she looked out at the scene, and she had to shake herself mentally to get him out of her head.

*He would have hated this. Or pretended to.*

A deep voice said, "Would it be terribly rude if I were to cut in?"

"Of course, my boy, of course," Horace said, relinquishing Minerva to her son's arms.

Malcolm didn't move as smoothly as Horace, but Minerva was delighted to finally share a dance with him. He'd been busy with chaperone duties most of the evening, and she'd barely had a moment to speak with him.

He said something, but she couldn't hear him, and he had to bend lower to speak in her ear.

"I said I would have asked for my dance sooner, but I had to take a couple of Gryffindors to the infirmary for a dose of Sober-Up."

At least *some* things never changed, she thought. "Did someone manage to spike the punch despite Filius's protective charms?"

"No, I tested it. Their revels were fuelled by a private stash of Firewhisky, apparently."

"Thank Merlin for that. If Fred and George Weasley were here, I'd suspect..."

A lump rose in her throat and stopped her words. What wouldn't she give to have Fred Weasley here, attempting to get Firewhisky, or something worse, into the punchbowl and conspiring with his twin to charm the music box to play something very loud and highly inappropriate. Merlin, but she wanted them all back, even Vincent Crabbe, who had spent the final months of his short, sorry life assisting Amycus Carrow in doling out horrific punishments to her students.

To cover her sudden burst of melancholy, Minerva told Malcolm, "Don't look now, but I think Rose is being chatted up by Derek Ainsley."

Malcolm's head swivelled madly on his neck.

"Where?"

Minerva swatted him on the shoulder.

"I said don't look! They're over by the punch table."

Malcolm manoeuvred his mother around so he could watch his daughter and the young Ravenclaw prefect chatting and laughing together.

"I don't know what she sees in him," Malcolm grumbled. "His Potions marks aren't all they could be."

"Potions isn't everything. Ainsley is a very nice young man. And his Transfiguration work is outstanding. Horace says he's the best in the year, next to Rose."

"Speaking of Transfiguration, how is the search going?"

"Don't remind me. If the general quality of applicants doesn't improve, I'm afraid I'll have to try to prevail on Horace to put off his re-retirement for another year. I don't know what I'd have done if he hadn't agreed to take Transfiguration this year."

"You'd have made me do it instead of Potions," Malcolm said.

"Yes, I suppose I would have."

"At least you don't have to worry about replacing the Defence master every year. I think you've got him pretty well locked in."

"You know, I think I have."

The old Gershwin song ended and segued into something Minerva vaguely remembered from the 1980s, with too little melody and too many twangy bits.

"I think I'll go see what he's up to," she told Malcolm. "If I don't see you after your rounds, I'll see you in the morning."

He kissed her cheek, and she threaded her way through the bodies gyrating on the dance floor over to where Alastor stood talking with Poppy.

"And what are you two conspiring about?" she asked.

"We're trying to work out a time for Alastor to meet with my friend from St Mungo's," Poppy said.

"Schedule's a bit tight these days. Me boss is a harsh taskmistress," Alastor said.

"I thought you said there was no way God or Merlin could get you back to 'that hellhole'," Minerva said.

"Matron says I have to."

"It's for a good cause," Poppy said. "My Healer friend thinks he might be able to replicate Alastor's new prosthesis and improve it with a few charms. He says this Muggle prosthesis is much better than anything wizards have managed to come up with. Muggle technology is a wonder."

"Amen to that," said Alastor. "I should've fallen a thousand feet off me broom years ago."

Minerva's jaw tightened at the mention of his near-death.

He noticed and put a soothing hand on her arm. "Ah, sorry, love. Didn't mean to mention it tonight. I know it was an awful time for you."

"For everyone," she said crisply.

"Aye." He cleared his throat. "Anyway, I got this shiny new leg out of it, and it's a damn sight better than that piece of tin they gave me at Mungo's when I first lost it."

Minerva looked down at the artificial leg that stuck out below Alastor's kilt, and laughed. The brushed metal was bespangled with little green Christmas trees topped with blue stars and decorated with baubles that flashed alternately crimson and yellow.

"What on earth have you done to it?" she asked.

"Wasn't me. I let one of the fifth-years decorate it as a prize for managing to deflect all me hexes during class last week. This is what she came up with. Charms are pretty good. Notice the symbolic inter-House unity." He stuck the leg out in front of him and turned it right and left so Minerva could admire the student's handiwork.

"An unorthodox pedagogical approach," she said.

