Howl

by LadyLightles

Summary

In a moment of anger, Molly Weasley sends a Howler. Like a butterfly flapping its wings, this single event heralds a storm that threatens to tear the Wizarding world apart.

Notes

DISCLAIMER – I do not own any of the characters, settings, locations, ideas, or plot points conceived of by J.K. Rowling and present in the “Harry Potter” series. This work was written for fun, not profit.

Author’s Notes/Warnings –

This story is an AU. It follows Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone up until the Sorting. After that, buckle up, because we’re entering uncharted territory. The story is not structured in a traditional manner—rather, it is comprised of a series of scenes, some of which take place weeks, or even months, apart.

This story is rated for language and because it deals with subjects that may be confusing or disturbing to children. There is no sexual content. Violence is canon-level.

Many of the events in this story are triggered by a child receiving a permanent, disabling injury. While this injury is not the main focus of the story, it is the catalyst for many of the characters’ actions and decisions and is referenced frequently. If this bothers you, please stop reading now.
There is no “romance” in this story. Romantic relationships between various characters are implied or understood to occur, but are rarely referenced and do not involve the main characters.

This story features a somewhat insane Dumbledore who believes that his “Greater Good” trumps anything—and anyone—else. It features some light Molly/Ron/Ginny bashing.
PROLOGUE

“Ow!” Hermione Granger glared at Ron Weasley, her hand reaching automatically to rub the spot where his elbow had made contact with her cheek. This was the third time he’d accidentally knocked into her, but the first time he’d made contact with her head. He didn’t seem to notice that he’d made contact and Hermione had to duck to avoid being hit again.

“You’re doing it all wrong!” She snapped, grabbing his wrist. “The motion is like this... see?” She demonstrated. Weasley glared at her and pulled his arm out of her grasp.

“I got it. You don’t need to be such a...” Whatever rude name he was about to call her died on his lips as Professor McGonagall approached.

“Is there a problem here?” The stern woman was peering at them over her glasses. Neville, who was sitting on Hermione’s other side, made a small squeak and held very still, as if he thought she wouldn’t notice him if he didn’t move.

“No, Professor.” Hermione said, quickly. Early on in her primary school days, she’d learned that tattling only brought more trouble.

“No, professor.” Weasley muttered. The tips of his ears were so red that Hermione thought they might catch fire.

“Good.” Professor McGonagall gave a sharp nod. “Let me see how you’re progressing with the exercise.” Neville let out another strangled squeak, while Ron shot Hermione a glare that implied that, somehow, it was her fault that they’d attracted the teacher’s attention. Hermione lifted her chin in defiance. She didn’t care what Ron Weasley thought of her—she loved magic and she was going to learn everything she possibly could about it.

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CHAPTER 1

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MOLLY

Molly Weasley hated the month of September. Every September 1, for the past thirteen years, she’d been forced to put at least one child on the train to Hogwarts. She did so knowing that, when she saw them again, they would be changed almost beyond recognition. It always took her a while to get used to the empty spaces that were left behind by those who were off at school. She worried constantly about how they were faring in their classes, whether they were making friends and (in the case of the twins, at least), whether they were staying out of trouble. It took a while for her to let go.

Molly knew that she was not the easiest person to live with in those first weeks after the Hogwarts Express left King’s Cross. Her temper, which was volatile at the best of times, was on a hair-trigger and Arthur had taken to hiding the good china lest she decide to start throwing things. The past two years had seen something of a reprieve; Molly’s relief at having the twins off her hands had gone a long way to mitigating her usual anxiety and no one new had gone away last year. This year, however, “Hurricane Molly” was back in full force, stronger than ever.
Parents weren’t supposed to have favorites, but Molly was honest enough with herself to admit that she had a soft spot for her youngest son. Perhaps it was because he was born at the height of the war. He had been the most vulnerable and, therefore, needed the most protection. Even Ginny, who had been born months before the war’s abrupt conclusion, hadn’t seemed to need quite as much protection as Ron. Perhaps it was because, as the youngest of the Prewett girls, Molly knew how difficult it was to stand out when you had older siblings. Perhaps it was because she knew that Ron was not as clever or driven as his older brothers and would, thus, find it harder to make his way in the world. Whatever the reason, putting him on the Hogwarts Express had been especially difficult and Molly had been on edge ever since.

Her mood was not improved by the fact that her youngest son was, quite possibly, the world’s worst correspondent. Percy sent a letter every week, like clockwork and the twins, while not nearly as predictable, were prolific. Molly was pleased (and a little bit surprised) to see that they even made a point of sending letters to their little sister, apart from those they sent to their parents. Ron, on the other hand, had only written once, to announce that he had been Sorted into Gryffindor. From Percy and the twins, Molly knew that her youngest son was alive and healthy and appeared to be making friends, but she still worried.

As if thinking of letters had summoned him, Errol, the family’s ancient owl, flew into the kitchen through the open window, barely managing to avoid crashing into the vase of flowers on the table as he landed. He had three letters tied to his leg. With a happy cry, Molly swooped down onto the bird, barely managing to remember to prop him up on his perch next to his water dish before she sat down to read the letters from her children.

The first was from the twins and was addressed to Ginny, so Molly set it aside. Ginny was currently visiting with Luna Lovegood, but would be back in time for supper. The second letter was from Percy and mostly consisted of complaints about the twins. The third letter was, Molly was thrilled to see, from Ron. Eagerly, she tore it open and skimmed its contents. The first part was comfortingly familiar—full of chatter about Ron’s new friends (Harry Potter!) and his teachers—but then Moly’s attention was caught by something unusual.

…There’s this girl in our year who is really annoying. Her name’s Hermione Granger and she’s an even bigger swot than Percy, if you can imagine that! We were in Transfiguration today and she was showing off, as usual, and when I didn’t do the spell exactly right the first time, she grabbed my wand and did it herself! She claimed she was just showing me how to do it “properly” but really, I just think she wanted to make me look stupid in front of Professor McGonagall…

Molly was the first to admit that she was hot-headed. She usually made at least some effort to control her temper, but the thought that someone had deliberately insulted or humiliated her child was akin to a spark falling into a powder keg. She saw red. In the months and years to come, she would never be able to clearly remember pulling the distinctive red parchment out of the drawer in which writing supplies were kept. She could never recall the words she shouted, nor the spell she’d used to motivate Errol to fly from the Burrow faster than he ever had before (although it must have been unpleasant, for the owl refused to come within wand range of her for the next year). She just remembered the anger and the feeling of satisfaction at having vented that anger that came over her when Errol was on his way.

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MINERVA

It was a typical Saturday morning. As Minerva McGonagall ate her porridge, she kept an eye on the students, looking for any signs of trouble. It had been a quiet year, so far. There was the usual inter-
House tension, of course, but that didn’t tend to get out of hand until Quidditch season began. There
was all the kerfuffle over Harry Potter, but the young man himself was polite and seemed to be
bewildered by all the attention, rather than flattered. Since he wasn’t playing up to their expectations,
the other students were moving on to other things. Even Fred and George Weasley had limited
themselves to a few small pranks that were confined to Gryffindor Tower, though Minerva suspected
that they were only waiting for their chance to do something really spectacular.

All in all, Minerva’s only real complaint about the school year, so far, was that the staff had been
forced to waste time shooing students away from the forbidden third-floor corridor. Silently,
Minerva cursed Albus Dumbledore for making that ridiculous announcement at the Opening Feast.
She had no idea what the old man was hiding in there, but that corridor was in a part of the castle that
hadn’t been used for years. If he had just kept his mouth shut, it was entirely likely that no one but
the House-elves would have gone anywhere near it. Now, however, it seemed that every student
above third year was determined to see what was behind the locked door.

Minerva shot a glare at the Headmaster’s empty chair. It was just like Albus…he had made a mess,
then left her to clean it up. If that wasn’t bad enough, he wouldn’t allow her to do her job in the
most efficient way possible. He’d vetoed her suggestion to ward the forbidden corridor against all
but those permitted to enter and had acted horrified when Filius had suggested that a “Notice Me
Not” charm be placed on the door, as though the Charms Master had suggested Obliviating anyone
who stepped onto the third floor. After declaring that he’d already taken all necessary security
precautions, Albus had swanned off to deal with “pressing matters,” leaving her in charge of a school
full of children who had just had a juicy mystery dropped into their laps. So far, Mr. Filch, Mrs.
Norris and the castle ghosts had managed to catch the little darlings before they’d set foot in
forbidden territory, but Minerva knew it was only a matter of time before one slipped through the
net.

A parliament of owls swooped in through the enchanted windows, signaling the arrival of the
morning post. Minerva accepted her copy of the Daily Prophet and was just about to start reading
when something drew her attention to the Gryffindor table.

“Oi Fred!” Lee Jordan was pointing to one of the owls. With a sinking heart, Minerva saw that the
Weasley’s owl was clutching a bright red envelope. “What did you do this time?”

“Wasn’t us.” Fred shrugged. Lee’s shout had attracted attention from most of the Gryffindors and
some of the Ravenclaws at the next table. “Honest!” He added, giving a comical flinch as Percy
glared at him. Only half-conscious that she was doing so, Minerva nodded her agreement. The
twins weren’t likely to confess their sins to their mother, so Moly only sent them Howlers when
Minerva informed her about a particularly foolish and/or dangerous prank. Percy had never done
anything to warrant so much as a disapproving note from his mother, let alone a Howler, so that just
left Ron. She frowned.

Minerva McGonagall liked Howlers. They were a neat, efficient way to communicate one’s
displeasure over long distances and ensured that there could be absolutely no confusion or
obfuscation concerning the sender’s opinions and feelings. However, she strongly disagreed with
the practice of sending Howlers to children who were incapable of defending themselves or
responding in kind. As far as she was concerned, sending a Howler to a child was nothing more
than practicing discipline through public humiliation. Molly was particularly fond of using this
method of punishment and Minerva wondered if she had any regard for what effect this might have
on her children. Since she’d eliminated Percy and the twins as potential targets, that left only
Ronald, the youngest Weasley currently at Hogwarts. Minerva’s lips pursed. No matter what
Ronald had done, he didn’t deserve to be shouted at in the Great Hall in the middle of breakfast.
Apparently, Percy Weasley didn’t agree.

“Ron, what did you do?” Minerva heard him hiss. It appeared that Ron Weasley had been paying more attention to his breakfast than to what was going on around him, for he looked genuinely surprised to see the owl, which had just plowed into the platter of eggs in front of him.

“Didn’t do nothing!” Minerva could barely understand him through his mouthful of toast.

“It’s addressed to Hermione!” Neville Longbottom gasped. Minerva’s heart gave a lurch. No… no no no no no no no no no!

Molly wouldn’t do that, would she?

“For me?” Hermione Granger was sitting directly across the table from Ron, who was staring at her with his mouth hanging open. “Oh, I wonder what it is…” The entire table seemed frozen as Hermione gently took the bright red envelope from the owl. “Oh, it’s pretty…” She said, as she slid her finger under the flap.

“Hermione…” Neville said in warning, but it was too late. As soon as the flap was lifted, the letter sprang out of Hermione’s hand and hovered in the air in front of her startled face.

“Hermione Granger! How DARE you take my son’s wand? If you were brought up properly, you would know that it isn’t your place to take another wizard’s wand! I am THIS CLOSE to write your parents and give them a piece of my mind for not teaching you something that every child ought to know! You listen to me, young lady, if you do not start showing some proper manners I will come up there and teach them to you myself! It’s disgraceful!

With a final hiss, the Howler exploded into a shower of confetti that littered the table. There was a moment of complete silence as everyone in the hall stared at the smoking remains of the Howler. Then, Ron started to laugh, loud and hard. Everyone seemed frozen, save for Ron, who had buried his head in his arm and was pounding the table with his fist, and Hermione Granger, who jumped off the bench and fled the Hall, tears streaming down her face.

It was a full minute before anyone else moved or spoke.

“Ron!” Minerva saw Percy Weasley give his brother a sharp poke. “Stop that at once!” This seemed to have little effect. Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil gave each other concerned looks, then stood and left the Hall together. Presumably, they had gone after their distraught roommate which gave Minerva some slight comfort, though she made a mental note to ask the elves to ensure that there was an ample supply of biscuits laid out in her office. She had no doubt that she would be hosting a deeply upset, homesick young Gryffindor in the very near future.

“Bloody hell!” Lee Jordan was staring at the place where Hermione Granger had been sitting. “What was that about?” Babble was beginning to rise among the other students, so Minerva didn’t hear the answer, but she could see that the twins were glaring at both Ron and Percy. Suddenly, Minerva remembered the incident that had occurred in yesterday’s first year Transfiguration class. A suspicion blossomed in her mind, but she refused to act until she had conducted a thorough investigation.

“Filius…” She had to nudge the Charms Master to get his attention. “Has Miss Granger taken Mister Weasley’s wand in any of your classes?”

“No, Minerva. They never sit anywhere near one another, so it would have been impossible for her to do so without my noticing.” His eyes were as round as saucers as he continued to stare at the Gryffindor table. Minerva nodded, her lips pressed together in a frown. Filius’ statements tallied with her own observations; Miss Granger always sat in the first row during Transfiguration and Mr.
Weasley usually sat somewhere towards the back of the room. However, yesterday, he and Mr. Potter had been late and she’d directed them to sit in the only empty seats. Mr. Potter had wound up sitting next to Mr. Boot and Mr. Urquhart, while Mr. Weasley had shared a table with Miss Granger and Mr. Longbottom.

Minerva considered the other first-year classes. Students didn’t start using wands in Herbology until their third year and Potions didn’t require wands until one reached the NEWT classes. Defense Against the Dark Arts required a wand, of course, but first years usually spent quite a bit of time on theory before doing any practical work. Astronomy and History required no wands at all. She would have to check with Professor Quirrell to see if…

“Professor McGonagall!” Argus Filch came running into the Hall from a side door behind the staff table. He was out of breath. “Come quick! He’s done it, now!”

“Who has done what, Argus?”

“It’s Peeves, ma’am. He’s gotten into the infirmary and….”

With that, Minerva was off and running. After shooing the poltergeist out of the infirmary and helping Madam Pomfrey to clean up the mess, she had to spend nearly an hour coaxing, cajoling, and threatening Severus Snape until he agreed to replace the potions Peeves had ruined. As soon as she left the dungeons, she encountered Nearly Headless Nick and had to go fetch a couple of fifth-year Ravenclaws who had managed to sneak past Filch and were about to unlock the forbidden door. Later, Minerva was ashamed to admit that, by the time she had finished dealing with these matters, she had completely forgotten about the Howler.

The crises had been resolved by half past eleven and Minerva set off towards her office to deal with the stack of paperwork on her desk that needed to be filled out and sent to the Ministry. Technically, it was Albus’ responsibility to do this, but he made a habit of ignoring those parts of his job he didn’t want to do. Minerva had far too much experience with what happened when it didn’t get done to not do it herself. She was well aware that Albus took shameless advantage of her in this regard, but there was no help for it. Several years ago, Minerva had resigned herself to spending at least part of her weekend filling out inane forms that she was sure no one would ever actually read.

To avoid further distraction and interruption, Minerva had shifted into her Animagus form. As she rounded a corner, she heard voices.

“…such a dreadful thing to happen to a child.” This was Charity Burbage. “Particularly a Muggle-born. I cannot imagine what possessed Molly Weasley to do such a thing…” Suddenly, Minerva remembered the Howler and cursed herself for not following through with her resolution to investigate the matter.

“I can.” Rolanda Hooch sounded faintly disgusted. “She wasn’t born a Weasley, you know.”

“Aye.” Septima Vector’s Irish lilt always reminded Minerva of music. “She was born a Prewett.”

“So?” Charity sounded confused.

“The Prewetts are an old family…Sacred Twenty-Eight.” Septima explained. “While they never preached that blood-purity nonsense or aligned themselves with You-Know-Who, they have always been rather…exclusive.”

“What she means is that they’re crashing snobs.” Rolanda said. “Think they’re better than the rest of us and can do and say whatever they like simply because they’re Prewetts.”
“Well, they’re not wrong.” Septima pointed out. “Not in this case, anyway.”

“Surely Albus will…” Charity began, but someone (Minerva couldn’t tell who) gave an inelegant snort. While cats couldn’t snort, Minerva shared the sentiment completely. Charity chuckled ruefully. “All right, not Albus. But Minerva! She doesn’t let anyone mess with her cubs…”

“She might…” Septima conceded. “If she has time. I’m afraid she’s been a bit….scattered lately, what with teaching, being Deputy Headmistress and doing all the things Albus can’t be bothered with. She hasn’t the time or energy to tend to the children unless they seek her out for something or cause a fuss, like the Weasley twins.” The statement felt like a physical blow. The fact that every word of it was truth made it even worse.

“I don’t know…” Rolanda sounded thoughtful. “I saw her face when that Howler went off this morning. She looked like she was ready to Floo over to the Burrow and start throwing hexes.”

“Yes, but then Argus arrived and she went off to deal with Peeves.” Septima reminded her. “I’m not saying that Minerva doesn’t love those kids or have the best of intentions. She’s just got other things on her mind.” The trio of witches were interrupted by the arrival of Bertram Babbling and the conversation shifted to another topic. Minerva slunk away.

As she prowled the corridor, she considered what she’d heard. They were right, of course. She’d fallen into the same trap she’d so often resented Albus for—that of giving more priority to some large, abstract ideal than to the very real children who had been placed into her care. In Albus’ case, it was “The Greater Good”, whatever that meant, while in Minerva’s case, it was “The School.” She knew that she would have to spend some time sorting it all out, but for now, she had an investigation to conduct.

Minerva decided that it was best to start by finding Hermione Granger. She padded her way up to Gryffindor Tower, intent on asking the Fat Lady for assistance in locating the girl.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Minerva and Molly deal with the consequences of the Howler.

MINERVA

“Here she comes!” Minerva paused and melted into the shadows as she heard footsteps and voices. To her surprise, she discovered that the object of her hunt had actually been walking fairly closely behind her.

Hermione passed Minerva and walked around the corner.

“Granger! There you are!” Minerva tensed, recognizing Fred (or was it George?) Weasley’s voice. She was prepared to shift into human form and intervene at a moment’s notice, but she wanted to give the Weasleys the benefit of the doubt. She wanted to believe that the twins weren’t cruel enough to echo their mother’s sentiments or, worse, to mock the poor girl.

“We’ve been looking everywhere for you!” said the other twin.

“Well, if by ‘looking everywhere’ you mean asking Madam Pince and the Fat Lady if they knew where you were…” said Twin One.

“Why were you looking for me?” Minerva winced at how small and frightened the girl sounded. Nothing like her usual confident self.

“We wanted to…er…well, we wanted to…” This was Twin Two and he sounded unusually nervous.

“We wanted to apologize for what happened this morning.” Minerva was startled to hear that Percy Weasley was a part of this delegation.

“Yeah.” Twin One said. “In case no one’s told you, it was our Mum who sent that Howler.”

“Y…yes.” Hermione stammered. “One of the Hufflepuff Prefects did say that.” It occurred to Minerva to wonder where the Gryffindor girls’ prefect, whose job it was to look after the first-years, was in all of this. “She said that your Mum sends them to you all the time.”

“She does. We got six last year!” Twin Two said. Minerva nearly sighed at the note of pride in his voice. Clearly, Molly had no clue that the Howlers were not having the desired effect.

“Our brother, Charlie, got a few as well.” Twin One said. “He graduated last year. Bill—he’s our oldest—and Percy, here, are law-abiding citizens who never set a toe out of line.”

“Well, Percy is.” Twin Two amended. “According to Bill, he got up to loads of stuff, he just never got caught.” Minerva had now crept around the corner and could see the small group. Percy was standing, stiff and formal, with his arms across his chest, looking distinctly uncomfortable, while Fred and George were leaning against the wall. Percy cleared his throat significantly, and the twins sobered up.
“The thing is that Mum’s never sent a Howler to someone who wasn’t her kid before.” Now that she could see them, Minerva realized that Twin One was, in fact, George.

“Yeah.” Fred said. “So, we…you know…wanted to apologize and make sure you were okay.”

“I….thank you.” Hermione looked rather taken aback. “Can I ask….what did I do that made her so angry?” Fred opened his mouth to respond, but Percy beat him to the punch.

“Look, Granger, you cannot be expected to know this because you weren’t raised in a magical household, but a wizard’s wand is…well, it’s a highly personal thing.” he said, sounding rather condescending. Sensing trouble, Minerva transformed back into human shape, but remained silent. Still, Fred saw her and began plucking on his older brother’s sleeve.

“Uh, Perce…?″ Percy ignored him.

“It is highly inappropriate to touch another witch or wizard’s wand without permission and it is a great offense to actually take it from their hand.”

“What?” Hermione blinked, looking confused. “But I haven’t taken any of your wands….” George had now seen their Head of House and was engaged in silent communication with his twin, involving hands, eyebrows, and a rather astonishing array of facial expressions. They started to back away, slowly.

“You took Ron’s.” Minerva could tell that Percy was trying to be kind, but the effect was anything but. “He told us about what happened during Transfiguration yesterday…."

“No, I didn’t!”

“Percy….” The twins were now a good five feet away from their brother and retreating fast. Again, he ignored them.

“Come now, Miss Granger, Ron’s told us everything. There’s no need to pretend…”

“Thank you, Mister Weasley.” Minerva kept her voice calm and crisp. “I think I can manage from here. Please come to my office after dinner. Miss Granger, please come with me now.”

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MOLLY

Molly Weasley was in the living room when the knock came at the front door. She heard Arthur open it, but didn’t pay much attention until she heard the visitor’s voice.

“Hello, Arthur. I’m afraid this isn’t a social call….″ Molly’s heart lurched. Sending that Howler had relieved all her pent-up anxieties, but Professor McGonagall’s words stirred them up again.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, hurrying into the kitchen. She saw Minerva cast a quick glance at Ginny, who was sitting at the kitchen table, and Molly took her meaning at once. “Ginny, go to your room and stay there until I tell you.” She ordered. Ginny tried to protest, but when she saw that both her parents were united in this matter, she gave way grudgingly, making sure to stomp on the stairs and slam her door. Minerva opened her mouth, but Arthur held up a hand. Molly was relieved to see him cast a privacy charm—it had completely slipped her mind to do so and Ginny had a rather distressing habit of eavesdropping.

“Now, Minerva, what’s happened?” Arthur asked.
“All of your children are fine.” Minerva assured them. Molly felt her heart start again. “I’m here to discuss the Howler Molly sent.” Arthur got a pained look on his face and Molly felt her hackles rise.

“What of it?” She challenged. “That girl behaved shamefully….”

“Wait.” Arthur looked from one woman to the other. “You sent a Howler to a child who isn’t ours?”

“She did.” Minerva said, flatly. “What is more, I believe that she sent it based on false information.”

“What?” Molly gaped. This was certainly not something she expected.

“I understand that Ronald wrote to you regarding an incident that took place during yesterday’s Transfiguration class.” Molly began to realize that Minerva was deeply angry. The Scots woman’s brogue was more pronounced than usual and Molly could practically see the icicles dropping off her words. What was going on?

“What, precisely, did Ronald tell you?”

“Ron sent a letter?” Arthur looked completely mystified. It was only then that Molly realized that she’d forgotten to share the letters she’d received with her husband. Hurrying to the cabinet, she pulled open a drawer and took Ron’s letter out.

“See for yourself.” She handed the note to Minerva, who scanned it quickly. The Deputy Headmistress’ frown grew deeper, if that was possible.

“Molly….” Arthur’s voice was shaking. “What, exactly, happened?”

“Some silly little girl stole Ron’s wand during Transfiguration and….”

“That is not what happened!” Minerva snapped. Molly stared at her.

“What? Of course that’s what happened! Ron said….”

“Molly, do you, perhaps, recall what class I teach at Hogwarts?” Minerva didn’t wait for an answer. “I was there and I can tell you exactly what occurred. I would have been happy to tell you yesterday, if you had asked. But, no…you had to go and send a bloody Howler to a first-year….”

“Professor McGonagall, what, exactly, did happen?” Arthur interrupted using his best “Reasonable” voice. Minerva drew in a deep breath and, when she spoke, she sounded somewhat calmer.

“Yesterday, I began having the children work on turning bricks into breadboxes. Ronald was not paying attention during my lecture.” Molly opened her mouth to object, but Arthur laid a hand on her arm. “When it came time to do the practical work, it was obvious that he had not grasped either the wand movement or the incantation. As so often happens, students who are not prepared think that making their movements bigger and broader and shouting whatever nonsense comes to their mind will work. Ronald was particularly…boisterous. He was sitting next to Miss Granger and accidentally hit her with his elbow several times.”

“Ouch.” Arthur winced in sympathy.

“Well, that is too bad.” Molly admitted. “But it’s still no excuse for…”

“I am not finished!” Minerva snapped. “Miss Granger was, quite understandably, irritated and when Ronald managed to hit her in the face, she grabbed his wrist and demonstrated the proper wand movement. That is all!” Molly stared at her.
“But…but Ron said…”

“I know what Ron said.” Minerva shook the letter, then gave it another glance. “Although his penmanship is so wretched that, before this morning, I might have been willing to suggest that he wrote ‘hand’ instead of wand.”

“Before this morning?” Arthur looked a little unsteady.

“That Howler arrived during breakfast. Naturally, Miss Granger was quite startled and upset and Percy and the twins took it upon themselves to apologize on your behalf. Thanks to that conversation and a later one I had with the twins, I have learned that Ronald definitely told his brothers that Miss Granger took his wand.”

“Oh dear…” Arthur sighed, sinking into a chair. Molly’s mouth hung open for a moment, as she tried to rally her thoughts.

“Ron…lied to me?” Even as she said it, Molly found herself remembering countless little fibs that her children had told her. They had all done it at one time or another, but Ron…Ron’s lies had always been told with an eye to getting someone else in trouble, rather than getting himself out of it. As much as she wanted to dispute Minerva’s account of events, she had no trouble believing that her son hadn’t been paying attention and had done exactly as Minerva said. Still, Molly held on to her indignation on her son’s behalf.

“Maybe it wasn’t his wand, but any properly brought up witch knows that doing what she did is….” Molly trailed off. The look Professor McGonagall gave her froze her blood.

“Miss Granger is a Muggle-born.” All of Molly wrath and motherly protectiveness dissolved, replaced with horror and self-loathing. Minerva went on, unrelenting. “Every year, I take the new Muggle-born students to Diagon Alley. It is their first introduction to the magical world and I try to make it as…well, as magical as I can for them. I do my best to protect them from the awful prejudice that exists in our world because they are children and deserve to experience all the joy and wonder of learning about magic.

“Then, those same Muggle-born children come to Hogwarts and they are called names and ridiculed for not knowing the ‘rules’ and every year…every year, Molly….there is at least one who begs to be sent home. They ask me to bind their magic and send them back into the Muggle world because it is too hard for them to deal with the scorn and the prejudice that is heaped on them simply because their parents cannot use a wand. That conversation usually happens in the spring. Congratulations, Molly! Thanks to your…your foolishness, I had to have that conversation today with a twelve-year old girl! All because she received a Howler on her birthday!”

Molly Weasley collapsed into a chair.

“What have I done?”

“I have never approved of sending Howlers to students.” Minerva hissed. “However, as you have only ever sent them to members of your family, I have kept my counsel. After all, it is not my place to tell you how to raise your children. However, Miss Granger is not your child! Even if she had taken Ronald’s wand, she is not your child! You have no right to do such a thing!”

“No….I…..I didn’t know……” Molly was finding it hard to breathe and tears were pricking her eyes. Minerva appeared unwilling to display even an ounce of sympathy.

“And if sending a Howler to a complete stranger isn’t bad enough, you told a Muggle-born student
that if she was ‘properly brought up’ she would know her place…”

“Molly!” Arthur gasped.

“That’s not….that isn’t what I meant.” Molly was nearly sobbing by now.

“Regardless of whether you meant it or not, that is what you said.” Minerva’s voice was hard as iron. “Or rather, that is what you shouted….in the middle of breakfast. I have no doubt that word of this will get back to the other parents, Arthur, so I’m afraid that you may encounter some… difficulties at work.”

“Is….Is the girl all right?” Arthur asked, quietly.

“She will be….I think. As I said, she was quite overwrought earlier, but I think she’ll recover.”

“What…what can I do to make this right?” Molly asked. Minerva shook her head. Most of the anger seemed to have drained out of her, but there was still a hard tone in her voice when she spoke.

“I’m not sure you can.”

**

MINERVA

Minerva was exhausted, but she felt as though she had accomplished more in this single day than she had in weeks. Miss Granger had been consoled (though it had taken an ocean of tea and several plates of biscuits) and Molly Weasley had been roundly chastised. There was just one more thing Minerva felt that she needed to do before she could put this sorry affair behind her and begin the long and arduous process of sorting out the rest of her life.

She eyed the young man before her and did her best to evaluate him objectively. Truth be told, she would rather not have made Percy Weasley a Prefect. He was intelligent and studious, it was true, but he was, all things considered, fairly sheltered and immature. He was more fond of quoting the rule book than taking the time to understand the reasons behind the rules or coming to his own conclusions about when it was—and was not—appropriate to enforce them. He was also either unwilling to perform the other duties usually assigned to Prefects or he was not aware that there were any other duties for him to perform. However, he had really been her only choice.

There were four fifth-year Gryffindor boys. There had been no question in Minerva’s mind that Oliver Wood was destined to be the captain of the Quidditch team—indeed, she suspected that Wood would have expired on the spot had she’d offered the position to anyone else. Derek Grasby was a nice enough boy, but an abysmal student and there was no way he would have been able to maintain the grades Prefects were required to get. Kieran McLaggen earned decent marks, but was an unrepentant bully who would have abused his position shamefully. Therefore, Percy had gotten the job by default.

Minerva considered what she knew of Percy’s work as a prefect during these first weeks of school. He was almost painfully punctual in his attendance to meetings and to patrol and she was certain he’d memorized the Hogwarts handbook from cover to cover. However, he did not appear to have developed a rapport with the younger students and, in fact, was already gaining a rather negative reputation. Then, of course, there were the issues with his brothers…. Still, Percy had potential and she was determined to see that he did the job properly.

Minerva sighed. This was yet another area where she’d fallen short of the mark. Percy Weasley was not a good Prefect, but it was clear that no one had ever told him how to do the job. It was time for
her to do what should have been done weeks...if not months...ago. She had already made an appointment with Miss Lane, the other fifth-year prefect, to have a similar conversation.

"Tell me, Mr. Weasley. Why do we have Prefects? What are they supposed to do?" Percy blinked, a bit startled, but recovered quickly.

"A Prefect's duty is to uphold the rules of Hogwarts." He replied. Minerva waited a moment.

"And?" She prompted.

"Er...We're supposed to serve as liaisons between the heads of House and the other students." Percy sounded somewhat less confident this time. "And we're supposed to maintain discipline within the House." When it was clear that there was no more, Minerva spoke.

"Mr. Weasley, everything that you have said is correct, but you have left out one crucial thing. A Prefect is supposed to be a mentor figure to the younger students, especially those who are new to Hogwarts." Percy frowned.

"I try to be a good role-model, ma'am." Minerva suppressed another sigh.

"Being a mentor is more than just being a role-model, Mr. Weasley. It is about being a friend and a confidant; someone the younger students can take their troubles to. You are correct in saying that Prefects maintain discipline within their House. One way to do that is to mediate disputes before they get out of hand and disciplinary measures are required. Do you understand?"

"I...think so." Minerva was pleased to see that Percy genuinely appeared to be thinking about what she said. "Is this about what happened between Ron and Miss Granger?"

"In a way, yes." Minerva nodded. "Tell me, what do you know about what happened between your brother and Miss Granger?" Percy shrugged.

"There's not much to tell. Ron and Hermione were in Transfiguration, Ron accidentally hit Hermione with his elbow, and she grabbed his wand out of his hand. She returned it, of course, but..." Minerva held up her hand.

"How do you know this?" she asked.

"Well...Ron told me, of course." Percy looked as though she had asked him a singularly stupid question.

"And did you do any further investigation?" At his blank look, Minerva elaborated. "Did you speak to anyone else who witnessed the incident? Did you ask Miss Granger what happened? You certainly didn't ask me..." For the first time, Percy looked uncomfortable.

"Er...well...no." He admitted. "But why would Ron lie about something like that?"

"I do not know, but he did lie—both to you and to your mother. I spoke with her this afternoon and she showed me the letter Ron sent her." Minerva related the incident as it had really happened. Percy looked chagrinned.

"You're right." He said. "I should have asked you or one of the other firsties...."

"As I said, one of your duties as a Prefect is to mediate conflicts between members of your house. To do that, you need the other students to feel comfortable coming to talk to you about their problems and you need to look at those problems objectively."
“They…they don’t like me very much.” Percy admitted, looking both irritated and ashamed.

“If I may make a suggestion?” Minerva almost laughed at the hopeful expression on the lad’s face. “Try talking with them instead of at them.”

“I….ah….oh.” Minerva watched the parade of emotions crossing Percy’s face: confusion, understanding, irritation, resignation, and, finally, determination. “You’re right, Professor. I’ll work on that.”

“Good.” Minerva nodded. “I will also ask you to try to maintain impartiality when performing your Prefect duties, even when your siblings are involved. If you feel that you cannot render a judgement without bias, simply ask me or one of the other Prefects for assistance.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Percy nodded, then looked a bit uncertain. “Er…ma’am?”

“Yes?”

“What do I do about Fred and George? They’re up to something, I just don’t know what it is.” This time, Minerva did allow herself a small chuckle.

“You need not worry, Mr. Weasley. Provided you do not participate in their antics or deliberately turn a blind eye when you see them committing an infraction of the rules, I will not hold you responsible for their actions.

“You won’t.” He grumbled. “But my mother will.” Minerva gave him a sympathetic look and passed him the plate of biscuits.

The next few days passed without incident. Though it took time away from the never-ending piles of Ministry paperwork, Minerva resumed her habit of prowling the Common Room at night in her feline form. In the old days, before she’d been reduced to being Albus Dumbledore’s personal assistant, she had spent many a night observing her cubs incognito. She never intervened unless the children were doing something truly dangerous, and she never punished them for the things she saw or heard. The purpose of these visits was to observe the students in their natural habitats and to, hopefully, spot potential problems before they became serious.

She was pleased to see that Percy Weasley had taken their talk to heart. He was still a bit stiff at times, but he was making a sincere effort and the other students seemed to recognize that. Even Fred and George had stopped heckling him constantly. She was also happy to note that Hermione Granger seemed to be making friends.

Like most Muggle-borns, Hermione had an almost desperate need to prove herself. That, combined with her exceptional intelligence and awkward social manner, had made her first few weeks at Hogwarts lonely ones. After the Howler, however, Minerva had given Hermione some tips on getting to know people and many of her house-mates had felt rather badly about the way they’d been treating her. The Weasley twins seemed to have adopted her as an honorary little sister and Neville Longbottom had a raging case of hero-worship. The only person who openly expressed dislike for Hermione anymore was Ron Weasley, but Minerva noticed that, as Hermione’s popularity waxed, his waned. Word had spread that the Howler had been sent because Ron was telling tales.

Perhaps, Minerva reflected, it wouldn’t have been so bad if Draco Malfoy didn’t already have such a terrible reputation. “My father will hear about this!” was quickly becoming a joke among the older Slytherins and, one night, when Ron accused a third-year of cheating in a chess match, the girl rolled her eyes and said, loud enough for the entire Common Room to hear, “My mummy will hear about this!” Just about the only friend Ron had at this point was Harry Potter, and even he was starting to
spend more time with Seams Finnigan and Dean Thomas. Ron hadn’t noticed this yet, but Minerva suspected that there would be trouble when he did.

On Tuesday, Albus returned to the castle, but he only stayed long enough to eat a hearty meal and pack a fresh travel bag. He refused to tell Minerva where he was going or when he would be back.

On Thursday, the Gryffindors had their first flying lesson and Minerva saw Harry Potter complete a spectacular, incredibly dangerous, dive on one of the school brooms. Sternly reminding herself that it was imperative she know why he’d performed such a stunt before issuing rewards or punishments, she ran out to the lawns and closely interrogated the students. The end result of that investigation was that Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter both lost house points and Harry wound up on the Gryffindor Quidditch team as the youngest Seeker in a century.

Minerva was still gloating that night when she went to dinner. As she filled her plate, she glanced at the Gryffindor table to assure herself that all was well. The Weasley twins were huddled together with Lee Jordan—nothing unusual about that, though they were acting far too suspicious for her taste. Percy Weasley was engaged in an animated conversation with a second year…good.

Angelina Johnson was having to hold on to Oliver Wood to keep him from dancing on the table—well, who could blame him? And Hermione Granger was engaged in a serious conversation with Lavender Brown and Neville Longbottom. She had her wand out and was demonstrating wand movements and, though Minerva couldn’t hear them over the noise of the Hall, she suspected that they were discussing something from their Charms class. She approved.

Just then, Draco Malfoy and two of his friends from Slytherin came sauntering over and started talking to Harry Potter. Minerva tensed slightly and cast a glance down the staff table at Severus Snape, who was studiously looking anywhere but his roaming students. Minerva seethed. Useless git! He wouldn’t bother to bestir himself until there was trouble and then, it would only be to dock points from the Gryffindors. It baffled her that a man who was as intelligent as he was seemed to be incapable of understanding that it was better to intervene before there was a problem. Standing, Minerva marched towards the group. As she drew nearer, she could hear snatches of the conversation.

“It’s nonsense, is what it is!” Hermione Granger was sitting two seats down from Potter and had obviously overheard something Malfoy had said. “You’re both too young to duel and it’s not allowed. Malfoy’s just up to something, Harry…”

“Shut up, Granger!” Ron Weasley snarled “No one asked you!” Thanks to certain enchantments cast on her hat, Minerva could hear what was being said, though she was still too far away to be heard. As she approached, the end of the Gryffindor table that the first-years had claimed as their own, Miss Dale of Hufflepuff knocked Mr. Tedley’s bag off a bench, causing a flurry of books, quills, ink bottles and parchments to tumble across the floor—and directly in her path. Gabbling their apologies, both students jumped up and began scurrying around, picking up the academic debris.

“I’m asking her.” Harry Potter sounded rather angry, himself. “So, Hermione, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that Malfoy is either incredibly stupid or is trying to trick you into breaking the rules so that you get caught.” Minerva began to glare at the Hufflepuffs, in an effort to get them to move. She had a very bad feeling about what was happening.

“You know, Weasley,” Malfoy said, staring hard at Hermione. “your mother was actually right about something. This little mudblood needs to learn her proper place!” Just as enough space finally cleared so she could move, Minerva saw Draco grab Hermione’s wand out of her hand.
“No!” She shouted, but it was too late. There was a resounding *crack* and flash of light as Draco broke the wand over his knee.
NARCISSA

An elf met her at the gates and told her she was wanted in the infirmary. All Narcissa’s efforts to coax any further information out of the creature proved to be in vain, so she had no choice but to go where she was told. As she entered the castle, she was sharply reminded of the time when, as a child, Bellatrix had kicked in an ant hill. Students and teachers were milling around rather aimlessly. There was an angry buzz of conversation and everyone’s attention was focused on the open doors of the Great Hall. Narcissa’s eyes instinctively followed the gaze of the crowd and what she saw made her stop and stare.

From where she was standing, she could clearly see the Gryffindor table—or what was left of it. There had been some sort of explosion that had destroyed the bench, taken a large chunk out of the table, and even blasted a hole in the floor. As she made her way towards the infirmary with as much speed as dignity would allow, Narcissa’s heart began to race and her mind writhed with all sorts of dire possibilities and predictions.

For the most part, people ignored Narcissa’s presence, though she did notice the odd angry glance cast in her direction—by both students and teachers. Whatever their feelings, however, they did question her right to be there.

When she finally reached the Hospital Wing, all Narcissa could do was gaze in horror at the scene before her. Not many people were aware of the fact, but Narcissa Malfoy, nee Black, was a trained Medi-witch. She had honed her skills on the battlefields of the Dark Lord’s war and she had, quietly, kept those skills from becoming rusty in the years since his defeat. She knew what triage looked like; she had never expected to encounter it in a school infirmary.

The room was crammed full of people. Every bed had its occupant and a number of cots had clearly been transfigured for the occasion. These were taking up almost all the space between the beds, against the walls, and under the windows. There was barely enough room for teachers, parents, and Healers from St. Mungo’s to pass between them. All the patients were children and all were covered in burn salve, though from the looks of things, it was of poor quality. The room was eerily quiet—a sure indication that multiple silencing and privacy charms had been cast.

As Narcissa searched desperately for some clue as to what could have happened, she noticed that one bed was set apart from the others and had a privacy screen around it. Two Aurors appeared to
be standing guard and ne—a young woman with disturbingly pink hair—looked vaguely familiar. The Auror caught her gaze and scowled, fiercely. Narcissa arched an eyebrow, but before she could investigate further, Minerva McGonagall bustled into the room, followed by Amelia Bones.

“Good. You’re here.” The Deputy Headmistress said in a low voice. Beckoning, she disappeared behind the privacy screen. Heart pounding with dread, Narcissa followed. After giving orders to the Aurors that they were not to be disturbed unless there was an emergency, Madam Bones joined them and cast some more privacy charms around the bed, so that they would not be overheard.

“That should do it.” She said, in a normal voice. “What the hell happened here, Minerva?”

“I’d like to know the answer to that myself.” Narcissa hissed. She was staring at the unconscious form of her son who was, it appeared, covered head-to-toe in burn salve. There was matted blood in his hair and what little skin she could see under the salve was covered in bruises. Draco’s left arm was resting on a pillow and had the strange, rubbery appearance of one whose bones had been vanished. Someone had hurt her precious son and she was going to make them pay…

“Here. I think it’s best that you see for yourselves.” Conjuring a small table by the bedside, Minerva withdrew a shrunken Pensieve from a pocket of her robes. After restoring it to its proper size, she withdrew a small vial containing what Narcissa recognized as liquid memory. “This was taken from Miss Katie Bell, a fifth-year student. Miss Bell was sitting at the Gryffindor table when the…incident occurred and was able to see and hear everything leading up to the explosion. I have no doubt that…well, once everyone has recovered a bit, you’ll be able to get corroborating testimony.” Amelia nodded while a strange terror overtook Narcissa. Minerva seemed to be deliberately avoiding looking at either her or Draco and that could only mean bad news.