"Do you disapprove, Headmistress?"

"Not precisely, no. But you'll be changing it back before we go to bed."

He grinned at her. "Right-o."

"And on that note, I'm back off to check on the infirmary," said Poppy. "Next Sunday, then, Alastor?"

"Ok. Tell Healer What's-'is-Name that me leg and I'll be there by two."

When Poppy had gone, Minerva asked, "Do you want to sit down?" He'd been on the leg for hours, doing patrols and helping chaperone the party.

"No, I'm fine. I barely feel it."

"Your back..."

"Back's ok," he said. "In fact, the physiotherapist has dismissed me."

"Really? As of when?"

"This week. She says as long as I keep up the exercises, I don't have to come in anymore unless something starts bothering me again. Which it won't, with Poppy's charms and Malcolm's potions."

"That's good news."

"Yup. No more going down to Muggle London twice a week. Which means more time for other things," he said with a mischievous waggle of his brows. "Think I might take up dance lessons."

She laughed, and he said, "Oh, I'm serious, madam. I expect to be able to take you for a few turns around the floor by next year's ball. Gotta make sure none of these other wizards sweep you off your feet. You looked too happy out there with Horace."

"Horace was a treat after Hagrid. Not to mention Dean Thomas."

"Trod on your toes, did he?" Alastor asked, smirking.

"Remind me to make 'more coordinated than a newborn Abraxan' a requirement for Head Boy next year."

There was a break in the music. Minerva sighed when she saw that the band was gearing up to play another set.

A jingle pulled her gaze upward to a sprig of mistletoe floating in the air above her head.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake! I thought we decided to forbid charmed mistletoe."

"You decided," Alastor said. "The rest of us took no position." Before she could object, he kissed her quickly on the lips, and she heard the mistletoe pop out of existence.

She glanced around to find Neville Longbottom looking at them, the cheeky smile still on his face. She forced herself to glare at him, and he turned back to Miss Lovegood, whispering something in her ear.

Alastor followed her gaze. "Boy's coming along nicely," he said. "He's right on track for a N.E.W.T. in Defence, and in Charms, Filius says. Herbology, too, of course."

"He was an enormous help last year. I don't know what we'd have done without him."

Alastor peered at her, his gaze softening as he looked at her. "I'm sorry you were so alone."

"It wasn't your fault."

"Never again, Minerva. I promise you."

"Alastor..."

Pomona bustled up, saying, "All clear around the grounds, save for the usual activity in Greenhouse Two."

Minerva sighed. "Who were they?"

"Miss Higgs and one of Malcolm's."

Alastor's brows rose. "A Slytherin with a Gryffindor?"

"Noooo," said Pomona. "Not someone from Malcolm's House. One of his*literally*."

"You don't mean Max?" Minerva said.

"Tall boy. Long nose. Has his gran's eyes ... yup, that'd be him," said Pomona.

"Oh, for... do I even want to know what they were doing?" said Minerva.

"Nothing too serious, just a bit of snogging. I took five points each and sent them to their common room."

"Where they'll continue with their snog," said Alastor.

"Where they can't crush my Shrivelfigs," Pomona said. "Anyway, I'm exhausted, and I'll wager you are too. If it's all right with you, Minerva, I'll have a word with the band, get them to wrap things up."

"Yes, thank you, Pomona," said Minerva.

When Pomona had gone, Alastor leant down to whisper in Minerva's ear.

"Care to take a walk to Greenhouse Two, Headmistress?"

She suppressed her smile.

"Alastor, we are adults with our own room, which has a lovely warm fire going, and, as I understand it, some of Elgar's non-alcoholic eggnog waiting for us. Not to mention a very large and comfortable bed, which beats a pile of Pomona's Shrivelfigs any day of the week."

She felt his chuckle in her body. In the dark months after his supposed death, she'd heard it seemingly around every corner, only to be confronted again and again with his

absence. To have it rumble in her ear along with his warm breath was a miracle she intended never to take for granted.

"You've sold me. Shall we?" He offered her his elbow, and they moved towards the doors of the Great Hall.

Hermione and Ronald intercepted them just before they went out.

"Ron just wanted to say hello," a slightly breathless Hermione said.

"Good evening, Mr Weasley," Minerva said. "I'm very glad you could come. I had the impression you didn't much enjoy dances."

Ronald looked unsure of what to say until Minerva smiled at him to indicate she was joking.