Minerva dropped the memory into the Pensieve, then tapped the bowl with her wand. A grey mist rose over the bowl and then hovered in the air, seeming to become almost solid. After a moment, the mist gave way to an image of the Great Hall, undamaged and full of students.

“To give you some background, the first-year Gryffindors and Slytherins had their first flying lessons today.” Minerva said. “At one point during the lesson, Madam Hooch had to leave the class to escort an injured student to the infirmary. She gave strict instructions that, in her absence, the children were to remain off their brooms and on the ground. While she was gone, there was an argument between several of the students, including Draco. The result of this exchange was that Draco and another student disobeyed Madam Hooch’s orders. I witnessed this, investigated, and took House Points from both parties. As far as I was concerned, there was nothing more to be said on the matter. It seems that Draco did not share my feelings, as he chose to continue the argument during dinner.” She tapped the bowl again and Narcissa watched as her son very foolishly challenged Harry Potter—*Harry Potter*—to a duel. It was clear as glass that Draco had no intention of honoring the challenge and the small girl who was sitting near Potter seemed to agree.

“‘It’s nonsense, is what it is!’ she said. “You’re both too young to duel and it’s not allowed, anyway…”

“Shut up, Granger!” The snarling red-head could only have been a Weasley. “No one asked you!”

“I’m asking her.” Harry Potter was frowning at the Weasley child and completely ignoring Draco. “So, Hermione, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that Malfoy is either incredibly stupid or is trying to trick you into breaking the rules so that you get caught.” The look of vicious glee that crossed Draco’s face sent chills down Narcissa’s spine. She’d seen that same look on Lucius’ face before—when he had just thought of a way to completely destroy an enemy. Draco was far too young to have that look—he was far too young to
have enemies.

“You know, Weasley,” Draco drawled. “your mother was actually right about something. This little mudblood needs to learn her proper place!”

Narcissa watched, horrified, as her only son broke another’s wand over his knee, thus committing one of the most serious crimes known to the British wizarding world. It appeared that Miss Bell was caught in the magical backlash because the memory cut off abruptly almost immediately after the wand was broken.

The picture faded away and the three women stood in silence while Minerva collected the memory. Finally, Amelia sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“How bad is it, Minerva?”

“It’s bad.” Minerva finally looked at Narcissa. To her surprise, there was no accusation, merely sympathy. “I’m afraid that your son has done a great deal of damage. The blast affected students within a radius of about thirty feet. In addition to Miss Granger, Draco, and his two companions—Gregory Goyle and Vincent Crabbe—twenty students from Gryffindor and another twelve from Hufflepuff sustained serious injuries. Dozens more were knocked about by the blast or received minor injuries while trying to leave the Great Hall, so we’ve had to treat a fair number of concussions, scrapes and bruises. There was also some damage to the table, the bench, and floor.”

“I know.” Amelia said. “I saw that when I came in. What about the girl who…” She seemed to be at a loss for words.

“Poppy has her in the private room with wards.” Minerva replied. Narcissa recalled that Hogwarts did, indeed, have a warded room in the infirmary for the use of students who had suffered damage to their magical cores. “Her magic is….well, they’re having some trouble getting it under control enough to be able to move her or treat her injuries. The Healers from St. Mungo’s had to call in an Unspeakable.…”

“Better and better.” Amelia muttered. “Where was Albus during all this? And where is he now?”

“I have no idea.” Minerva’s face and voice had gone curiously flat. “He left the castle on some mysterious business shortly after term began and has been back exactly once—and then, it was only long enough to eat a hot meal and get a fresh pair of socks.”

“And Mr. Malfoy’s Head of House? Who is that, by the way?”

“That would be Severus Snape. He was at the staff table during the incident, but did not intervene. He is currently in the Potions lab making more burn salve. Madam Pomfrey’s stores were pillaged by that wretched poltergeist a few days ago and Severus neglected to make any more. We’re lucky—if you can call it that—that his sixth-year students were assigned to make burn salve this week. However, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, the quality is…. ”

“Poor.” Narcissa said. Her mind was racing for some way…any way…to fix this. “Professor McGonagall, there is a goodly supply of burn salve and pain potions at the Manor. If you will allow my house elf access to your wards, I can have them here in just a few minutes.”

“I….” For a moment, Narcissa thought Minerva was going to be unreasonable, but then she inclined her head. “Thank you. Effie!” A house elf in Hogwarts livery appeared. “Madam Malfoy is going to summon her House elf. He….er….” She gave Narcissa an inquiring look.

“Dobby.” Narcissa supplied.
“Dobby will need access to the wards. Please hurry, as he will be fetching medicines.” The elf nodded and disappeared. Narcissa waited a moment, then called for Dobby. He appeared almost immediately. Narcissa was pleased to see that he was wearing proper house elf livery, rather than the dirty pillowcase he sometimes favored. She was convinced he only wore the disgusting thing just to annoy Lucius, who he seemed to dislike for some reason.

“Gather all the burn salves and pain potions in the Manor and….wait.” She paused and looked at Minerva. “Do you need blood replenishing potions or Dreamless Sleep?”

“Dreamless Sleep would be appreciated.”

“Right. Dobby, get all the burn salves, pain potions, and Dreamless Sleep potions in the Manor and bring them here.” Dobby nodded and disappeared.

“Thank you.” Minerva said. Narcissa inclined her head. Under other circumstances, she might have parlayed this act of generosity into something more…useful…but now was not the time to be thinking of such things.

“Are the girl’s…er..I’m sorry, I didn’t catch her name…?”

“Granger. Hermione Granger.”

“Are her parents here? I’d like to speak to them…offer my sincerest apologies….”

“I’m afraid not. Miss Granger’s parents are Muggles.” Narcissa felt as if she’d been struck a physical blow. She looked at her son and love and pity warred with fury and shame in her heart. She was startled when Amelia Bones addressed her for the first time. In that moment, Narcissa knew she was dealing with Madam Bones, the Director of the DMLE and not Amelia, her friend of many years.

“Did you tell Draco to snap Miss Granger’s wand?”

“Certainly not!”

“To the best of your knowledge, did your husband tell him to do this?”

“No. Lucius would never…. She’s a child!” Even at the height of the Dark Lord’s reign of terror, Lucius Malfoy had a well-earned reputation for refusing to make war on children. Amelia nodded and seemed to relax slightly.

“Where is Lucius? I would have thought….”

“He’s in Italy on business.” Narcissa explained. “I fire-called him and he is going to get a portkey from Gringotts as soon as possible.”

Amelia seemed to be about to ask another question when the screen was drawn back and the young, female Auror stuck her head in. Her lips moved, but no sound came out. Amelia held up a hand, raised her wand, and dismantled the privacy charms.

“Sorry for the interruption, Ma’am, but the Professor’s needed. Some of the students came across your Defense teacher being attacked by a…..what was it, Diggory?” There was a murmur from outside the screen. The Auror turned her head to listen, but Narcissa could still see the incredulity on her face. “Are you sure?” She turned back to them. “He says that there’s a three-headed dog on the third floor!”
“Just what in the hell is going on in this school?” Amelia Bones asked an hour later. The infirmary was now nearly empty—Narcissa Malfoy’s burn salves and pain potions had been quite excellent—and most of the injured had been able to flee without assistance when the possessed teacher had attempted to go on a rampage. Only seven students needed to remain in the Hospital Wing overnight and their needs were being seen to by a cadre of parents and siblings, since Madam Pomfrey and the team from St. Mungo’s were devoting most of their efforts to Miss Granger’s care. Once the Quirrell situation was under control, Amelia and Minerva had retreated to the latter’s office.

“I have no idea.” Minerva sighed. The bruises on her face were already fading, thanks to some concoction the Weasley twins had given their Head of House, but she was still obviously favoring her left arm and shoulder. “I honestly don’t know what to make of any of this, Amelia.”

“Start by telling me what my people can expect to find on the forbidden corridor on the third floor.”

“I wish I knew.” Minerva took a sip of tea. “That part of the castle isn’t used for any classrooms or dormitories. Over the summer, Albus told the staff that he had a private research project that required a lot of room and asked us not to go in there. Then, the idiot got up at the Welcoming Feast and told the students that they should avoid that corridor unless they wished to—and I quote—‘die a very painful death’.”

“In other words, he waved a red flag in front of a herd of bulls.”

“Exactly. I’m actually surprised we haven’t had any problems before now. I suspect that, had their brother not been injured in the blast, the Weasley twins would have taken advantage of the chaos caused by Draco Malfoy’s foolishness to sneak up there. They’ll be heartbroken to learn that the Hufflepuffs beat them to the punch.”

There was a knock on the door and Amelia arched an eyebrow at Minerva. It was, after all, her office.

“Come in!”

Auror Tonks and one of the Unspeakables from the Department of Mysteries came in, shutting the door firmly behind them. Both looked grim.

“What do you have for me, Mr…..er…Smith, was it?” The man shrugged.

“Smith will do as well as anything else. The wards are in bad shape, Madam Bones. It looks like they haven’t been repaired or reinforced in nearly fifty years and someone has definitely made some alterations.”

“What kind of alterations?”

“I’ll give you a full list when we return to the office…I need to look up a few things, to be sure. Right now, I can tell you that the wards preventing Dark creatures and artifacts from entering the castle were almost completely drained of power.”

“Well, that explains how a troll got in.” Tonks muttered.

“Troll?” Amelia’s eyebrows nearly flew off.
“Yeah. That Cerberus—his name is Fluffy, by the way—was guarding a trap door. Shafiq and I went down to have a look and we found what looks like an obstacle course, of sorts. There’s Devil’s Snare, a room with flying keys and brooms—you’ve got to find and catch the right one to get through the door—a room with a giant chess set, and then a mountain troll, just sitting there, bold as brass. Shafiq is contacting the Creature Squad as we speak.”

“Good. Go on.”

“After the troll, there was a room with potions and a logic puzzle—stupid, really. Any Auror cadet could have told you which one to drink just by smelling the damn things and anyone with half a brain could figure out the clues. Anyway, getting past that got you into…..” she paused for dramatic effect “an empty room!”

“What?” Amelia stared.

“That’s right, boss. Nothing! Nada! Zilch!” Amelia turned to Minerva, who looked just as baffled as she felt.

“This makes no sense.” Minerva muttered. “If Miss Tonks is correct, most of these obstacles sound like they could be mastered by first-years—well, except for the Cerberus and the troll, of course. If Albus wanted to keep people away, why all that business with the keys and the chess set? And the empty room…?”

“I trust you did the standard sweep for hidden objects and spaces?” Amelia gave her subordinate a gimlet glare. Tonks had forgotten to do just that on one of her first days as an Auror. Fortunately, her senior partner had caught her mistake.

“Yes ma’am.” Tonks nodded. “We even got….er…Smith, here, to go down there and have a look. There really is nothing there. Oh…except a door that leads into a cabinet in the staff room.”

“I suspect…” Amelia said “that Albus was making himself a treasure cave.”

“Without the treasure?” Minerva asked.

“Hasn’t had time to put it in there, yet, I suppose.” Amelia replied. “Where’d the Cerberus come from?” Tonks laughed.

“Oh, he’s Hagrid’s. I talked to him—Hagrid, that is, not the dog—and he says that Professor Dumbledore asked to borrow Fluffy for the year. Hagrid’s been sneaking up there every few days to bring him food and give him some company.”

“Exactly how did Professor Quirrell get into that room in the first place?” Minerva’s voice was deadly calm, a sure sign that she was furious.

“He unlocked the door with an Alohamorra.” Tonks replied.

“That bloody imbecile!” Minerva shouted. “I swear, the next time I see Albus Dumbledore, I’m going to shove every single one of those bloody lemon drops down his throat with my fist—While they’re still in the bowl!”

“You have no way of getting in touch with him?” Amelia asked.

“I sent Fawkes with a message just after I contacted you. To the best of my knowledge, the bird has not returned.” Amelia sighed and came to a decision.
“Tonks, you and Mr. Smith go back to the Ministry and scramble a full investigation team. Coordinate with Croaker—I want at least one more Unspeakable up here. Tell everyone to be here first thing tomorrow morning. We are going to go over every inch of this castle and interview every single student and member of staff. Tell them all to pack bags because no one gets time off until we make sure this castle is safe. Mr. Smith, please ask Croaker to coordinate with the goblins to get a ward team out here as soon as possible.” The two nodded and left.

“Albus won’t like this.” Minerva warned. Amelia laughed.

“Albus won’t have a choice.” She said.

**

MINERVA

In order to allow the Aurors to do their work as quickly and efficiently as possible and to give the injured time to recover, Minerva cancelled classes on Friday. Students were confined to their Common Rooms with the threat of in-school suspension with Mr. Filch enough to keep even the Weasley twins where they were supposed to be. Even so, things were unusually quiet. Minerva spent some time prowling the Gryffindor Common Room in her animagus form and listened to a number of conversations that were all on the same theme—people were still shocked and horrified about what Draco Malfoy had done to Hermione Granger’s wand.

“But I don’t understand…why did the wand….explode like that?” Harry Potter was sitting at a table with the Weasley twins, Oliver Wood, and Angelina Johnson. It was Mister Wood, looking uncharacteristically serious, who answered.

“You got your wand from Ollivander’s, yeah?” Harry nodded.

“And he gave you all that business about the wand choosing the wizard, right?” Another nod. “Well, it’s like this. There’s a special bond between wizards and their wands….”

“There are so many dirty jokes that start with that sentence.” Johnson muttered. Wood ignored her, but the twins snickered.

“I don’t really understand it, but somehow, our magic gets tied up with the magic of the creature whose hair or feather or what have you makes up the core of our wands. When a wand is broken, that connection is broken. You see?”

“Okay, but you can’t tell me that people don’t break their wands pretty often. I mean, they’re wood and they’re not that thick.” Harry said.

“Adults break or ruin their wands all the time.” Johnson said. “My Mum dropped hers in a cauldron full of Swelling Solution just last month! The thing is, Harry, that kids…well, our magic doesn’t stabilize until we get to be sixteen or seventeen. Mum once told me that there’s something in our wands that helps keep the flow of power even…something like that. I didn’t really understand it. Anyway, the younger you are, the more dependent you are on your wand to help you get things done, you see? It’s not that we don’t have the power, it’s just that we lack control. So, if a kid’s wand gets broken, it can be really bad because the kid almost always loses control. That’s one reason why we’re not supposed to do magic in the halls or outside of school—less chance of the wand getting broken.”

“It’s a lot worse if you’re using a wand that’s a perfect match for you.” Wood picked up the explanation.
“Yeah.” Fred nodded. “If you broke your wand, it would be a lot worse than if Ron broke his, because his wand was a hand me down.”

“Also, the amount of raw power a kid has can affect how much…er…damage is done when the wand is broken.” George added. “Granger must have been really powerful to have caused that big of an explosion.”

“Deliberately breaking a child’s wand is just about the worst thing a witch or wizard can do because it damages their magic so badly.” Anglina said. “Even You-Know-Who never stooped that low….and that’s saying something!”

“Yeah.” Fred leaned forward, looking as serious as Minerva had ever seen him.. “The only time it’s ever supposed to happen is if a kid gets expelled from Hogwarts for killing or attempting to kill another student.”

“Even then, it has to be done a certain way to avoid causing unnecessary harm to the expelled person, the person doing the breaking and anyone who happens to be in the room at the time.” George looked thoughtful. “They do all sorts of spells to prepare and the expelled person has to take potions. The expelled student’s magic is…well, it’s bound so that they can’t use it anymore.”

“And the only people who are allowed to break an expelled student’s wand are the Headmaster and the Ministry official in charge of magical education.” Wood finished.

“But what about Hagrid?” Harry protested. “He was expelled and I’ve seen him using magic!” If felines had eyebrows, Minerva’s would have been somewhere near the ceiling. The child was absolutely right—why hadn’t she ever made that connection before?

“Who knows?” Fred shrugged.

“I bet Dumbledore did something.” George nodded, sagely. “He wasn’t Headmaster when Hagrid was a student here, but I bet he did something.” There was a moment of silence while they all appeared to contemplate the possibilities. Minerva made a mental note to have a word with the gamekeeper as soon as possible.

“So, what will happen to Hermione?” Harry finally asked.

“Dunno.” George shrugged. “Depends on how strong her magic was….is….and how stable her core is. She might make a full recovery but…..”

“It’s not likely.” Angelina put a comforting arm on Harry’s shoulder. “I’m just glad Malfoy’s mother took him home. I’d like to snap more than that little git’s wand….”

“He’s been expelled?” Fred looked eager.

“Not officially. Not yet, anyway.” Angelina said. Not for the first time, Minerva wondered who Miss Johnson’s source of gossip was. The girl always had remarkably accurate information. “Only the Headmaster can expel a student and no one knows where he is.” Wood let out a derisive snort.

“A Galleon says that Malfoy is back within a week.” he said.

“But….but he nearly killed Hermione….not to mention everyone else.” Harry protested.

“Yeah, but he’s a Malfoy.” Fred said. “Old Lucius is probably at the Ministry throwing money around even as we speak.”
“But the Ministry has no say in this, do they?” Angelina asked. “And Dumbledore would never take a bribe….”

“No, he wouldn’t.” George agreed. “But he would bring Malfoy back if he thought it might get him something….like Lucius Malfoy’s support in the Wizengamot.”

As she crept out of the Common Room, Minerva had to agree with the Weasleys. If Albus was allowed to have his way, Draco Malfoy would be welcomed back to the castle with open arms and a slap on the wrist. Of course, it would never occur to Albus that this would, in all likelihood, be akin to signing the boy’s death warrant.

The taboo in British wizarding society against deliberately snapping a child’s wand was so great that, to Minerva’s knowledge, it had only been done without permission once before. Even the staunchest “I heart Voldemort” t-shirt wearing pure-bloods would rather kill a Muggle-born child than snap his or her wand. But that was exactly what Draco had done, with all the arrogance and assuredness of one who believes he will not be punished, and there was no reason to believe he would not do so again.

If Draco Malfoy was allowed back into the castle, every single student would be consumed with fear that he might go after their wand and, if Albus handed out his usual inadequate punishment, there was no reason to believe that they would be wrong. It was a disaster waiting to happen. Albus wouldn’t see that, of course. He would just see the potential benefit to his so-called “greater good” and, possibly, the potential for Draco Malfoy’s redemption. In the meantime, Hermione Granger would simply be written off as collateral damage, sent back to the Muggle world with a pat on the head and an Obliviation charm.

“To hell with that.” Minerva muttered as she entered her private quarters and regained her human form. Stalking to the fireplace, she grabbed a pinch of floo powder and threw it into the flames.

“Augusta Longbottom!” she called.

**

Albus finally returned to the castle on Sunday morning. Minerva learned of his arrival when he burst into her office without knocking. His face looked like thunder.

“Minerva, explain to me why I have been locked out of my office!”

“One moment, please.” Minerva sat back and folded her hands on the desk. She was looking forward to this. “Effie!” The house elf appeared. “Please find Madam Bones and inform her that Albus Dumbledore is here, demanding explanations.” The house elf nodded and popped away.

“Minerva….” There was no mistaking the warning in Albus’ voice.

“Did you receive the letter I sent with Fawkes?” she asked.


“Did you read it?” Albus definitely looked shifty. Before he could come up with an answer, however, the door opened and Amelia Bones entered.

“Amelia!” Dumbledore said, genuinely surprised. “What are you doing here?”

“So, that’s a no.” Minerva said, dryly. “Sit down, Albus. Quite a bit has happened since you last graced us with your presence.” Rather than taking one of the available seats, Albus conjured himself
a large, overstuffed armchair that was far too large for the space. Just as he was sitting down, however, Amelia vanished it. Only a hasty grab at Minerva’s desk kept him from landing on the floor.

“I do not have the time or the patience for your nonsense, Albus.” Amelia snapped. “Now sit down and behave yourself, or I swear I’ll throw you in a cell in Azkaban and throw away the key!” Looking suitably cowed, Albus sat down in the plain, wooden seat to which he’d been directed.

“On Thursday night, Draco Malfoy deliberately took, and then broke, Hermione Granger’s wand.”

“Which you would already know if you’d read the letter I sent you.” Minerva muttered. Amelia ignored her and continued.

“The backlash from the destruction of the wand injured a number of students and nearly killed both Miss Granger and Mister Malfoy. Mister Malfoy will make a full recovery. Miss Granger…will not, though I am unsure as to the extent of the damage.”

“This is serious.” Albus shook his head, looking grave. “I can assure you, Amelia, that a full investigation will be conducted and that appropriate punishments will be meted out, if necessary.” Minerva’s jaw fell open. She was about to speak, but Amelia gave her a warning look.

“And just what do you consider to be appropriate punishments?” She asked. Albus thought for a moment before speaking.

“Should Mister Malfoy be found guilty, I will place him on probation for the remainder of the year and he will serve detentions with me every Saturday, during which I will endeavor to make him see the error of his ways.” Minerva couldn’t help it – her jaw fell again.

“Should Mr. Malfoy be found guilty….Albus, he broke her wand in the middle of the Great Hall during dinner!”

“Yes, but….”

“Besides, there is no question as to Mr. Malfoy’s guilt.” Amelia interjected. “I have already conducted my own investigation into this matter and am well satisfied with my conclusions.”

“I’m sure you…..” Albus began.

“This is not up for debate, argument or negotiation.” Amelia cut him off. “To continue—after getting the injured to the infirmary, Minerva called me and, as I understand it, tried to contact you. We brought in a team of Healers and Healer-trainees from St. Mungo’s to assist Madam Pomfrey in dealing with the wounded and we also had to call on the assistance of several Unspeakables to help stabilize Miss Granger. While we were in the infirmary assessing the situation, three students arrived with your Defense teacher in tow. He was unconscious and bleeding from several bite wounds.”

“What?” Albus looked completely bewildered. “Is Quirinus all right? Have the students been….?”

“Oh do stop interrupting, Albus.” Minerva snapped. “Some of us have things to do today!”

“It seems that both Professor Quirrell and your students decided to take advantage of the chaos created by the wand incident to try to sneak onto the third-floor corridor. Quirrell got there first, where he encountered Fluffy. Fortunately, one of the students knew enough about Cerberus hounds to sing the beast to sleep long enough to get Quirrell out of the room and shut—and properly lock—the door. They brought Quirrell to the infirmary and Madam Pomfrey cast some standard diagnostic spells on him. That is when the spirit that was possessing your teacher decided to intervene.”
“Possessing….” Albus had gone very pale, though he looked more frightened than surprised.

“We are all very lucky that Poppy Pomfrey has kept up with her dueling practice and that we had Unspeakables on site.” Amelia went on. “The spirit was subdued and contained.”

“I….see.” Minerva could practically see the wheels turning in Albus’ mind. “Where is it now?”

“Someplace where Voldemort’s followers can’t get to it.” Amelia said, sounding rather sharp. “Right now, my main concern is how that spirit got into the castle in the first place. Tell me, Albus, why have you altered the wards?” Minerva watched as Albus’ mouth opened and closed soundlessly. Amelia studied him for a moment, then spoke again. “Don’t bother answering that. I think it best that we continue this conversation at a later date in a more…suitable environment. In the meantime, Minerva?”

“Yes.” Minerva cleared her throat and withdrew a scroll from her desk. “Albus, I’ve spoken with Augusta Longbottom who has, in turn, spoken with the rest of the Board of Governors.” She handed the scroll to Amelia, who pressed it into Albus’ unresisting hands. There was a brief flare of golden light and Albus let out a small, horrified gasp. “Albus Dumbledore, you are hereby suspended from your position as Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry pending the results of an investigation into your actions as Headmaster. Augusta asked me to tell you that she expects you to cooperate fully with that investigation and not to bother trying to get your job back until it’s finished.”

“You…you can’t….?” Albus drew himself up. “Madam Bones, I must protest!”

“Protest all you like.” Amelia shrugged. She pulled another scroll out of her pocket and tried to hand it to Albus, who looked at her as if she was trying to give him a handful of troll excrement. When he didn’t take it, Amelia dropped it into his lap.

“What is this?” he asked, warily.

“That is your official summons to stand before the Wizengamot to answer to charges of endangering the welfare of minors. I suspect more charges will be added, but we can talk about that later.”

“Endangering the…?” Albus sputtered. “Madam Bones, I can assure you that I’ve done no such thing!”

“I think that there are a number of parents who might disagree with you. Really, Albus? Keeping a fully grown Cerberus behind a door that a first year could open?” The blood left Albus’ face so rapidly that Minerva thought he might faint. Amelia gave a grim nod.

“I see we understand one another. Good.”

“Albus, the House elves have packed up your possessions.” Minerva said. She didn’t bother to tell him how many things they’d found in his quarters that didn’t belong to him. “Where would you like them sent?”

“I…ah…surely you are not forcing me out of the castle?”

“Surely you don’t think we’d allow you to stay!” Amelia said, coming perilously close to mocking his tone of affronted dignity. “Answer the question, Albus. I need to know where I can reach you.”

“The….the Hog’s Head, I suppose.” Albus sounded rather lost. Minerva wondered what Abeforth would say about his brothers sudden arrival.
“Very well.” Amelia stood and glared at Albus. “Come along then.”

“One moment, Amelia.” Minerva also stood. Albus looked terribly small, just then, and seemed to cower in his chair. “Albus, I have three things I want to say to you. First: probation and detention are not appropriate punishments for what Mr. Malfoy did. If you paid half as much attention to your duties as Headmaster as you do to whatever scheme you’re hatching, you would know that. Second: be advised that I have spoken to Mafalda Hopkirk and informed her of the Board’s decision. Your name has been removed from all Guardianships that have been entrusted to the school.”

“No….” Albus moaned.

“Third,” Minerva went on, pointedly ignoring him “I wish to remind you that you are not permitted on school grounds while you are suspended. Please do not test me on this, Albus. Please don’t force me to do something we will both regret.”

“But….” Albus was still spluttering as Amelia took him by the elbow, hauled him to his feet and out of the office.

Minerva spent most of the remainder of the day in conference with Board members, Healers from St. Mungo’s and ministry officials. She returned to the castle in time for dinner, after which she prepared for the emergency Staff meeting. The meeting was mandatory, so the room was quite full by the time she arrived. The only absences were Professor Binns (who never attended meetings) and Madam Pomfrey (who still had three patients in the infirmary). There was a low hum of conversation as people settled themselves with tea and biscuits, but Minerva got silence by pointedly clearing her throat.

“Thank you all for coming.” She said. “We have a lot to discuss, but I will try to get through this as quickly as possible. First, I’d like to address some of the rather ridiculous rumors that have been flying around the castle. As you all know, Draco Malfoy snapped Hermione Granger’s wand during dinner on Thursday. I would like to thank all those who helped tend the wounded and otherwise made themselves useful.” Here, she shot glares at Sibyl Trelawney and Severus Snape. The former had hidden in her tower, while the latter had spent the entire night complaining bitterly to anyone who bothered to stand still for more than five seconds.

“We had a total of 36 seriously injured students, including Mr. Malfoy and Miss Granger. Of those, 31 have been cleared to return to class tomorrow. Mr. Crabbe, Mr. Goyle, and Miss Brown are still in the hospital wing. Poppy tells me that she expects to release Mr. Crabbe and Miss Brown tomorrow night but, due to an unfortunate reaction to a poorly made burn salve….” Here, she glared at Severus again “Mr. Goyle may need to stay longer.”

“If I may ask, why were Crabbe, Goyle, and Brown’s injuries so much worse than everyone else’s?” Bertram Babbling had not arrived in the Great Hall until a few moments after the explosion, so his question was perfectly reasonable.

“They were closest in proximity to Mr. Malfoy and Miss Granger and, thus, received the full brunt of the blast.” Filius explained.

“What about Malfoy and Granger?” Pomona Sprout asked, looking concerned.

“They have both been moved out of the infirmary. I will return to them in a minute. For now, please let me continue.” After getting nods from around the table, Minerva went on. “After we got everyone to the infirmary, I fire-called the DMLE, the Department of Mysteries, and St. Mungo’s for assistance. I was in the infirmary, speaking with Madam Bones, when Messrs. Diggory, Jackson, and Montague arrived, towing an unconscious Quirrimus Quirrell behind them. Quirrimus managed
to breach Albus’ laughable security measures on the third floor and had a run-in with Fluffy.” Hagrid said nothing, but was blushing furiously.

“Fluffy?” Aurora Sinistra asked.

“A Cerberus Hound Albus borrowed to guard the entrance to his private domain.” Minerva explained. She had already had words with Hagrid about having such a creature in the first place and saw no need to inform the rest of the staff about his role in this sorry affair. “Apparently, Messrs. Jackson and Montague had the same idea as Qurrimus, but, by the time they got there, Fluffy was using our Defense professor as a chew toy. Fortunately, Mr. Montague is doing quite well in Care of Magical Creatures and was able to put Fluffy to sleep long enough for them to rescue Quirrimus. Mr. Diggory found the lot of them and brought them all to the infirmary. Once there, Poppy began to cast a standard diagnostic spell on Quirrimus, which only served to anger his passenger.”

“Passenger?” Charity Burbage raised an eyebrow.

“It seems that, while Quirrimus was on sabbatical last year, he encountered the disembodied spirit of Voldemort…” Minerva huffed in irritation as several people screamed. “You’re adults!” She snapped. “Act like it. Anyway, Quirrimus encountered Voldemort’s spirit and it possessed him. Fortunately, Poppy has not lost any of her zest or talent for dueling and, with her help, the Aurors and Unspeakables were able to subdue and contain the spirit. Unfortunately, Quirrimus did not survive the encounter.” There was a moment of silence as everyone processed this. Minerva noted that Severus Snape looked particularly disturbed.

“While investigating the wand explosion and the possessed teacher, the Aurors and Unspeakables made some rather disturbing discoveries, which led to Amelia Bones’ decision to have her people thoroughly search the school and interview all the students and staff. Am I correct in believing that all the interviews have been completed?” There were nods around the table. “The search will take a lot longer, of course, so there will be Aurors and Unspeakables wandering around the castle for the next few weeks. Please treat them with all due courtesy. I have assigned them to guest quarters on the fifth floor and I have been assured that their activities will not interfere with the day-to-day business of the school. Hagrid, a ward team will be arriving tomorrow. I told Madam Bones that you will be available to show them where the boundaries are and to handle any necessary negotiations with the Centaurs.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Hagrid nodded.

“Sylvanus…Sylvanus!” Filius had to nudge Sylvanus Kettleburn, the Care of Magical Creatures teacher, who had fallen asleep.

“Er…what?” He blinked blearily. Minerva resisted the urge to shout at him.

“A ward team will be on the grounds tomorrow. Please keep your classes away from the forest.”

“Oh. All right.” Sylvanus blinked twice, then promptly fell asleep again.

“Don’t worry, Professor.” Hagrid chuckled. “I’ll look after him.”

“Thank you.” Minerva gave him a grateful smile.

“Where was Albus during all this?” To Minerva’s surprise, this perfectly reasonable question came from Sibyl Trelawney.

“As many of you know, Albus left the castle on personal business shortly after term began. Despite
my efforts to contact him, he did not see fit to return until this morning. The Board of Governors has
decided that his extended absence—and his refusal to come back here during an emergency—
constitutes abandonment of his post. They have suspended him indefinitely.” Minerva felt like she’d
suddenly landed in a room full of snakes as people began urgently whispering to one another. She
wondered what the reaction would have been if she’d told them about all of Albus’ quasi-criminal
activities. She had to clear her throat several times to regain their attention.

“While the public is being told that his suspension is temporary, pending an investigation, I have
been permitted to tell you that Albus will not be permitted to resume his post as Headmaster.” This
time, the murmurs were much louder. Minerva let them go on for a moment, before she glared them
into silence once again. “I must impress upon all of you that Albus Dumbledore is no longer a part
of Hogwarts and he has no rights, duties, or responsibilities where this school or its students are
concerned. I will not tolerate his meddling and I will not deal kindly with anyone who attempts to
meddle on his behalf or at his quest. Is that clear?”

“So, you are Headmistress now?” Severus asked.

“For the moment, yes. The promotion is temporary.” Minerva nodded. “The Board and I have
agreed that I will serve in that capacity for the remainder of this year and that we will revisit the issue
during the summer.”

“So….” Babbling said, after a moment’s silence. “What does all this mean for us, right now?”

“I’m afraid it means that there will be a great deal of upheaval over the next few months.” Minerva
sighed. “Pomona will be taking on the duties of Deputy Head and Rolanda has kindly agreed to take
over as Head of House Gryffindor.” Minerva sighed. It had been hard to give that up, but she had a
duty to all the students, not just her cubs.

“Will you still teach?” Filius asked.

“No. Madam Jones from the Department of Mysteries will be taking over Transfiguration for the
remainder of the year and Amelia Bones has agreed to loan us an instructor from the Auror Academy
to serve as our Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. They will both arrive some time this week
and we have all agreed that they will begin teaching next Monday. Transfiguration and DADA
classes will be cancelled this week. There are a number of other changes I plan to implement over
the next year, but that is enough to be getting on with, don’t you think? We will have another
meeting, once things are more settled, where we can discuss those ideas and, of course, I am happy
to hear any suggestions you might have. Now, it’s getting late, and there is one more thing we need
to discuss. You asked earlier about Mr. Malfoy and Miss Granger.

“Mr. Malfoy’s parents moved him to St. Mungo’s and I am told he is expected to make a full
recovery.” Minerva said. “Amelia is waiting until he is released before she formally charges him
with anything, but I understand that his parents are attempting to come to some sort of… arrangement
that will keep Draco from having to stand before the Wizengamot.” This announcement was met
with a good deal of grumbling. “Whatever happens with Mr. Malfoy’s legal case, I have informed
his parents that he is not welcome to return here. Either they formally withdraw him from the school
or he will be expelled. As for Miss Granger, she was finally stable enough to be moved to a private
clinic in Wales last night and is being cared for by a team of Healers who specialize in injuries to the
magical core. I have been informed they’ve managed to heal her physical injuries, but the damage to
her core is permanent.”

“So, she’s a Squib?” Severus Snape seemed unusually intent. Minerva sighed.

“Not exactly. She still has access to her magic but, for all intents and purposes, she has about as
much control as a three year old child.” There was a moment of confused silence before Charity Burbage raised a tentative hand.

“Forgive me, Minerva, but I’ve not spent much time around three year olds. How much control do they have?”

“Virtually none.” Minerva replied. “I think it best if I explain this the way the Healers explained it to me. Our cores contain a mechanism that works very much like the faucet on a sink. When we cast a spell, it is as if we turn the faucet on and release a certain amount of our power. We can control, to a greater or lesser degree, how much of that power we release. Very young children have almost no control—they access their magic and release all their power at once, resulting in bursts of accidental magic. Adults have almost complete control over how much power they release. Well, when Mr. Malfoy broke Miss Granger’s wand, he damaged that mechanism.”

“He broke the faucet and now she leaks.” Severus supplied. Minerva eyed him coldly. “I did not mean that as an insult.” He muttered.

“I should hope not.” She sniffed. “However crudely it was put, your assertion is correct. Miss Granger has virtually no control of how much power she releases—intentionally or otherwise. Unfortunately, she has a great deal more power than the average three year old, so the potential consequences of her lack of control are….daunting.”

“Can the damage be repaired?” Filius asked. Minerva shook her head.

“Not entirely, no. The Healers tell me that there are techniques they can teach Miss Granger that will allow her to exercise a certain amount of conscious control of her power, but she will never be able to maintain the amount of control necessary to use a wand.”

“Poor girl!” Septima Vector gasped.

“It’s a shame to lose her.” Filius shook his head. “She showed such promise.”

“She still does!” Minerva snapped. Drawing in a deep, calming breath, she continued. “The Healers tell me that, if Miss Granger applies herself to learning and using their techniques they will teach her, she should be able to reliably sustain the control exhibited by an eight or nine-year old child.”

“In other words, she would only have accidents when under severe emotional or physical duress.” Severus murmured.

“Precisely. When she does have accidents, however, there is a far greater potential for damage than there is with a younger child. Because she will never be able to fully control her magic, I am afraid that the Ministry has decided that she cannot return to the Muggle world.” There was a moment of silence before the Sickle dropped and people began to gasp in horror and outrage.

“But her parents…” Pomona began.

“Have already been Obliviated.” Minerva suppressed the rage that threatened to overwhelm her. “Miss Granger has not been told this yet, as the Healers flatly refuse to allow anyone from the Ministry within a mile of the clinic. Healer Llewellyn is already drafting a complaint to the I.C.W.”

“Just what, exactly, does the Ministry intend to do with Miss Granger?” Rolanda Hooch asked. “They must have some sort of plan, if they’ve cut off her support in the Muggle world….”

“You are giving them far too much credit.” Minerva glowered. “As it happens, they don’t have a plan. Fortunately for Miss Granger, I do. I am going to bring her here and she is going to get a
proper education.”

“Are you mad?” Severus was wearing his finest sneer. “How do you expect to educate the girl if she cannot use a wand?”

“Tell me this, Severus, how much ‘foolish wand waving’ occurs in your class?” Minerva pinned him with an icy stare. He opened his mouth, then closed it again, looking thoughtful.

“And you, Septima? How often do students use their wands in your class?”

“Not at all. Not until after they’ve sat their O.W.L.’s at any rate.” Minerva saw a smile begin to tug at the corners of the other woman’s mouth. “So that’s your game, is it?”

“Oh!” Filius’ eyes widened in understanding. “That’s brilliant!”

“I’m sorry…” Pomona looked rather sheepish. “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“I intend to remove Miss Granger from all classes that rely solely on wand-work—that is, Transfiguration, Charms, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. There is nothing wrong with her mind or body, so she should have no difficulty managing in her other classes. As she gets older, we will have to determine what she is, and is not, capable of doing, of course, but for now, I see no reason to keep her out of Astronomy, History, Potions, or Herbology.”

“What about starting her on Arithmancy?” Septima asked, leaning forward, eagerly. “I spend the first two years focusing on mathematics—it’s the same stuff Muggle kids learn in primary and secondary school, so she should have no trouble with it.”

“And Runes!” Bertram also looked intrigued at the possibilities. “You don’t need a wand for beginning Runes….”

“Those are excellent ideas.” Minerva smiled, rather ashamed she hadn’t thought of them herself. “When Miss Granger returns, I will discuss her options with her and see where her interests lie. I should also like to add that the Healers theorize that the control techniques they will be teaching Miss Granger will, perhaps, enable her to start working on wandless casting a bit earlier than the norm.”

“When will Miss Granger be rejoining us?” Severus asked.

“The clinic has a temporal compression field.” Minerva explained. “They are putting her in there with a Mind Healer and some tutors tonight and they expect she will be in there for about a week of our time. I will let you know if that estimate changes.”

“Wait…” Aurora Sinistra’s eyes were narrowed. “A private clinic in Wales, a temporal chamber… Minerva, who is paying for all this? Come to that, who is going to pay Miss Granger’s tuition?”

“Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy are paying all Miss Granger’s medical expenses.” Minerva still wasn’t sure whether that news made her want to laugh or hex something. “This year’s tuition has already been paid and Hogwarts has a fund set aside for the care and maintenance of orphans. I have filed papers to make Miss Granger a ward of the school. If no more suitable arrangements can be made, she will spend her summers here.” This was met with nods and murmurs of approval.

“What do you plan to tell the students?” Filius asked.

“I will make an announcement at breakfast tomorrow. Unfortunately, I will have to tell them most of what I’ve told you. I spoke to Barnabas Cuffee just before I came here and he’s managed to get his
hands on almost the entire story. I am sure we will all be front-page news tomorrow.”

“Wonderful.” Pomona sighed. “That’s just what we need.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

As one issue is resolved, several more come to light.

Chapter Notes

Just a note to avoid confusion - from now on, I will be posting new chapters on Saturday.

NARCISSA

The three Malfoys made their way through the Ministry silently, doing their best not to draw attention to themselves. Even so, Narcissa saw the venomous looks that were cast in their direction and one witch actually spit at them as they passed. Draco opened his mouth to say something, but Narcissa squeezed his arm in warning and he shut it again.

They made it to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement without further incident and stopped just outside the doors to Amelia Bones’ office.

“Remember, Draco.” Narcissa murmured in her son’s ear. “You are not to speak unless it is to answer a question. You are to answer all questions truthfully. You are to be respectful and you are not to make derogatory comments about Miss Granger—or anyone else, for that matter.”

“I still don’t understand.” Draco was in a fine sulk. “Why are we even doing this?”

“We are doing this because your mother and I want to keep you out of Azkaban!” Lucius hissed. “if you are tried before the Wizengamot, you will be found guilty and that is the only punishment that they will be allowed to hand down. The only way to keep you out of prison is for you to plead guilty to the charges Madam Bones lays against you and accept whatever punishment she sees fit to administer.”

“The Wizengamot will never convict me.” Narcissa despaired at the confidence in her son’s voice. “I’m a pure-blood.”

“You little fool!” She shook him rather more roughly than she’d intended. “You still do not understand what you’ve done, do you?” She paused to draw breath, but Lucius intervened before she could say anything more.

“Under other circumstances, there are some members of the Wizengamot who might take your blood status into consideration. However, you broke the law in front of literally hundreds of witnesses, many of whom are the children and grandchildren of those same members.”

“Besides,” Narcissa added, tartly “as you are still a child, this is not your decision to make. Your father and I have determined that this is the best course of action and you will obey us. Is that
clear?" There must have been something in her expression that frightened Draco, for he nodded quickly. Just then, the door opened and they were beckoned into the office of the Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Amelia Bones was the soul of efficient courtesy and they were soon seated around the table with tea. Narcissa tried to read her friend’s expression, but the Director kept her face carefully neutral.

“Let us begin.” She said, taking her own seat. “After viewing the memories of several witnesses and interviewing everyone who was in the Great Hall at the time of the incident, I have no choice but to conclude that Draco Lucius Malfoy deliberately took and broke Hermione Jean Granger’s wand. This attack was unwarranted and unprovoked.” Draco opened his mouth, but Narcissa—whose hand was still on his arm—gave him a warning squeeze. “As Miss Granger is underage, this constitutes either a Class One or Class Two felony.” Amelia sat back and eyed Draco speculatively. “Tell me, Mr. Malfoy, do you know the difference?” Draco seemed rather taken aback by the question.