His mouth widened into grin. "Thanks, Professor. I'm kind of looking at this one as my do-over," he said with a glance at Hermione. "Professor Moody, good to see you, sir."

Alastor shook the proffered hand, saying, "I hear you've joined up with the Aurors."

"Yes, sir."

"Good man. Try to enjoy all yer parts while you've still got 'em."

Minerva pursed her lips, and Alastor just smiled back at her.

"Um, right. Thanks," Ron said.

"Goodnight, Professors," said Hermione, pulling Ron back towards the dance floor.

Minerva and Alastor made their way to the staircase to begin the long climb to the Head's Tower. They took things slowly, for both their sakes, stopping to rest for a few moments at each landing.

When they reached the second floor, Minerva said, "Let's go through the office. I have to pick up a few things for tomorrow."

"You're going to work on Christmas?"

"Just a few letters I need to respond to, and I can do them after breakfast in Malcolm's quarters so I don't have to come all the way back here."

"What time are they expecting us in the morning?"

"If H       had her way, it would be the crack of dawn, but Malcolm and Eliane have talked her down to nine."

"Very efficient of you to get your entire family moved to Hogwarts. Now you don't even have to leave the castle to do your Christmas visiting."

"Yes, it was rather clever of me, wasn't it?"

"Oh, you're clever, all right, Minerva McGonagall. Also entirely too beautiful for yer own good."

"Goodness, Alastor. I think you'd best have Poppy's Healer friend check your new eye."

"The eye works perfectly, thank you very much." He kissed her deeply, and when they broke, she resisted the impulse to look around to make sure no one had seen them.

Instead, she traced two fingers gently along the scar that ran below the false eye. It no longer bulged and swivelled madly around, but sat in his natural socket looking not very different from his other eye.

She said, "The new eye is very nice, but I hope you didn't give up the old one just because you thought I'd like this one better."

He caught her fingers and brought them to his lips, kissing their tips.

"As much as I enjoy doing things you like, no, it wasn't just for you. The old one hasn't worked quite right since Barty Fecking Crouch Junior used it, and it's a bit of a relief not to wear it. Except in class. Gotta keep the kiddies on their toes."

"Yes, having 360-degree vision would have been a huge help in the classroom."

Alastor took her hand as they continued their walk towards the Headmistress's office.

"Do you miss teaching?" he asked.

"Sometimes. Usually I'm so busy I don't have time to miss it."

"Malcolm says he's likin' it."

"That's what he tells me. I think he does miss having his own practice, though."

"I'm sure he does," Alastor said. "He doesn't miss some of his clients, though, he says. Especially that.."

"Madame Le Galle," they said together, then laughed.

D'you think Eliane is happy here?" Alastor asked

"Why? Has Malcolm said something?"

"No, I just wondered. She's always loved Paris so much."

"I can't imagine that it wasn't a sacrifice," Minerva said. "But Malcolm wanted to stay after the war, and I know she's happy to be here while the children are in school. Plus there's her work with Aurora and the centaurs. I think she's enjoying that."

"Yeah. I can't make heads or tails of it, though."

"Nor can I, but I suppose that's why neither of us is an astronomer."

They had reached the outer door to the Head's office, and once the spiral staircase had carried them up and they entered the office proper, Alastor limped over to lean heavily on the back of a chair.

"You're knackered," she said.

"A bit, yeah."

"Why don't you go on. I'll collect what I need and follow you up in a minute."

He straightened up and stretched. "Ok. Don't be too long."

"Don't drink all the eggnog."

"Wouldn't think of it."

Minerva shuffled through some papers on her desk as she watched him out of the corner of her eye.

He moved slowly up the staircase leading to their private quarters. He was overdoing things, she thought. Probably to prove to her...and maybe himself...that despite everything he'd been through, he was still the strong, stalwart warrior he'd always been.

She knew, though, that, despite the improvements, Muggle and magical, in his condition, he still had pain, and getting around on the prosthetic leg took more energy than he let on. She and Filius had managed to coax the castle to create a magical connection between his third-floor office and their private rooms in the Head's Tower, but he still had to climb the stairs several times a day to go to the Great Hall and other parts of the castle. He claimed the exercise was good for him, and she supposed it was, but she couldn't help worrying about him.

They'd agreed that, once Hogwarts was running to her satisfaction, and she was certain there was a good, solid staff and clear line of succession, she and Alastor would retire, likely in two or three years. Although she'd often thought that she'd like to stay around until H  l  ne finished Hogwarts...assuming Malcolm and Eliane stayed in Scotland after Max left school. But that would be another eight years, and Minerva didn't want to wait that long.