“Er…yes. A crime is classified as a Class One felony if the criminal deliberately causes death or permanent injury.” He stammered. “It’s a Class Two felony if death or permanent injury occurred, but they were neither intended, nor could they be reasonably anticipated.”

“That is correct.” Amelia replied, making a note on a piece of parchment.

“Miss Granger’s injuries are permanent, then?” Lucius asked, looking grave. Amelia nodded and, for a moment, looked both sad and angry.

“She will never be able to fully control her magic.” She said. “While the Healers believe she may be able to do some wandless magic when she gets older, she will never be able to use a wand.” Draco snickered quietly and Narcissa squeezed his arm yet again, using her fingernails this time to make her point. Amelia frowned at him before continuing. “She will be released from the clinic this weekend and will return to Hogwarts…”

“Hogwarts?” Draco burst out, snatching his arm out of his mother’s grip. “But she’s a squib….”

“Draco, be silent!” Lucius snapped. “Pardon the interruption, Madam Bones. I just want to be clear on this - the Healers are certain that there is no chance she will recover? Even if it takes years for her to do so?”

“I’m afraid they are.” Narcissa knew that Amelia had a niece the same age as Draco and Hermione Granger. She suspected that Amelia was wondering what she’d do if something like that ever happened to Susan. “Unfortunately, Miss Granger’s lack of control means that it is not possible for her to return to the Muggle world, except for brief visits. Minerva McGonagall has taken her on as a ward of Hogwarts.” Narcissa gasped. They hadn’t heard about that.

There was a moment of silence as this sank in, then Amelia cleared her throat and resumed her businesslike manner.

“Before I can determine the exact nature of the charges, there are some question I must ask”

“Of course.” Lucius nodded.

“What sort of education did Draco have, prior to beginning at Hogwarts?”

“He has had tutors since he was four.” Narcissa answered, promptly. “In addition to the basics, he was given instruction in etiquette and culture, law, government, and estate management.” Amelia nodded, absently, as she made another note.
“Who was his tutor for matters related to the law?” she asked. Narcissa could see where this was headed and desperately wanted to lie. However, she knew Amelia well enough to know that doing so would be a very bad idea.

“Armand Fortescue.” Lucius said. From his face, it was clear that he knew what was coming.

“Ah.” Amelia made yet another note, then sat back in her chair. “I will speak to Master Fortes at the earliest opportunity, but I think it is safe to say that Draco’s education in legal matters was quite… thorough, wasn’t it? He had no difficulty answering my question just now and that is a rather esoteric piece of legal knowledge.”

“Indeed.” Lucius’ face twisted in a scowl before he seemed to come to a decision. “Madam Bones, I see no need to waste your time dancing around the obvious. We all know that Draco knew what would happen when he snapped Miss Granger’s wand and that he knew—or should have known—that, by doing so, he was breaking the law. May I assume you intend to charge him with a Class One felony?”

“I do.” Amelia nodded. “I wish it could be otherwise, but….” Her voice trailed off helplessly.

“Am I correct in saying that a Class One felony carries a minimum sentence of twenty years in Azkaban?”

“It does.” Narcissa felt her breath catch in her throat.

“But Draco is a child!” She whispered. “Surely you know that he wouldn’t survive….” In the two hundred plus years that the wizarding prison had been in existence, only one person under the age of seventeen had ever been sent there—a fourteen year old boy convicted of poisoning his parents. The Dementor’s power had reacted with his unstable core in unexpected ways and he had died within a week of his arrival at the prison.

“I know.” Amelia sighed, then leaned forward. “That is why I have a proposition for you. It will keep Draco out of Azkaban, but will—I believe—satisfy the demands of justice.”

“What is it?” There was a slight tremor in Lucius’ voice.

“I will charge Draco with First Class attempted murder and assault with intention to harm a child. You will accept those charges on his behalf and enter a plea of guilty. That will eliminate the need for a trial before the Wizengamot and I will be able to administer punishment directly. As I’m sure you’re aware, I am allowed to take his youth into consideration—something that the Wizengamot cannot and will not do.” Narcissa nodded. She and Lucius had discussed this already and had hoped for just such a proposal.

“And what would that punishment be?” Lucius asked.

“Draco’s wand will have to be snapped and some monetary compensation will need to be paid to Miss Granger.” Amelia said, bluntly. “I am willing to negotiate on the amount, provided it is reasonable, but I will not negotiate on the issue of the wand.” Narcissa closed her eyes briefly. When she opened them, she saw that her son was staring at the Director with his mouth open. She took the opportunity to cast a non-verbal Silencing charm on him before he could make matters even worse for himself.

“That is…acceptable.” Lucius said, sounding pained. Draco turned to stare at him in horror. “And there will be no need to dicker over the amount of compensation. My wife and I intend to speak to Headmistress McGonagall about sponsoring Miss Granger.” Amelia’s eyebrows lifted slightly, but
“Very well.” She said. “I will have the paperwork ready for you to sign in one hour. I assume you would like the…er…procedure to be performed at the Manor?”

“That would be best, thank you.” Narcissa had to speak around the lump in her throat.

“I will tell Mafalda Hopkirk to make the necessary preparations and she can return to the Manor with you, once the paperwork is signed.

**

AMELIA

“All right, people.” Amelia Bones sighed. “Settle down.” She was sitting at the head of a conference table deep in the heart of the Department of Mysteries. Every seat at the table was taken up by a member of the team that had been created to investigate “the Hogwarts problem.” There were several guests in attendance as well, including Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, and Dirk Cresswell, Head of the Goblin Liaison office.

“Let me start by bringing everyone up to speed on what, exactly, has happened in the last few days. I spoke with the Malfoys on Friday morning. Draco was charged with attempted murder and assault with intention to harm a minor. His parents entered a guilty plea on his behalf and I issued summary judgement. His wand was snapped and the Malfoys have agreed to financially compensate Hermione Granger, so that’s an end to that. Moving on. As you all know, the team sent to Hogwarts to deal with the wand disaster discovered a number of issues. I want to start with a report on the wards. Bartlett?” The Unspeakable in charge of the ward team gave a crisp nod.

“We’ve completed our survey and Mr. Smith’s initial findings were correct. The wards around the school have not received proper maintenance in decades and they were deliberately altered. We have determined that all the changes were all made after Albus Dumbledore became Headmaster in 1953, so we must conclude that he is the one responsible. We can only speculate as to the reasons behind those changes.”

“Could anyone else have made those alterations?” Amelia asked. Bartlett shook her head.

“No, ma’am. Hogwarts wards are tied to the Headmaster, just as the wards on your estate are tied to you.”

“Right.” Amelia sighed. “Go on.”

“To be frank, the damage is so extensive that it will be easier, and less expensive, to tear the old wards down and erect new ones. Deputy--excuse me, Headmistress—McGonagall has requested that we do what we can to keep the children safe now and wait until they are gone for the holidays to do the full replacement.” Amelia nodded.

“What alterations were made, exactly?” Kingsley Shackleton asked. He had quill in hand and was taking notes. Bartlett rolled her eyes.

“Pretty much the only things that weren’t touched were the Muggle repelling charms. Even the mail wards were tampered with!” Amelia felt her eyebrows rise and saw similar looks of surprise around the table.

“Get a complete list to Shackleton as soon as possible.” She instructed. “Anything else?”
“That’s all for now.” Bartlett said.

“Good. Moving on. After I received Mr. Smith’s initial report concerning the wards and my people found a bloody mountain troll inside the school, I assigned several Aurors to do a thorough inspection of the castle and grounds to ensure that there aren’t any other nasty surprises. Tonks?”

The youngest person in the room blushed and her hair flashed bright red before returning to its usual bubble-gum pink.

“Yes, ma’am.” She stammered. “The team has settled into Hogwarts and our interviews of the students and staff are complete. Fortunately, they are all who they claim to be and we found no signs that anyone else was possessed. Our search of the castle is ongoing, but we’ve already identified several areas of concern. First, our scans show that there is a large chamber underneath the Black Lake, but we’ve yet to find an entrance. Some of the older blokes are suggesting that it’s the Chamber of Secrets.” Amelia scoffed, then thought better of it.

“Has anyone asked the Merpeople about it?” She asked. Tonks blinked a few times.

“Er…no, ma’am. Does anyone even speak Mermish anymore?”

“Dumbledore does.” Shacklebolt rumbled.

“I’d prefer not to involve him unless we have no other choice.” Amelia said.

“I may be able to help.” Amelia turned to peer at Barty Crouch. “I’m sure the I.C.W. can put us in touch with someone.”

“That will work.” Amelia nodded. “Thank you. Go on, Tonks.”

“Right. Next, there’s a whacking great Acromantula nest in the Forbidden Forest. Though I’ve been assured that they’ve never set…er…feet on school grounds, we could see some of the buggers from the Quidditch Pitch. That’s way too close for my level of comfort.”

“Agreed.” Amelia shuddered.

“I am coordinating with the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures and they’re making plans to deal with the nest, but Hagrid is pretty upset.”

“I….don’t want to know.” Amelia said. “Next?”

“There’s a room on the seventh floor that the elves call “The Come and Go” Room or the Room of Requirements. It’s…well….Smith?”

“We have something similar downstairs.” Mr. Smith from the Department of Mysteries said. “The room is enchanted to be whatever the person entering the room desires. For instance, if you want a cozy living room, you’ll open the door and find a cozy living room. However, if Shacklebolt comes along five minutes after you leave and wants a Quidditch pitch, the room will become a Quidditch pitch complete with bleachers and regulation goal hoops.”

“It’s not the room itself that’s the problem.” Tonks said. “It’s that there’s something Dark in the room and we can’t figure out hoe to find the bloody thing!” Amelia nodded in understanding. She’d seen the DoM’s version of the Room of Requirements and knew that the possibilities were almost limitless and, unless they hit on exactly the right request, they’d never find what they were looking for.

“Keep working on it. Anything else?” Tonks sighed.
“It’s Dumbledore’s office and living quarters, ma’am. I think I’d better let Shacklebolt tell you about that bit.” Amelia suppressed a groan and nodded.

“Very well. I suppose that brings us neatly to Dumbledore. As you all probably know by now, the Board of Governors has ‘suspended’ Albus Dumbledore; and, by suspended, I mean that they’ve sacked him and are just being too polite to say so for now. I’ve opened an investigation into his activities at Hogwarts and that’s led to some…interesting developments. I’ve put Auror Shacklebolt in charge of the file and asked him to give us a report.” Shacklebolt nodded and unrolled a parchment.

“The investigation is currently focusing on three specific areas of activity.” He said. “First, we are looking into any criminal activity that relates to the school, rather than to any individuals. These include the alterations made to the wards, and to other aspects of the castle and grounds, and to Dumbledore’s handling of Hogwarts’ financial resources.”

“Other than the wards, what other changes did Dumbledore make?” Tonks asked.

“He blocked off access to certain sections of the castle and placed several doors under the Fidelius charm.” Kingsley explained. “We’re going to need a cursebreaking team from Gringotts to dismantle the charm, but that can wait until this summer. Dumbledore also created a number of so-called ‘secret passages’ that run between the school and various places outside of the wards. One leads to the basement of Honeyduke’s and one leads to the Shrieking Shack in Hogsmeade. There are several others, but they’ve either flooded or been blocked off by rockfalls, so we don’t know where they lead yet.”

“Wait…” Barty Crouch was frowning. “while I agree that none of those things are particularly…beneficial to the school, it doesn’t sound as if Dumbledore committed any crimes by making those alterations.” Kingsley nodded in agreement.

“While the alterations to the wards and other physical elements of the castle are not, in and of themselves, illegal, there is evidence to suggest that they were made with the intent of permitting or assisting illegal activities to be committed on school grounds.”

“Like allowing a possessed teacher to have close, regular contact with defenseless children.” Amelia said. Kingsley nodded.

“Among other things, yes. I’ve also had several meetings with the Gringotts Account Manager in charge of the Hogwarts Trust. While our accountants have only begun going over the ledgers, it appears that Dumbledore has made regular withdrawals from the Trust for decades, but there is no indication that the money was used on the school. I’ve spoken to Madam Bletchley in Legal and she assures me that she can make a good case for theft. I’ll keep you posted on that. Our second area of investigation concerns this.” From his pocket, Kingsley withdrew a small, silver device. “We found it in Dumbledore’s office, along with several others like it.”

“What is it?” Rufus Scrimgeour looked puzzled. “Nothing wrong with that. Healers use them all the time.

“It’s a monitoring device.” Shacklebolt frowned. “It contains blood and hair from one Harry James Potter and that blood and hair was not given freely…or recently.” There were gasps and disturbed looks around the room. “The Unspeakables have evaluated the device and determined that the hair and blood were taken after Voldemort tried to kill Potter back in ’81. The best we can tell, it’s designed to keep track of Potter’s general physical health…”

“So?” Rufus Scrimgeour looked puzzled. “Nothing wrong with that. Healers use them all the time.
“To the best of my knowledge, Albus Dumbledore is not a certified Healer.” Amelia said, dryly.
“And he is certainly not Harry Potter’s father.”

“No, actually, he’s not.” Shacklebolt sighed. “Mr. Potter was taken to Gringotts last weekend to meet with his family’s account manager. He was granted access to the Potter vaults and found a copy of his parents’ wills. Albus Dumbledore’s name is not on the list of approved Guardians.” Amelia sucked in a sharp breath. She recalled the Wizengamot meeting where Dumbledore had informed everyone that he had placed Harry Potter with Muggles. There had been protest, of course, but Dumbledore had asserted his rights, as the boy’s Guardian, to keep him with his family and to keep his location secret.

“Who is on that list?” She asked. Shacklebolt’s eyes burned with fury.

“Frank and Alice Longbottom, Sirius Black…” he paused as Rufus Scrimgeour snorted in disgust “…Minerva McGonagall, Horace Slughorn, Esme and Todrick Ollivander, Marlene McKinnon, and…..me.”

“Kingsley, I’m sorry.” Amelia said, softly. James Potter had been Shacklebolt’s junior partner in the Aurors, before he’d gone into hiding, and Amelia knew that the two men had enjoyed a close friendship. Shacklebolt gave a terse nod.

“While the goblins verified the wills as being authentic, Madam Bletchley informed me that the Wizengamot will only recognize the official Ministry copies of the wills, which Dumbledore had sealed in November of 1981.”

“Wait…can they do that?” Toks frowned. “If the goblins have authenticated…”

“Technically, the Wizengamot does not have the right to ignore one copy of the will in favor of another, when both are deemed authentic, but they have a rather unfortunate history of doing just that.” Amelia said. “Fortunately, as Director of the DMLE, I have the right to petition the Wizengamot to have the official Ministry copies of the Potters’ wills unsealed.”

“Dumbledore won’t like that.” Barty Crouch warned. Amelia shrugged.

“What objection can he possibly raise that doesn’t force him to incriminate himself?” She asked. “Harry Potter is at Hogwarts now, so the only Death Eaters who have access to him are the ones that Dumbledore himself allowed into the castle.” Barty thought about this for a moment, then nodded. “Besides, after those articles in the Daily Prophet about what we found on the third floor corridor, do you really think he’ll still be Chief Warlock by the time the next meeting begins?” Heads around the table shook in unison. “Please continue with your report, Auror Shacklebolt.”

“Right.” Kingsley cleared his throat. “Putting aside whether or not he had the legal authority to do
so, Dumbledore has been acting as Harry Potter’s official Guardian since November of 1981. We examined his actions as Mr. Potter’s Guardian and that led us to look into his Guardianship of several others. While our investigation is nowhere near complete, we have evidence to suggest that, in all cases, he has been, at best, neglectful, and, at worst, he has deliberately manipulated the affairs of his charges to suit his own ends rather than the best interests of the child. In Mr. Potter’s case, I am afraid I must lean towards the latter conclusion.

“The Potters’ wills provide for a monthly sum of 1,000 Galleons to be paid to Harry’s Guardian for his upkeep. The goblins tell me that this sum has been transferred to Dumbledore’s vault on the first of every month, like clockwork, since December of 1981. I spoke with Petunia Dursley, Mr. Potter’s Muggle Aunt, and have ascertained that she never saw a Knut of that stipend and that Dumbledore never visited the child, nor did he purchase anything for the child’s use.”

“Bastard.” Tonks muttered. Amelia heard several murmurs of agreement.

“As I said, the investigation into Dumbledore’s guardianship issues is ongoing. Returning to this device for a moment…” Kingsley prodded the item in question “the other point of note is that it clearly shows that very strong magic—both Light and Dark—was worked on Mr. Potter around the same time as this device was created. We believe, therefore, that Dumbledore created it immediately after James and Lily were killed, but before he brought Harry to his aunt and uncle’s house.”

“So, the Dark magic would be the Killing Curse.” Amelia mused. “And the Light magic would be…what? Some spell that Dumbledore cast?” Kingsley shook his head.

“Not likely. It’s too…pure. Even if you ignore all the things Dumbledore has been up to lately, he cast the Killing Curse during the war with Grindelwald. His magic is permanently tainted because of that. Croaker thinks that the Light magic is what saved Harry from You-Know-Who in 1981.”

“What….you mean he killed You-Know-Who in a burst of accidental magic?” Scrimgeour looked dubious.

“Of course not!” Amelia snapped. “He means that Lily and James Potter did something to protect their son.” Kingsley nodded.

“We’ll probably never know exactly what happened, but Croaker thinks it’s far more likely that Lily and James were responsible for Voldemort’s defeat, not Harry.”

“But…” Amelia rolled her eyes at Sturgis Podmore’s horrified expression. Sturgis was an excellent Auror, but he was rather prone to swallowing whatever swill the Daily Prophet decided to feed its loyal readers. Clearly, he actually believed that a 15 month baby had defeated a fully grown wizard without any assistance. She gestured at Kingsley to continue.

“As Mr. Potter has been living in the Muggle world, he has never been tended to by a Healer to address any issues that the Dark magic may have caused. Headmistress McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey are making arrangements for him to have a complete exam at St. Mungo’s and there will be an Unspeakable on hand in case of any…unforeseen issues. Once that’s complete, we’ll have a much better idea of what we’re dealing with…and what Albus Dumbledore knew or didn’t know about any of it.

“In the meantime, I obtained an interview with the Potter’s Account Manager at Gringotts and discovered that, in addition to the Guardian stipend, Dumbledore has been making regular withdrawals from the Potter account and that he refused to alter the wards around Mr. Potter’s Muggle residence to allow access to Gringotts owls. When Mr. Potter finally came to the bank on his eleventh birthday, he was not taken to see his Account Manager and his key was in Hagrid’s
possession.” This elicited another angry murmur.

“Mr. Cresswell and I are working with the goblins to determine what funds were taken, what they were used for, and whether Dumbledore has taken such….liberties with any of his other charges.”

“You said there are more of those…things?” Scrimgeour glared at the monitor as if it was personally responsible for any and all harm done to the hero of the wizarding world.

“Yes.” Kingsley nodded. “Most are tied to Dumbledore’s wards, but two are tied to people for whom he is most certainly not legally responsible. We found one keyed to Neville Longbottom and one keyed to Ginevra Weasley. There are several indications that both devices were made around the same time as the one keyed to Mr. Potter. I have not had the opportunity to interview the Weasleys yet, but Madam Longbottom assures me that neither she, nor her son or daughter-in-law, gave Dumbledore permission to use Neville’s hair and blood. She asked that we destroy the device. We did so, once we had copies of the readings.”

Amelia was not the only one to groan. Kingsley went on, relentless.

“Meanwhile, our third area of investigation also concerns Mr. Potter, although it does not focus directly on him.” He withdrew a thick, bound scroll from an inner pocket of his robes and handed it to Amelia. “As you know, Dumbledore was out of the country when the Board voted to suspend him. Minerva McGonagall asked the Hogwarts elves to pack up his possessions. When we began searching his office, we discovered that the House elves took the instruction quite seriously – they packed items that belonged to Albus Dumbledore and left everything else behind.”

“I take it that there are items that did not belong to him?” Amelia desperately wanted a headache potion, but she’d already had two today.

“Yes, ma’am. Many are entailed to the school, of course, but we found quite a few books and enchanted objects that are entailed to private estates. As you know, Dumbledore is famous for his private library—at least a third of the books in that library bear the Potter coat-of-arms.”

“Wonderful” Amelia sighed. “So, on top of everything else, he’s a kleptomaniac.”

“So it would seem. That…” Kingsley indicated the scroll “is a list of everything we found in his office that does not belong to the school. Minerva McGonagall has a copy, in case he starts complaining.”

“Very well.” Amelia sighed. “It is clear that we will be drawing up a list of charges against Albus Dumbledore, but I want to hold off on that until Shacklebolt’s investigation is complete. Meanwhile, if anyone has any relevant information or…yes, Alastor?”

“You should know that I had a message from Albus this morning.” Amelia thought that the old Auror might be scowling, though with the number of scars on his face, it was difficult to tell. “He heard that I’m heading to Hogwarts and wants to get together ‘for old time’s sake.’”

“Is this going to be a problem, Moody?” Amelia asked, sharply. She was well aware that Albus Dumbledore was one of the few people Alastor “Mad Eye” Moody gave deference to and she did not like the thought that the old bastard was trying to corrupt one of her people. Fortunately, Moody had a thoughtful look on his face, which meant that he wasn’t about to lie to her.

“If you’d asked me than twenty minutes ago? Truthfully, it might have been an issue, but now….?” He shrugged. “I don’t know what Albus has been up to, but I know he isn’t working on the side of the angels anymore.”
“Good.” Amelia nodded. “I’d like you to talk with Kingsley…give him your perspective on things.” Alastor nodded.

“Right. Moving on. Our colleagues in the DoM have been studying the spirit fragment that was possessing Quirrimum Quirrell and they have come to the conclusion that it is but one of several pieces of Voldemort’s…” She growled as some of the younger Aurors squeaked. “Voldemort’s soul. Croaker tells me that they have records of dark witches and wizards deliberately tearing off pieces of their souls and putting them in objects in order to obtain a semblance of immortality. His best guess is that the piece we got was what was left in Voldemort’s body after he created those objects. When that body was destroyed in 1981, the soul fragment was freed. It fled the country and, somehow, came in contact with Quirrell. What that spirit wanted at Hogwarts is beyond me…” She paused, seeing Shacklebolt’s pained expression. “Yes?”

“Last item on the list.” He said, pointing to the scroll. Intrigued, Amelia unrolled it, her eyes widening at just how many things were on it. She finally found the end of the list and stared at the last entry. Philosopher’s Stone belonging to Nicolas Flamel.

“I trust that this has been returned to its rightful owner?” she said, her voice catching slightly.

“It has.” Shacklebolt nodded. “He was most put out that it had been taken in the first place.” Amelia had to work to unclench her jaw.

“Right. Anyway, another reason I do not wish to bring charges against Dumbledore yet is because I suspect he knows far more about Voldemort’s survival than he’s told anyone.” Moody snorted, then started to snicker.

“Oh, clever girl.” He muttered. Amelia ignored him.

“Right. Moving on. Dirk? Barty? Is there anything you’d like to add?” All heads turned to the “visitors.” Dirk shook his head, but Barty Crouch cleared his throat for attention.

“I have had several meetings with representatives from the I.C.W. about the unsanctioned obliviation of the Granger girl’s muggle parents. In the course of those conversations, I discovered something that is, I believe, relevant to this discussion. As you all know, Albus Dumbledore is the Supreme Mugwump of the I.C.W., but does anyone know what he actually does for them?” There was silence as the people seated around the table looked at one another in confusion. “The Supreme Mugwump is responsible for leading the I.C.W.’s annual academic conference. That’s it. Despite what Albus Dumbledore has said, or strongly implied, he has no power or influence within the I.C.W. beyond that very specific role.”

“Wait…” Amelia frowned. “The Wizengamot hasn’t sent a delegate to the I.C.W. since….I don’t know when, because Dumbledore said…..” Her voice trailed off as the implications of what Barty had said dawned on her. “Oh shit.”

“Indeed.” Barty nodded. “My contacts at the I.C.W. were kind enough to provide me with a record of all decisions made in the last fifty years. My people are going through it now and I’ll be able to give you a more accurate idea of what we’re dealing with within a month.”

Amelia groaned again.
Chapter Summary

Narcissa gets a new perspective while Minerva begins to make changes.

NARCISSA

Her entire world had shattered. Looking at Lucius, she could see that he felt the same way. With an off-hand comment, a twelve-year old girl had somehow managed to turn everything they knew—or thought they knew—on its head.

They had gone to Hogwarts to extend an offer of sponsorship to Miss Granger. Narcissa, with some input from Minerva McGonagall, had been forced to patiently explain what the custom of sponsorship entailed and why it was to Hermione’s benefit to accept the offer. After the papers had been signed, and as she was about to return to class, Hermione had turned to them with a small, sad smile.

“I do wish they taught this sort of thing at Hogwarts.” She said.

“Sponsorship is a common practice among wizards.” Narcissa remembered the frown on Lucius’ face. “Surely they discussed it during your Muggle-born orientation class.”

“What class? There’s a class?” Hermione looked towards Professor McGonagall, accusation and hope warring in her face.

That was when it had all come out. Prior to her arrival at Hogwarts, Miss Granger had received no information about the Wizarding world, save for some Ministry pamphlets and the books she’d acquired on her first trip to Diagon Alley. Further discussions with Minerva and the Ministry’s Muggle Liaison office revealed that there hadn’t been a Muggle-born Orientation class held at either Hogwarts or the Ministry in at least thirty five years.

As children of pure-blood families, both Lucius and Narcissa had been raised to cherish the culture and traditions that British witches and wizards had developed over the course of their two-thousand-plus year history. They’d been told that Muggle-born witches and wizards were informed of that rich history, that they were taught all the traditions. Therefore, it had galled and infuriated them to see those not born in the magical world doing everything in their power to make magical Britain more “modern” and “civilized.” To the descendants of families whose lineage could be traced back through dozens, if not hundreds of generations, this disrespect could not be tolerated. Both had gladly participated in the Blood war, convinced that it was the only way to preserve their way of life.

But there was a difference between knowing about a culture and choosing to ignore or revile it, and not knowing and understanding the context or significance of the practices one was seeing. Thanks to a combination of miscommunication, prejudice, laziness, and parsimony on the part of the British Ministry of Magic and Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Muggle-born witches and wizards were thrown into the magical world, with little more than some poorly written pamphlets to serve as guide, and expected to fend for themselves. What was worse, Minerva had readily admitted that, under Albus Dumbledore’s leadership, the school had grown quite lax about enforcing social and cultural standards.
Now, both Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy were being confronted with the reality that the Muggle-borns they’d hated and fought against weren’t throwing away wizarding culture, they were thrust into a vacuum and were trying to fill it with what they knew.

“We need to fix this, Lucius.” Narcissa said, quietly.

“We will.” He replied.

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MINERVA

“Well? What have you to say for yourselves?”

“It was Granger, ma’am! She attacked us!” Minerva sighed. She had known that something like this would happen, eventually, she just hadn’t thought it would happen so soon…or that it would be the result of violence.

Adelia Urqhart and Florinda Davies were cousins. Miss Urqhart’s parents had died during the war and the two girls had been raised together. Upon arriving at Hogwarts, they had maintained a close relationship, despite the fact that Miss Urqhart was a Slytherin and Miss Davies was in Ravenclaw. Davies was the dominant member of the duo and, unfortunately, Urqhart was a born follower and seemed to be unable to resist her cousin’s entreaties or threats. Now in their fifth year, the pair had a well-earned reputation as bullies.

On reflection, Minerva was rather glad that things had come to a head sooner than expected. The entire school had been on edge for the past month and she hoped that this incident might help to relieve some tension. It also served as an excellent opportunity for her to show both the pupils and the staff that she was not Albus Dumbledore.

“Miss Granger had a burst of accidental magic which resulted in the flying debris that caused your injuries.” She said. “That is hardly the same thing. Perhaps I should rephrase my question—What did you do to provoke that burst of accidental magic….and before you think about lying to me, remember that Miss Granger needed to go to the hospital wing for injuries that were not caused by the debris. Also, there is a portrait in the Arithmancy classroom that sees and hears everything that goes on in there. I have not spoken to that portrait yet, but I can and will if I feel that it is the only way to get at the truth. If that portrait’s story does not match yours, you will spend the next month of Sundays in detention!” Urqhart and Davies gave each other nervous glances.

“It was an experiment, ma’am.” Davies finally said, glancing towards her Head of House. Obviously, she thought to appeal to Filius’ ever-present academic curiosity. Minerva was proud to see that the diminutive Charms professor remained totally unmoved. Looking disappointed, Davies returned her attention to the Headmistress. “People have been talking, you see….and no one is really quite sure how….er….emotional Granger can get, before she….y’know….” She made a gesture that Minerva assumed was meant to pantomime an explosion.

“So, you thought to test her limits?” She asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Tell me…” Minerva held Davies’ gaze with her own. “did you ask Miss Granger what her limits were?”

“Uh…no, ma’am.”
“Did you ask her permission to conduct this ‘experiment’ of yours?” Davies shook her head, looking both miserable and defiant. “And what, pray tell, were the results of your experiment?”

“Ma’am?” Urqhart and Davies exchanged confused looks.

“What are Miss Granger’s limits? What, exactly, did you do to make her lose control to the point that she destroyed a classroom and sent you both in the hospital wing with life-threatening injuries?” The girls looked at one another, but neither seemed willing to be the first to speak. Minerva sighed again. “Wands, please.”

“What?” Urqhart squeaked. “You want our wands?”

“You…you’re not going to snap them are you?” For the first time, Davies sounded genuinely frightened. Minerva felt a brief stab of pity for the girl. All the Heads of House had reported that students were still having nightmares about that dreadful incident.

“No, Miss Davies, I am not going to snap your wands. Give them to me, please.” Reluctantly, the girls passed over their wands. One Priori Incantatem later, all the pity in Minerva’s heart was gone.

“Four Stinging Hexes?” She glared at Urqhart, who shrank back in her chair. “Three Slicing Hexes and….I don’t even know what this is!” Filius stepped forward to look at the wisp of fog emanating from the end of Miss Davies’ wand, then hissed.

“I suspect that that is Miss Granger’s limit.” He said. “This, Minerva, is an old spell that used to be quite popular on the dueling circuit. It was banned because its effects too closely mimic those of the Cruciatus curse. While it is not, technically, illegal, I am of the opinion that it should be.”

“I see.” Minerva sat in thought for a moment, holding the wands in her hand and staring thoughtfully at the two students in front of her.

“It’s not fair! Granger shouldn’t even be in Arithmancy, let alone the fifth-year class!” Urqhart burst out. “She shouldn’t even be at Hogwarts! She’s a Squib!”

“I think the rather large hole in the wall of the Arithmancy classroom might beg to differ.” Severus Snape was leaning against the wall, sneering at everyone indiscriminately. Minerva glared at him, but otherwise ignored the interruptions.

“Fifty points from Ravenclaw and fifty points from Slytherin. Both of you will serve detention with Mr. Filch every Saturday afternoon from now until the end of November. Furthermore, I am confiscating your wands. Miss Urqhurt, you can have yours back in three days. Miss Davies, yours will be returned a week from today.”

“What?” Davies and Urqhurt were staring at her, wearing almost identical expressions of shock.

“Wands are a privilege, ladies. If you cannot use them responsibly, you will not be allowed to use them at all.”

“But Professor,” Davies wailed “I have a Charms test tomorrow and I’m scheduled to duel in Defense on Thursday!” Minerva made a mental note to have a word with Alastor Moody. He’d know how best to handle the situation.

“Good!” She had to work to keep herself from snarling. “Perhaps next time, you will think twice about casting hexes at someone who cannot fight back! We are finished here. Please return to your dormitories.” It took a while to convince the jabbering, bleating students that she was serious about keeping their wands, but they eventually left. When they were gone, Filius gingerly sat in the seat
most recently occupied by Miss Urqhart.

“Confiscating wands, Minerva? That seems a bit…harsh.”

“They attacked a first-year student!” Minerva hissed. “Even if Miss Granger was fully in control of her magic and in possession of a wand of her own, there is no way she could have defended herself.”

“Minerva is correct.” Severus said, much to her surprise. “It’s first-years now, but in a few years, it could very well be Muggles.”

“Surely not!” Filius gasped, horrified. Minerva sternly reminded herself that Filius Flitwick was a good man and her friend, and that one did not call one’s friends ‘idiots’ and mean it. Apparently, Severus Snape had no such compunctions.

“Do not be an idiot, Filius!” He snapped. “Magic is power and those with power will always seek to use it against those without!” Filius’ mouth opened and closed several times, before he abruptly stood.

“If you’ll excuse me, Minerva, I need to get back to my office. I’ve some papers to grade and I need some time to…think.” He sadness moved Minerva to the brink of tears. Unlike Severus and herself, he had been raised completely in the Wizarding world. While that provided him with many advantages not available to his half-blood or Muggle-born colleagues, it also gave him a very limited perspective. What was more, he had spent most of his adult life at Hogwarts and was, thus, accustomed to the ways of children, often forgetting that those children would become adults someday.

“I understand.” She nodded. “Before you leave, I must ask that you proceed with your lessons as usual. Do not offer either Miss Davies or Miss Urqhart any special accommodations.” Much as she hated the idea of making him feel any worse, Minerva could not allow Filius’ soft heart to undermine her authority. For a moment, she thought he might protest, but then he nodded and left the room.

“He’s an optimistic fool.” Severus sneered.

“Perhaps.” Minerva shrugged. “But that’s not necessarily a bad thing. Please have a seat. I need to speak with you.”

“Minerva…”

“Severus, sit!” She commanded, pointing to the chair for emphasis. Reluctantly, he crossed the room and threw himself into the seat, looking for all the world like a petulant teenager.

“Well?”

“First, I need to inform you that a deposit of 2,972 Galleons, 23 Sickles, and six Knuts was made into your vault earlier today.” As she had anticipated, this news threw him completely off balance. “All Hogwarts teachers and staff are supposed to receive salary increases after they have completed their third, fifth, tenth, and twentieth years here. Albus…neglected to give anyone those raises. As you know, the DMLE and Gringotts have launched a joint investigation into his financial dealings and they brought this matter to my attention. I have discussed this with the Board of Governors and we decided to make up the difference out of the Hogwarts Trust. Your future wages will include the relevant increases.”

“I….thank you.” He stared at her as if he’d never seen her before in his life. Minerva gave him a curt nod. There was a pause while she chose her next words.
“Severus, I am well aware that you did not take up teaching because you felt called to the profession.” She said at last. “While I am not privy to all the details, of course, I suspect that Albus manipulated you with guilt and or threats in order to persuade you to get himself a Potions master at a bargain price. I can only imagine his reasons for doing so, but that is beside the point. Albus is no longer here.”

“No, he is not.” Severus agreed, looking at her with suspicion. “Is this your way of politely telling me that I am out of a job?”

“Severus, if I were going to sack you, you can be sure that I would not be polite about it!” This elicited a startled chuckle. “What I am going to do is present you with some facts and then offer you some choices. Since we both have a great deal to do tonight, I will ask you to keep your sarcastic comments to a minimum.” He arched an eyebrow, but nodded at her to proceed. Minerva took a moment to gather her thoughts.

“When I took over as Headmistress, I discovered some very disturbing things. Though the Ministry likes to tout Hogwarts as the ‘finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world,’ I have recently learned that we are not even the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the British Isles. We’re ranked third behind the Kylemore School of Sorcery in Ireland and St. George’s Academy in London. We’re ranked sixty-fourth in the world.” Severus gaped at her. “As much as I’d like to blame it all on Albus, his neglect did not create the problem, it only made it worse.”

“Who did create the problem?” Minerva was pleased to see that she had captured Severus’ interest.

“That would be Lorcan Fudge, the several times great-grandfather of our own esteemed Minister of Magic. He was Headmaster from 1828 to 1884.” Minerva saw Severus’ eyes automatically flick towards the wall where the portraits of past Heads had once hung. Since taking over as Headmistress, Minerva had restored them to their original places throughout the castle, where they could interact with the students and staff on a daily basis. “Lorcan has the dubious honor of being the only Headmaster ever to drive the school into bankruptcy.”

“I take it that our Minister inherited his avaricious tendencies from Lorcan?” Minerva nodded. “Indeed. In order to keep the school’s doors open, Lorcan was required to pander to the whims of certain old families who were more interested in the appearance of academic achievement than in the achievement itself. The curriculums for a number of courses were adjusted to cater to those students with the least intellect and talent, but the most money. Courses that were once required were made optional and some subjects were eliminated altogether. By the time Lorcan retired, people were so used to the changes that they just accepted that that was the way things had always been done. Then, along came Phineas Nigellus Black.”

“Ah.” Severus nodded. “I can imagine that matters did not improve under his leadership.”

“They did not. He eliminated all courses that had Muggle equivalents—literature, art, mathematics, languages—and watered the remaining curriculum down to the point that, to this day, Hogwarts graduates are unable to obtain jobs or apprenticeships outside of Britain because they lack the necessary basic skills. Armand Dippett was a dear soul, but rather lazy. I’m fairly certain he had no knowledge of how far Hogwarts had fallen, but Albus certainly knew and did nothing about it. In fact, he went out of his way to maintain the status quo.”

“I…see.” Severus eyed her closely. “What do you intend to do about all this?”

“I have spent the past month asking myself that very question and discussing it with the Board of Governors.” Minerva said. “Before we start adding….or, to be more accurate, reviving courses that
have fallen by the wayside, we need to improve the classes we already have.”

“Ah. So this is a sacking.”

“Do you want it to be?” Minerva asked, rather irritated. “I am not trying to fire you, Severus. I am trying to determine whether you want to be here.”

“I….ah….oh.” For once, Severus Snape seemed to be at a complete loss for words. “Why?” He asked, finally. “Why do you care what I want? We both know that I am….ill-suited for teaching…” Minerva sighed and resisted the urge to run her fingers through her hair. Doing so would have disarranged her neat bun and that would have been the height of unprofessionalism.

“As you know, I have been observing your classes.” She said, finally. She’d warned the staff of her intentions to do this a few days after Albus had been removed from the castle. She’d done so, first as herself, then in her animagus form. The differences in some of those classes had been… enlightening. “While I certainly agree that your…manner could use some improvement, I noticed that you seemed quite comfortable with your N.E.W.T. students.”

“They are not dunderheads.” He said, shrugging. “They want to learn.”

“Severus, I’m going to say something that may come as quite a shock to you. Dunderheads are not born, they are made.” She leaned forward, gazing at him intently. “Tell me, why do you not give lectures or demonstrations to your first-year students?”

After her initial evaluation, she had picked three of his classes—his first-year Gryffindor/Slytherin class, his fourth-year Ravenclaw/Gryffindor class, and this seventh year N.E.W.T. class—to observe in her cat form. Each class met three times a week and she’d spent a week hiding in a cupboard observing. What she’d seen had been bewildering, to say the least.

With his seventh years, Severus was almost…gentle. He patently answered their questions, his criticism—when given—was always constructive and delivered in a manner designed to help the student, rather than humiliate him or her, and there was no sign of his legendary House bias.

With his fourth-years, Severus was strict and highly sarcastic, but reasonably fair. The class was assigned to work on Pepper-Up potion which, Minerva knew, was relatively easy, but required the brewer to work with some unusual ingredients. Severus had devoted one class to a discussion of those ingredients and another to a practical demonstration of how to handle and prepare them.

She had been shocked and appalled when Severus had begun the first-year class by pointing to a recipe on the blackboard and telling them to get started. There had been no discussion of ingredients or preparation techniques…nothing! Minerva had tried to give him the benefit of the doubt, supposing that the lectures had occurred in previous classes, but the next two classes followed exactly the same pattern. Severus put the recipe on the board, told the students to brew it, then hovered over them, heaping extravagant praise on some (the Slytherins) and eviscerating others (the Gryffindors). He had also given and taken points for truly ridiculous reasons. After that, Minerva had sat in on the first-year Hufflepuff/Ravenclaw class to see if Severus’ house bias was his only problem, but she soon discovered that he truly did not give lectures to those who needed them most.

“They do not need lectures and demonstrations. They need practice!” Minerva stared at him, open-mouthed.

“Of course they need lectures and demonstrations, Severus! Children are not born knowing how to brew potions!”
“I know that.” Severus sounded as if he was talking to a small child. “But you and I both know that parents teach their children the basics long before they get to Hogwarts.” Minerva desperately wanted to bang her head on the desk, but restrained herself.

“Severus,” she said, slowly “just how much experience with brewing do you think the average eleven year old has?” He shrugged.

“My mother had me brewing basic salves by the time I was nine.” Minerva pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Not every child has a Potions Mistress for a mother—yes, I know she never actually got her Mastery, but we both know she was a Potions Mistress in all but name!”

“All right,” he said, looking rather uncomfortable. “I see your point, but…”

“Neville Longbottom,” She said.

“What about him?”

“I happen to know Augusta quite well. We went to school together. She barely scraped an ‘A’ on her Potions O.W.L. and has not bothered to even look at a cauldron since. I can promise you that she hasn’t taught her grandson a bloody thing about potions!”

“Yes, well…” Severus was squirming now.

“He is not the only child from a magical home to be raised in similar circumstances, I am sure. What is more, you have children in your class who were not raised in magical homes. Hermione Granger, Dean Thomas, and Harry Potter are all….”

“Potter! Of course you would defend him…” Minerva blinked in shock. The reasonable, if somewhat prickly, man she had been talking to had disappeared to be replaced by the vindictive little boy who still carried a grudge from his school days. Her eyes narrowed.

“Severus, what exactly has Harry Potter done to antagonize you?” She held up a hand before he could respond. “Bear in mind, I said Harry Potter, not James.”

“He’s just like his father….swanning about the castle as if he owns it….” Minerva groaned loudly, which was enough to interrupt Severus’ rant.