So they'd go. Not far, still in Scotland, certainly, but somewhere they could finally relax and have some time alone. Not that either of them was likely to want to sit around a cottage, gardening or doing needlework, or whatever it was pensioners were supposed to do with their days, but a bit of a rest would be welcome.

Until then, there would be plenty of work.

She rifled through the correspondence the Head's owl had left on her desk. Among the usual official correspondence and notices from the Ministry, there was one letter addressed to her personally. She opened it with a flick of her wand and scanned the contents.

She sighed. It was another chastising note from an outraged citizen complaining about the Headmistress's "openly consorting" with another teacher without the benefit of marriage. She ripped it in half and dropped it in the rubbish bin. At least there hadn't been any Howlers for weeks.

And the governors had held their collective tongue on the matter, thanks in no small part to Molly Weasley's ability to strongarm the other governors into shamed silence any time one of them dared to question the morals of Minerva McGonagall.

Alastor had made no noises about marriage, for which she was grateful. The notion still stuck in her craw, even though Kingsley...or Minister Shacklebolt, as Minerva supposed she should call him, even in her own mind...had summarily done away with the Ministry's binding rituals and marriage charms.

Gerald's face flashed briefly through her mind...the Gerald she'd come to know before drink and debt had taken him over. His life had been warped by the antiquated values of traditional wizarding society just as surely as hers had. It had all been such a waste. Perhaps The Pure Mudbloods had the right idea after all, pointing out the utter absurdity of it all.

Now, the next generation had a chance to get it right. Harry, Hermione, Ron, Neville, Ginny, Luna ... and all the rest of them. To marry ... or not ... for love and bring up their children to know that a person's worth isn't dictated by where or to whom they are born, or even their intelligence or talent, but rather by what they do to and for others.

She looked at the pile of documents on her desk, selecting the most urgent and rolling them up to put them in her pocket.

Dumbledore's voice from the wall behind the desk startled her.

"How is he?"

She looked up at the portrait.

"Alastor? Fairly well, all things considered."

"No more problems with memory?"

"A few minor lapses, but nothing serious."

"Severus did a good job."

The sound of Severus's name on the portrait's lips still sent a ping of anger through her, but she tamped it down.

"Yes," she said. "I don't know how he managed to master memory charms along with all his other responsibilities, but he managed to do the job without anything important going missing."

"We worked on it quite a bit over the years. It was prudent for him to be able to selectively remove and replace memories, both his own and others'."

"Yes, I suppose it would have been."

She wondered if there were memories Severus had removed from his own mind and not replaced. She wouldn't have blamed him.

"You must have done an excellent job replacing Alastor's memories," the portrait said. "It can be a tricky thing."

"It was Malcolm. Severus left very detailed instructions, and he followed them."

"Ah. One master potioneer to another."

"Indeed. And we wouldn't have found them, if you hadn't told us where they were."

"I'm very glad to have been able to do you that service," the portrait said, and once again, her eyes filled.

She smoothed her palms over her robes.

"Yes, well. I'm glad most of you portraits survived more or less intact."

She straightened the paper on her desk and used her wand to put out the candles on the large candelabra, leaving only a few single candles lit around the office to light her way.

"And are you happy, Minerva?" the portrait asked, stopping her in her tracks.

She turned back to the portrait, who wore a ghost of the smile she remembered so well.

"Yes," she said.

"I'm very glad. You see? it all came out all right in the end."

"Not for everyone. Not for you," she said quietly.

"Oh, Albus did all right. He had a long, productive life. Work he enjoyed. Dear friends. His end was not a bad one, except for the pain it caused others. And I am glad that this bit of him remains in me, so that some part of him is able to see you happy and secure. You and Malcolm and Alastor. It would make Albus very glad."

"I hope so."

"Well, you'd best be off. Alastor's waiting."

"He is. Good night."

"Good night, Minerva. Sweet dreams."

~FIN~

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## Author's Notes

Thanks to all the readers who have travelled this far with me. I hope you've enjoyed the ride as much as I have.

I must note that the idea to have Snape rescue Alastor was one I first encountered in *Troika*, a wonderful Minerva-Alastor-Kingsley story by the talented Selmak. It's available under Selmak's author name on both Fanfiction.net and An Archive of Our Own, and I highly recommend it to anyone who loves insightful characterization married to intriguing story, all laced with wry wit and affectionate humour.

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