“Severus Snape! You are either blinded by your own prejudice or you are actually blind.” She paused to calm herself. “Before you say anything else, I want you to remember something: I am not Albus Dumbledore! My priority is the safety and education of the students in this castle. I do not care whether you re ‘redeemed’ and I am also perfectly capable of distinguishing between children and adults….no matter how childish the adults can act sometimes. Harry Potter is a child. You are an adult!” There was a moment of silence while Severus simply stared at her. “Now, I’ll try this again. What has Harry Potter done to antagonize you?” After a moment, Severus slumped back in his seat.

“Nothing.”

“And Neville Longbottom? What has he done to earn your wrath?”

“Besides managing to melt at least one cauldron a week? Nothing.”

“I believe we’ve already established the reason for Neville’s lack of finesse.” Minerva said, dryly.
"If anyone is to blame for the melted cauldrons, it is you for refusing to teach your students the most basic skills. To return to my earlier point, you have at least four children in your first-year Slytherin/Gryffindor class who have no experience brewing potions or working with potions ingredients. While I cannot be certain, I do not think it is unreasonable to assume that none of the others came to Hogwarts with the same amount of experience or level of skill as you possessed when you first walked through these doors. You cannot expect them to simply know all the same information you did, Severus!"

“They have textbooks!” If Minerva didn’t know better, she would have accused him of whining.

“Severus, the Potions text used by our first-years today is the same one I used when I was a student! I know what I am talking about when I say that it is not sufficient. And you and I both know that reading about doing something is not the same as doing it.” Taking another deep breath, she tried another tack. “Where did you get your Mastery?”

“Er….France There were no Masters in Great Britain, so….” He shrugged. Minerva nodded.

“And have you ever considered taking on an Apprentice of your own?” He gave a derisive snort.

“The only way I could would have time for an Apprentice is if I give up sleeping and eating.” Minerva nodded in acknowledgment. Some of the tension had gone out of his shoulders and she relaxed her own posture slightly.

“After some discussion, the Board and I have decided to hire some more teachers. Our goal is to have two teachers for each of the core subjects by next September, one for the first-through fourth years and one for the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. students. One of our long-term goals is to develop post-graduate programs at Hogwarts and we believe that the way to do that is by encouraging current faculty members to take on Apprentices.”

“But not all of them are Masters.” Severus frowned.

“That is true and that is an issue we will be addressing this year, but as you are a Master, it is not relevant right now. Right now, I have a proposition for you. I would like to offer you the position of Senior Potions professor at Hogwarts next year, provided….” Here, she glared at him over the rim of her spectacles. “you meet certain conditions.”

“And what, exactly, are those conditions?” He asked. He was suspicious, but she could see an intense longing in his face.

“First, that you agree to take on an Apprentice. I understand that you may want a year or two to settle into your new position and to engage in some private research projects, but I would like it have it settled within the next four years.” He nodded.

“That is reasonable. Next?”

“For the remainder of this year, you will demonstrate that you are capable of teaching all the students—not just the ones that interest you or are from your House. As I said, dunderheads are made, not born. I know that it can be tiresome teaching the basics to the first and second-years, but I think you will find that your efforts are not wasted.” He looked sour, but nodded.

“That is reasonable. Next?”

“Your personal opinions about a given student are just that….personal. You are a professional and I insist you act like it! I do not care if you dislike Harry Potter because of who his father was or if Draco Malfoy is your second cousin twice removed! You will treat every student equally—with
courtesy, if you can manage it, or, at the very least civility. I am determined to put a stop to the bullying at this school and that starts with the teachers! Is that clear?"

“Do you need my answer now?” Severus asked, ignoring her question. Minerva shook her head.

“No, but I would like it before the end of the Yule break. Regardless of your decision, however, I expect you to start abiding to the latter two conditions now. If you do not feel that you can behave in a professional manner or teach first years the proper way to slice a daisy root, then I will reluctantly accept your resignation.” She did her best not to let on that she was holding her breath.

“I…will not resign.” He said, finally. “I will think about your offer and give you my answer in a week or two.”

”Very well.” She nodded. “There is one more thing we need to discuss. Effective immediately, I am removing you from the position of Head of Slytherin House.”

“What?” She saw his shock replaced with rage. “You can’t do that.”

“I can and I have.”

“Why?” Minerva pulled a thick scroll towards her and unrolled the bottom portion. She began to read. “Five points from Gryffindor for breathing too loudly. Three points from a second-year Ravenclaw for only managing to name five out of the six potions that contain Foxfire which is, I believe, a potion that is not usually studied until fourth year. Ten points to Slytherin for walking decorously through the hall. Twenty points from Hufflepuff for being…and I quote…’an idiot dunderhead.’ Twenty points to Slytherin for returning library books on time… These are all points you took and awarded yesterday, Severus. Does that sound reasonable to you?”

“And you’re saying you didn’t take any points from my Slytherins?” He sneered. Minerva scanned the parchment until she found what she wanted. “Here are the points I awarded and took yesterday. Let’s see….for correct answers, I awarded a total of twenty four points to Ravenclaw, sixteen to Slytherin, nine to Gryffindor, and seven to Hufflepuff. I took twenty points each from Mr. Ravenwood of Ravenclaw and Miss Meadows of Slytherin and assigned them both a detention for being caught in a broom closet after curfew….that is the standard punishment, by the way….and I took ten points each from Fred and George Weasley for setting fire to their bed-curtains.”

“What were they…..no, never mind.” Severus shook his head as if to shake off some fog. Minerva was pleased to see he had calmed down somewhat.

“I can read you the entries for Filius and Pomona if you like, but they are quite similar to mine. For some reason, you seem to have taken it into your head that every single member of the staff is biased against Slytherin and…..”

“Sirius Black and Remus Lupin.” He said, his voice flat. Minerva’s eyes widened as the Sickle dropped. She resisted the urge to clench her fists. Her first instinct was to rush to her cubs’ defense, but that was what he expected her to do and it would be counterproductive. It would also not help matters to berate him for holding a grudge, but he did need to own up to his own responsibilities.

“You do realize that Albus was playing politics, don’t you?” she asked. Severus looked at her closely, as if sensing a trap.

“You mean about Lupin? Yes…” She shook her head.

“He was playing politics with Remus Lupin, but not in the way you think. I am referring to Sirius Black and to you.”
“Me?” Severus seemed genuinely shocked. “And Black? How?”

“The war was getting worse and Albus knew that Voldemort was recruiting some of the older students. Albus was aware of the pressure that Sirius’ mother was putting on him and was concerned that, if he was expelled, Sirius would cave to that pressure. Albus couldn’t allow that to happen. Sirius was his example, you see. He was from a notoriously Dark family, but had been sorted into Gryffindor and was openly defying his blood-purist parents. That was very good for Albus’ own recruitment efforts.”

“And me?”

“Severus, from the moment you walked into this castle, Albus knew—we all knew—that you were a potions prodigy. By the beginning of your fifth year, Albus began to hear rumors that Voldemort was interested in recruiting you to his cause. Albus planned to use this to his advantage, but he knew that you were only useful to Voldemort if you sat your N.E.W.T exams and earned an Apprenticeship. That is why Albus did not expel you!”

“Expel….Minerva, I didn’t do anything wrong!” Severus was nearly shouting.

“Really? So, you didn’t go looking for a werewolf at the full moon with silver daggers and a bottle of Aconite in your pocket?” Severus wilted under her glare. “Both you and Sirius embarked on your schemes with the intent to kill another student and that is an offense worthy of expulsion.” Reaching into a drawer, Minerva pulled out a thick, leather-bound book and dropped it on the table. “The Headmasters of Hogwarts are supposed to keep journals that are intended to be passed down to their successors. Albus treated his as a private diary.” She flipped through the book until she found the relevant page, then marked it with a slip of parchment. Closing the book, she handed it to Severus. “You do not need to take my word about any of this. Albus was quite….verbose.” Severus took the diary, looking numb.

“And Lupin?” He whispered. “You said Albus was playing politics with him, too.” Minerva snorted with disgust.

“Tell me, Severus. Are you aware of how the Hogwarts letters are compiled and sent?” He shook his head. “There is a scroll that resides in the heart of the castle. It lists the name of every magical child born within the British Isles. The letters are written and delivered by house-elves and Hogwarts is required to take any student who accepts his or her invitation. Remus Lupin is hardly the first so-called ‘Dark Creature’ to attend Hogwarts. A banshee was named Head Girl in 1365 and a vampire became Captain of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team—don’t ask me how—in 1752. Albus knew that he had no choice but to accept Remus Lupin as a student—there was nothing the Ministry could have done to prevent his attendance. However, he allowed Remus and his family to think that he was doing them a great service.”

“Why….why would he do that?”

“It’s all in the journal.” Minerva said. “Read it. I think you’ll find it quite enlightening.”

“But he still tried to kill me!” Minerva knew that Severus was just being stubborn now, but it was the stubbornness of a person who knows that he is wrong and is unwilling to admit it.

“Do you think I should punish Miss Granger for what happened today?”

“What? Of course not. Those girls attacked her, knowing that there could be dire consequences. She had no control over…..over…..” She saw the fight drain out of him like some foul gas. Slowly, he nodded and stood.
“I will think about your offer.”

“Good.” As he reached the door, Severus paused and turned around.

“Out of curiosity, why did you allow Miss Granger to move into the fifth-year Arithmancy class?”

“I am conducting my own experiment—and, unlike those two young fools, I asked Miss Granger’s permission before I attempted it.” She said, giving him a small smirk.

“Oh?” He arched an eyebrow. “And what are your results?”

“No results, yet.” She shrugged. “But I am quite…optimistic.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Narcissa looks towards the future, while Amelia and Dumbledore discuss the past.

NARCISSA

Ordinarily, the Ministry’s annual Yule Ball was a tedious affair. This year, however, Narcissa found it to be quite an engaging and intellectually stimulating event. After the war, when the dust had settled, Lucius had been the only one of the “old crowd” left with wealth and influence. The Malfoys’ position of the top of wizarding Britain’s social and political ladder had remained largely unchallenged since then. There had been precious few opportunities to use the cunning and skills she’d learned as a daughter of the House of Black, then honed in the Slytherin common room and the Dark Lord’s court. Narcissa could admit, if only to herself, that she’d grown complacent.

Everything had changed on that terrible day when Draco’s childish arrogance had led to a life-changing mistake. In the wake of what was now generally known as “the wand incident,” Narcissa had been forced to exercise intellectual and social muscles she hadn’t used for the past decade. It was hard, exhausting, perilous work, but it also left her feeling more alive than she had in ages.

Narcissa and Lucius had discussed matters at length and had set three goals for themselves. Their first goal was to ensure that Hermione Granger became a productive, successful member of Britain’s magical society. Honor demanded it and it was also the surest way to rehabilitate the family’s image. Their second goal was to find Draco a suitable wife and get a magical Heir for the line of Malfoy as soon as was reasonably possible. The third was to fix the mess that the Ministry had made with regards to the Muggle-born population.

Seeing to Hermione Granger’s welfare and ensuring that she found a place in the world was proving to be far easier than Narcissa had expected. At the end of October, Narcissa and Lucius had, officially, become Hermione Granger’s sponsors. It was an old wizarding tradition, dating back to a time when wizarding families regularly engaged in blood-feuds. Wizards could be cruel, vicious bastards, but it was generally understood that one did not make war on children. If the feud resulted in orphans, the responsible family was expected to provide for their education and livelihood through sponsorship. Narcissa and Lucius were going to pay for the remainder of Hermione’s education and would ensure that she had whatever she needed to obtain a job or an Apprenticeship after graduation. They had plans to introduce her to Society and Narcissa was already traveling to Hogwarts once a week to give her private tutoring in etiquette and wizarding culture.

The Malfoys had made their offer in the expectation that they would be required to financially support Hermione for the rest of her life. Her lack of control meant that she would be unable to get work in the Muggle world, while they had assumed that her lack of a wand meant that she would be unable to obtain any sort of meaningful work in the magical world. They had not taken into account Hermione’s intellect, her determination, or her ambition. Nor had they considered Minerva McGonagall’s influence, both on Hermione and on the school.

Though she had only completed half a term, it was already clear that Hermione was destined for academic success that was nearly unparalleled. Her lack of a wand excluded her from certain classes, of course, but she was excelling at those classes she attended and was even planning on
taking the Arithmancy O.W.L. at the end of the year. Hermione and the headmistress had charted a course of study that would see her graduating from Hogwarts with at least one Mastery already under her belt. With a Mastery, she would have her pick of jobs, wand or no wand.

Hermione had also put paid to most of the public’s concerns about her magical stability. She had only had two “accidents” since her return to Hogwarts and one of those had been the result of an unprovoked attack by older students. The second had occurred on the one occasion Narcissa had brought Draco to their weekly tea. That…had been a mistake, as Draco refused to exercise any control over his mouth. Fortunately, Hermione had managed to leave the room before she lost control: no one had gotten hurt and there had been minimal property damage that was easily repaired.

With things moving satisfactorily on that front, Narcissa turned her mind to her second goal: namely, ensuring that there was a magical Heir for House Malfoy. She scanned the room until she spotted her son. He was sitting at the table where she’d left him nearly an hour ago, sulking and nursing a drink that did not look like butterbeer. Narcissa frowned and summoned a House elf.

“Yes, Madam?”

“My son….young Master Draco Malfoy….what is he drinking?” The elf’s frown almost exactly matched her own.

“Mr. Thorfin Rowle is ordering firewhiskey for him, madam. He is threatening punishment if Tibs is not bringing it to him.” Narcissa had to bite back her temper.

“How many has he had?”

“This is being his first, madam.”

“Good. If Master Rowle—or anyone else—orders another firewhiskey for my son, please ensure that it is no more intoxicating than butterbeer. I will see to it that none of you are punished for carrying out this order.” The elf nodded and vanished. Narcissa made a mental note to speak to Lucius about what his so-called “friend” Thorfin was doing, then returned to her ruminations.

Draco was not coping well with the loss of his magic. Unlike Hermione, Draco’s wand had been properly snapped and all access to his magic had been cut off. He was, for all intents and purposes, a Squib. Squibs had a hard road to tread in Magical Britain, but it was possible—if one had the brains, the will, and the resources—to make a name for oneself in a field that did not require magic: Potions or Magical Law, for example. The difficulty was that Draco didn’t seem to want to put even the slightest bit of effort into learning things that would help him build one of those careers. He seemed to revel in self-pity and Narcissa was rapidly losing patience with that.

They had brought Draco to the ball tonight, knowing that many of his former House-mates would be in attendance. While it was far too early to contemplate marriage, Narcissa had hoped he would renew the nascent friendships and alliances he had begun to form during his first few weeks at Hogwarts and that, somewhere down the line, one of these might become a more permanent relationship. Unfortunately, it seemed that either his tales of said friendships had been mostly fabricated or the memory of his wanton destruction of Hermione Granger’s wand was still too fresh in everyone’s minds. Within ten minutes of their arrival, Narcissa had realized that the other children were not ready to forgive or forget. They were avoiding Draco as if he had Dragon-Pox and his one attempt to insert himself into their company had ended poorly.

Narcissa sighed. If things did not improve, she and Lucius might be forced to arrange a match with some respectable family outside of the United Kingdom. Draco might have been allowed to fend for himself if they had been able to have another child, but sadly, they had long known that Draco was
to be their only Heir. The House of Malfoy needed an Heir capable of wielding magic. If Lucius
died and there was no such heir, it was quite possible that they would lose their Wizengamot seat and
much of the gold in their vaults. That could not be allowed to happen.

As she watched Draco take a sip of his drink and wince as tiny flames came out of his ears and nose,
Narcissa resolved to put an end to his nonsense. As soon as the holidays were over, she and Lucius
would sit down and devise a course of study for their son. Lucius would have no trouble finding the
best tutors and she would see to it that her son learned what they had to teach him if it killed
her….or, more likely, him.

With that matter settled, for now, Narcissa turned her mind to their third goal: that of cleaning up the
Ministry’s mess with regards to the Muggle-borns. She and Lucius had hit upon a solution that they
felt would would be acceptable to the old families, take the needs of the children into account, and
was well within the boundaries set by the Ministry to maintain the Statute of Secrecy. The trouble
was that it would take a long time to convince people of its merits and even longer to implement.
Measures needed to be put in place now to ensure that those currently at Hogwarts and those due to
receive their letters within the next few years were properly educated. They had a plan for that as
well and, as Narcissa scanned the faces in the crowd, her gaze lit on the perfect person to help her
execute it.

A few moments later, Narcissa was standing by the refreshment table, shoulder-to-shoulder with her
target.

“Good evening, Arthur.” She said, politely. Arthur Weasley was so startled that he nearly dropped
the plate of canapes he was holding.

“Ah…good evening, Madam Malfoy.” He spluttered. Narcissa gave him a winning smile.

“I wonder if I might have a moment of your time? I’ve recently heard some rather…troubling news,
but I want to be sure that the information I have is accurate before I act on it.”

“Oh.” Arthur’s eyes widened, slightly, but otherwise, he seemed to have recovered his wits. Arthur
Weasley was far more intelligent than people gave him credit for. She had long suspected that he
cultivated the image of a Muggle-obsessed, ineffectual bungler and hen-pecked husband on purpose,
and she often wondered whether the Sorting Hat had ever considered putting him into Slytherin.

For her plan to succeed, she needed both the image of Arthur Weasley and the reality.

“Shall we find a seat?” He asked. Narcissa nodded and followed him to one of the many small
tables scattered around the edge of the room. Though he had never had much money or influence, it
was clear Arthur’s upbringing had been impeccable, for he saw Narcissa comfortably seated and
furnished with a drink before he spoke of business.

“How can I help you, Madam Malfoy?”

“Please, call me Narcissa.” She beamed at him. “As I said, I have recently obtained some rather
troubling information, but as my sources is not necessarily reliable—through no fault or malice of
their own, I assure you—I was hoping you could help me.”

“I see. What is it you want to know?”

“Is it true that the Muggle Liaison Office no longer runs an Orientation class for Muggle-born
children?” Arthur blinked several times, obviously thrown by her question. After a moment’s
reflection, he nodded.
“That’s correct. I don’t know exactly when it happened, but some time before the last big Muggle war, it was decided to have the schools run the orientation classes.” Narcissa knew this already, of course, but the easiest way to lead Arthur Weasley down the path she wanted him to follow was to feign ignorance.

“I see.” She frowned. “And the Ministry maintains no oversight to ensure that the children at different schools are receiving the same basic information?” She paused, for dramatic effect. “Is anyone making sure that the classes are being held at all?” Arthur’s eyes narrowed and Narcissa knew she wasn’t fooling him at all.

“What do you know?” His voice was quiet, but nevertheless, his exuded strength and an aura of command. Narcissa decided it was time to drop the innocent act.

“I know that Hogwarts has not held such a class in at least a generation.” She said. “New Muggle-born students receive a home visit from a teacher, some pamphlets that purport to be from the Ministry, and directions to Diagon Alley and Platform 9 and ¾. That’s it.”

“What do you know?” He asked.

“Hermione Granger.” Narcissa replied. “Lucius and I have also spoken to a number of other Muggle-born Hogwarts students, past and present. We cannot find anyone who has attended—or was offered—a Muggle-born orientation class after 1955. We’ve also spoken to graduates of several of the other British magical schools—Saint George’s stopped running their class in 1960, Kylemore never offered one, and the school in Cardiff hasn’t accepted a Muggle-born student since the war with Grindelwald ended.

“That is….disturbing.” Arthur Weasley looked more than disturbed. When people talked about the ‘Weasley temper’, they usually did so in reference to Molly, forgetting that Molly was a Weasley by marriage, not by birth. The real Weasley temper was not a Blasting curse that sought to destroy one or two targets, it was a slowly building tidal wave that destroyed entire villages. Narcissa was cautiously pleased to see that she had stirred the waters. Now all she had to do was direct the wave towards the right targets. Arthur looked at her with narrowed eyes.

“Forgive my saying so, Narcissa, but neither you nor your husband are known for being….sympathetic to Muggle-borns.” Narcissa nodded, acknowledging his point.

“Had this conversation taken place six months ago, your suspicions would have been completely justified.” Narcissa smirked slightly. “Frankly, this conversation would not have taken place six months ago. However, as I’m sure you are aware, my husband and I felt it was our responsibility to sponsor Miss Granger after the harm Draco caused her. We did not do this out of sympathy, but out of a sense of duty and we take that duty seriously. In speaking with Miss Granger, however, we have both come to realize that many of our assumptions about Muggle-borns were wrong…and many of those assumptions stemmed from the erroneous belief that the Ministry was giving Muggle-born children a thorough grounding in wizarding culture and traditions.”

“I…see.” Arthur looked thoughtful, though Narcissa could see that the fire in his eyes had grown more intense.

“What we don’t know…” she said “is why the Ministry abrogated this responsibility in the first place. After all, the introduction of Muggle-born witches and wizards into our society has direct bearing on maintaining the Statute of Secrecy and that is the Ministry’s primary responsibility, isn’t it?” Out of the corner of her eye, Narcissa saw Molly Weasley making her way towards them. “Think of how many….er….misunderstandings could have been avoided if the Muggle-borns had been given a proper introduction to our world.”
“What is your aim in all this?” Arthur asked, giving her a suspicious look. “What do you expect to gain?”

“Peace.” Narcissa said, simply. “Neither Lucius nor I want to see any more witches or wizards—no matter what their lineage may be—lose their lives because of ignorance—not when that ignorance can be so easily remedied.”

**

AMELIA

“Boss?” Truvy, Amelia Bones’ long-time assistant, stuck her head through the office door. “He’s here.”

“Send him in.” Amelia could hardly resist the urge to rub her hands together gleefully. “And Truvy? I do not want to be disturbed unless the building is burning down around our ears. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Truvy disappeared and, a moment later, Albus Dumbledore swept through the door.

“Amelia, thank you for agreeing to speak with me.” He said, acting for all the world as if he hadn’t been avoiding her for months. Absently, he transfigured one of her office chairs into a squashy armchair and settled himself in it. Amelia gave him a bemused glance and briefly debated asking him if he had some sort of medical condition that made it unbearably painful for him to sit on anything other than chintz.

“My pleasure.” Before she could say anything else, Albus went on in his patented “concerned grandfather” manner.

“I know how busy you are and I’m sorry to trouble you, but there are certain matters that really cannot wait any longer.” Amelia arched an eyebrow, but decided to play the old man’s game…for now. Flicking her wand, she closed the door. Since Albus was facing her, he did not see the runes on the door-frame glow briefly, before fading back into the woodwork.

“How can I help?” Albus beamed at her as if she was a clever child who had correctly found the hippogriff in the picture full of wands.

“I have two issues that I have been unable to resolve, though I have made extensive efforts to do so without involving the DMLE.” I’m sure you have. Amelia had to work hard to keep the smirk off her face. “The first concerns the guardianship of Harry Potter. I’m afraid that there’s been some confusion—the office of records seems to think that I assumed guardianship in one of my official positions. Since I have been suspended from both Hogwarts and the Wizengamot, they transferred that guardianship to Minerva in her capacity as Acting Headmistress of Hogwarts. The truth is, that I accepted that Guardianship as a private citizen, in accordance with the last wishes of the late James and Lily Potter.” Amelia chewed her lip for a moment, before coming to a decision.

“Can we table this discussion for the moment, Albus? There have been some…developments…in the past day or so that have direct bearing on your request and I’d like to deal with other matters first.”

“Oh.” Albus blinked, rather surprised. “All right. Well, my other concern is this—as you may recall, I…er….left Hogwarts rather abruptly. Minerva asked the elves to pack my possessions, but I’m afraid that the dear creatures overlooked some of them. While I can wait until I am reinstated to retrieve most of my things, there are two that I need rather urgently and Minerva is refusing to either
send them to me or to allow me in the castle to retrieve them myself.”

“I see.” Amelia was having a hard time not laughing in his face. “What, exactly, are these items?”

“The first is a Pensieve. It is not worth much, monetarily speaking, but it has been in the Dumbledore family for generations and has been enhanced with some enchantments of my own design.” The pensieve in question was actually an old family heirloom belonging to the House of Ogden. Tiberius had nearly sobbed when he’d discovered how badly Albus had defaced it.

“And?”

“The other item is a small, red, multifaceted crystal that is roughly the size and shape of an Ashwinder egg.” Dumbledore demonstrated with his hands. “I have a friend who is most anxious to borrow it, as he believes it contains some most interesting properties that may aid him in his alchemy experiments.” Amelia marveled at how the man could lie so convincingly. She’d been there the day Minerva had returned the Philosopher’s Stone to Nicolas Flamel and had heartily approved of his plan to revenge himself on his former partner by applying pressure on Albus to return the Stone himself.

“I see.” She said, at last, when she was sure she could control her voice. “You are suggesting that Minerva is guilty of theft?”

“I would never dream of accusing Minerva McGonagall of criminal activity. However, she has my property and is refusing to return it to me. What other conclusion can I draw?” He threw his hands out in a dramatic gesture of helplessness. Amelia sighed, suddenly tired of the game. Reaching into the top drawer of her desk, she pulled out a thick sheaf of parchment.

“I’m afraid I cannot help you with either of your so-called ‘concerns.’” She said, suddenly all business. “The items in question—along with quite a few others we found in your office and personal quarters—have been definitively proven to belong to other people. What’s more, we have yet to find a single shred of evidence that suggests that the rightful owners gave you permission to take their personal property. Many have, in fact, requested that I charge you with theft. We have returned most of the stolen items already and those that cannot be returned will become the property of Hogwarts. As for the Guardianship of Harry James Potter…” She glared at him “that issue touches on several matters that I need to discuss with you.”

“Amelia, I’m afraid I’m rather busy…” Dumbledore looked slightly panicked.

“Really?” Amelia arched an eyebrow. “You’re suspended from Hogwarts and the Wizengamot and, from what I understand, your only duties as Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards pertain to their annual academic conference which does not occur for another three months. That is, of course, assuming that they even invite you. My office has had you under surveillance for the past four months and you have neither sought nor obtained employment elsewhere. As far as I’m concerned, you have all the time in the world.

“Face it, Albus. One way or another, we are having this conversation today. We can do it here or I can have my people escort you to one of the interrogation rooms. This would, of course, necessitate a detour through the Atrium as some of the lifts are being repaired.” Albus went deathly pale and said nothing, but nodded.

“Very well.” Amelia took a blank piece of parchment out of her desk and set it, along with a Dicta-Quill on a side table, out of Dumbledore’s direct line of sight. “Interview of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. Date: January 7, 1992. Location: Office of the Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Time: 10:30 a.m. Interviewer-Amelia Bones, Director of the
Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Mr. Dumbledore, before we begin, I must inform you that this is a Lie-Detection Quill. It cannot force you to tell the truth, of course, but it will tell me if you are lying and the degree to which you are lying. You may refuse to answer a question, but that refusal will be noted. Do you understand?” Albus nodded again. “I need verbal answers, Albus.”

“Yes, I understand.” He gave an aggrieved sigh. *Oh good.* Amelia thought, with a grimace. *He’s going to play the martyr.*

“Very well. Let’s begin. While investigating events that transpired at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry on September 24, 1991, a team consisting of Aurors and Unspeakables determined that alterations had been made to the school’s wards. The damage was so extensive that the wards were virtually useless against anyone or anything except random Muggles who might be passing by. Please describe the alterations you made and explain why you made them.”

“Altering the wards is not a crime.”

“No, it’s not.” Amelia agreed. “However, those alterations allowed creatures and artifacts to pass into the school that the wards were specifically designed to keep out! They allowed criminal acts to take place on school grounds, so it is vital to our investigation that we know the nature and purpose of the alterations.”

“If you must know, I felt that the wards were far too strict. They were inhibiting the staff’s ability to ensure that the school runs smoothly and preventing parents and students from communicating freely.”

“I see. How, exactly, does altering the wards that prevent Dark creatures from entering the castle assist the staff in ensuring that the school runs smoothly?”

“As you may or may not be aware, there are times when Hogwarts has some…unusual students. I do not know if you recall Remus Lupin—he began when you were in your fifth year, I believe. He is a werewolf. I altered the wards to accommodate him.” Amelia glanced at the parchment. The first sentence was written in yellow ink—it was the truth, but not relevant to the question; the second sentence was written in navy blue—it was the truth, to the best of the speaker’s knowledge, and the third sentence was written in acid green—a bald-faced lie. Of course, Amelia didn’t need the parchment to tell her that—the magic wards knew the difference between Dark creatures and humans who had been cursed—unlike some Ministry officials.

“And the anti-Animagus ward?” She asked.

“Surely you know that Minerva McGonagall is an Animagus…” He looked rather shocked.

“Of course I know. She is a registered Animagus. When she added her name to the registry, a charm was placed on her that allows her to pass through anti-Animagus wards. Another was placed on her to monitor when and where she transforms. I know you know this, because you were there and served as a witness to her registration! Those wards were designed to prevent unregistered Animaagi from getting onto the grounds or into the castle. Now, *why* did you alter them?”

“I respectfully refuse to answer that question.” Amelia gave him a curt nod.

“Very well. Let’s move on. What was the nature of your research project on the third floor of the castle?”

“Excuse me?” Albus blinked, seeming genuinely confused.

“The third floor corridor on the right hand side.” Amelia did her best not to sound impatient.
“Several members of the staff tell me that you asked them to stay away from that area of the castle because you were conducting research. A number of students have also reported that you warned them to stay away by promising that anyone who entered the corridor would suffer a ‘most painful death.’ Despite all this caution, a first-year could have gotten through most of your extremely elaborate security protocols. My Aurors managed it in about five minutes. Do you know what they found?”

“Nothing.” Dumbledore sounded sulky now.

“That’s right. So, I will ask you again—what were you doing that was so important and sensitive that it required you to keep a Cerberus, a mature Devil’s Snare, and a fully grown-mountain troll in a school full of children?” There was a long pause before Dumbledore shook his head.

“I respectfully refuse to answer that question.” Amelia deliberately let out a sigh of frustration.

“Very well. Let us turn our attention away from Hogwarts for a moment. In November, 1981, you used your power as Chief Warlock to seal the wills of James and Lily Potter. Why?” For a moment, he thought he was going to refuse to answer, again, but he surprised her.

“While I’m certain James and Lily had the best of intentions, they recorded some information that, had it gotten out, would have been quite harmful to others.”

The ink on the parchment was robin’s egg blue—he was telling the truth, but not all of it. Amelia’s curiosity was piqued.

“For example?”

“You recall that Severus Snape became a spy for the Order of the Phoenix about a year before the end of the war?” Amelia nodded. “Severus and Lily were…close as children, but had a falling out at the end of their fifth year at Hogwarts. Lily learned of Severus’ work for the Order and wished to reconcile. Unfortunately, the Potters were already in hiding when she expressed this desire and it was too dangerous for them to meet, so she included a personal message to him in her will that made specific reference to his efforts on behalf of the side of Light. I deemed it unwise to allow that to become public.” The ink on the parchment was solid black—complete truth.

“I see. Was that the only reason you sealed the wills?” It wasn’t, of course. If that had been the only reason, James Potter’s will would not have needed to be sealed.

“No.” Albus said.

“What else was there that you didn’t want the public to know?”

“I respectfully refuse to answer that question.”

“Of course you do.” Amelia muttered. “Moving on. Why did you lie to Bartemius Crouch?”

“I did not…. Albus was shooting furtive looks at the door. Amelia suspected that, by now, he had discovered the subtle sticking charm on the chair he had appropriated. While it would not prevent him from standing if he really wanted to, it would certainly prevent him from doing so easily, quietly, or quickly.

“Albus, I think it’s time I bring you up to speed on events at Hogwarts. Over the Christmas holidays, the old Hogwarts wards were torn down and replaced. These wards are exactly like the original wards with one notable exception—rather than simply refusing entry to people, creatures and things that are not permitted on school grounds, they trap the interloper. Imagine Minerva’s surprise
when a carriage full of students, who were being carried from Hogsmeade station to the castle, was stuck in the wards! Fortunately, it was one of the last carriages to arrive and a team of Aurors was already on the scene. The carriage contained four students and three pets, all of whom had been knocked unconscious. The Aurors investigated and discovered that one of the pets—a rat belonging to Ronald Weasley—was, in fact, an unregistered Animagus by the name of Peter Pettigrew. Mr. Pettigrew was taken into custody and is currently undergoing interrogation. His trial, if you are interested, is scheduled for next Tuesday.” Albus had gone white as a sheet and seemed to be incapable of speech. Amelia went on, relentlessly.

“On discovering that Pettigrew was not nearly as dead as we had been led to believe, I requested a copy of Sirius Black’s trial transcript. There wasn’t one, as I know you are aware. I spoke with Barty Crouch who told me that you told him that there was no need for a trial, as you had cast the Fidelius Charm on the Potter’s hiding place and had made Sirius Black their Secret-Keeper. While our interrogation of Mr. Pettigrew is far from complete, we have ascertained that you did cast the Fidelius Charm….with Peter Pettigrew as the Secret Keeper. He admitted this under Veritaserum, Albus, so please don’t waste my time telling me that he lied. I will ask you one more time: Why did you lie to Bartemius Crouch?” There was a moment of silence.

“I respectfully refuse to answer that question.” Amelia studied him for a moment before deciding that there was no point in further postponing the inevitable.

“Albus, I am going to be straight with you.” She tapped the sheaf of parchment on her desk. “This is a list of charges that I am bringing against you. They include, but certainly are not limited to, fraud, child endangerment, child abuse, abuse of authority to commit criminal acts, obstruction of justice and theft. Please believe me when I tell you that our investigation has been very thorough and we have irrefutable evidence to support every single one of these charges. Your career, as you know it, is over. You will never be Headmaster of Hogwarts again, nor will you be permitted to sit in the Wizengamot’s visitor’s gallery, let alone serve as Chief Warlock. Right now, you have a choice. Option one is that you can take your chances with the Wizengamot. I am not arrogant enough to believe that I will be able to obtain a conviction on every charge, but I am certain that you will be convicted of enough crimes to see you spending the rest of your days in Azkaban, if not Kissed. That trial will be open to the public.”

“And...what are my other options?” Albus had to swallow several times before he could speak.

“There is only one other choice. You can plead guilty to all the charges on my list and I will handle your sentencing, rather than the Wizengamot. As you may have surmised, I already know, or can guess, the answers to the questions I have already asked you. In a minute, I am going to ask you a question that I do not know the answer to. If you answer that question—and any follow-up questions—fully and completely honestly, I will sentence you to house arrest for the remainder of your life. You will be kept under Auror guard, but you will be permitted to have visitors and some correspondence with the outside world. The extent of these privileges will be determined by your cooperation with our investigation. While I cannot promise that your crimes will remain secret, I will do my best to keep them out of The Daily Prophet until after your death.” She held up a hand before he could say anything. “Please be aware that if you choose this option and then lie to me, either by commission or omission, or make any further attempts to impede this investigation, this deal is off the table, I will take you before the Wizengamot and I will throw the whole bloody library at you! Are we clear?”

“Crystal?” Albus was visibly shaking.

“Do you have any questions?”
“When determining the terms of my… confinement, will you take my reasons for my actions into consideration?” Amelia looked at him, thoughtfully.

“To a certain extent, I will, provided those reasons are truthful. If I hear one word about ‘The Greater Good’…”

“Don’t you think that there are times when the ends justify the means, even if those means are, I admit, not always what we would like them to be? Do you not think that there are times when individuals must suffer—and, perhaps even die—for the good of the whole society?” Amelia considered her answer carefully. She had a feeling that, despite her best efforts to help him, Albus Dumbledore was about to put the last nail in his very public coffin. She needed to make her point crystal clear, yet do it in such a way that the *Daily Prophet* couldn’t twist her words later.

“On my first day at the Auror Academy, Alastor Moody gave us a lecture. He went on for at least an hour about all the horrible ways we could be injured or killed in the line of duty. I think it was his way of seeing who had the stomach for the job. Anyway, towards the end of his speech, he said something that has always stuck with me. He said that, as Aurors, we make a promise to society. We promise every witch and wizard in Great Britain that we will lay down our lives to keep them safe. By becoming Aurors, we consent to put the needs of society above our own needs and desires, even if it costs our life.”

“Such selflessness is truly noble.” Dumbledore nodded.

“The thing is, Albus, that there is a difference between volunteering to sacrifice for the betterment of your community and having someone else decide that you should make that sacrifice without your knowledge or consent.”

“The Muggles have something they call conscription…” He began, but Amelia cut him off.

“I’m aware of that. However, the Muggles do not draft *children* into their armies. Nor do they permit them to volunteer. What’s more, the Muggle government—in this country, anyway—is set up in such a way that those who are at risk of being conscripted have a chance to participate in the selection of their leaders and are given the opportunity to express their views on whether the country should go to war. They are old enough to understand that there are times when personal sacrifice is needed in order to make things better for everyone and to understand the consequences of the choices they make.

“Many of your crimes were committed against *children* who have neither the knowledge or the experience to consent to any such sacrifice—and I daresay they weren’t ever asked. What is more, I have found little to no evidence that your actions benefited anyone other than you. So, no, I do not think that your so-called ‘Greater Good’ is a valid justification for your actions. I will also add that I do not believe that there is any ‘greater good’ that justifies stealing from children or deliberately ignoring their abuse!” Sitting up straight, Amelia pinned Albus with her gaze. “What is your decision?”

“May I know what the question is before…”

“No.” Amelia growled. “I’m losing patience, Albus. Will you answer my questions or will you stand trial before the Wizengamot?” There was a moment’s silence, then Albus’ shoulders slumped in defeat.

“I will answer your question.” He said, finally.

“Good.” Amelia breathed out a sigh of relief. Standing, she walked to a cabinet in the corner of the
room. From it, she withdrew a cloth covered object, which she placed on the table in front of Albus. Resuming her seat, she watched him closely as she removed the cloth from the prophecy orb.

“My question is this. What was Sibyl Trelawney’s prophecy concerning the Dark Lord and Harry Potter?” He stared at the orb, transfixed. Amelia had to snap her fingers several times to get his attention. When he finally looked at her, she saw blind panic in his eyes.

“Amelia, this…it is far too dangerous! This prophecy cannot be allowed to fall into the hands of Voldemort’s supporters!”

“Albus, you know as well as I do that the only people who can activate a Prophecy orb are the person or people about whom the prophecy is made.”

“Yes, but you want me to tell you….” Amelia’s eyes narrowed.

“Do you believe that I am a Death Eater? Do you believe that I would willingly give them any information?”

“You might be tortured…Or, they might take Susan in order to force your hand…” Amelia drew in a deep, steadying breath and reminded herself that Susan was safe at Hogwarts, well away from this lunatic.

“Albus, apart from me, you, and the Keeper of the Hall of Prophecy, the only person who knows this thing exists is Severus Snape! Now, quit stalling! What does it say?” Without warning, Dumbledore’s wand was in his hand and he was pointing it at the orb.

“Bombarda!” He shouted. Nothing happened. With a flick of her own wand, Amelia disarmed him, then activated his chair’s full security protocols. Albus Dumbledore was horrified to discover that he couldn’t move. Standing, Amelia went to the door and opened it.

“Truvy, call Shacklebolt and Scrimgeour and have them escort Mr. Dumbledore to a holding cell. Then contact the Chief Warlock’s office and tell them we need to schedule another trial.” She turned to Dumbledore and pointed to the runes around the frame of the door that were glowing again. "In case no one's ever told you, Albus, only authorized personnel are allowed to use wands within the offices of the DMLE."
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Minerva and Amelia both get unpleasant surprises, while Narcissa visits the Burrow.

MINERVA

A late winter storm was raging outside of the castle and it suited Minerva McGonagall’s mood perfectly. As she stared at the letter on the desk in front of her, she seethed with rage. Drawing in a deep breath, she read through it again, hoping against hope that it didn’t mean what she thought it meant.

Professor McGonagall –

As President of the Board of Governors of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, it is my duty to send you this report regarding the most recent meeting of the august body. Unfortunately, this will be the last time I have the pleasure of doing so, as I have been forced to resign from the Board, as have Augusta Longbottom, Dexter Pyne, and Celeste Abbott. We have all, as you know, had the honor of serving Hogwarts for many years now, but due to recently enacted Ministry regulations, we are no longer considered to be eligible for such service. I have no doubt that the new President of the Board—Dolores Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic—and newly appointed members—Thaddeus Davies, Honoria LeStrange, and Cassius Flint—will do their utmost to carry on the Board’s good work. Stanley Slughorn and Dominic Bole will remain on the Board to ensure a smooth transition and to provide a sense of continuity with regards to Hogwarts policy.

During our most recent meeting, held on March 4 at the Ministry of Magic, a number of issues were discussed. As I have already stated, Madam Longbottom, Madam Abbott, Mister Pyne, and myself were relieved of our duties and thanked for our many years of service. We were then questioned, quite closely, about the work the Board has done since the beginning of the current school year.

Madam Umbridge and the new Governors unanimously approved and supported our decision to suspend Albus Dumbledore. In light of the allegations brought against him by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, they agree that it would not be in the best interests of the school to invite him to return to his position, even if he should somehow escape Azkaban. Madam Umbridge has agreed to notify Mr. Dumbledore of this decision, via owl post.

The new Governors raised a number of objections to the actions taken by the Board and by yourself, as Acting Headmistress, after Dumbledore’s suspension. While they have not, to the best of my knowledge, reached any firm conclusions yet, I believe that they will reverse the Board’s position on several important issues. For your interest and edification, I have taken the liberty of outlining our discussions below.

To begin with, I believe I am correct in saying that the primary concern of Madam Umbridge and the new Governors is to ensure that Hogwarts remains true what they see as the school’s core mission—namely, the education of outstanding young witches and wizards. so that they may, one day, take their place in society and uphold the values and traditions that we all hold so dear. With that in mind, some of the Governors are of the opinion that your recent decisions, while well-
intentioned, are not in line with this mission.

The most immediate concern is your new policy of confiscating wands as punishment for certain infractions of the rules. While there is, of course, general agreement that rule-breaking should not be tolerated, the Board feels that detentions and House point deductions are sufficient deterrents to those who might be tempted to push the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Madam Umbridge expressed their point most eloquently when she said that confiscating a student’s wand prevents him or her from receiving an adequate education and therefore, such a practice is not to be tolerated.

Further concerns were raised about the “profligate spending” that you and the Board have engaged in over the past few months. While everyone agreed, with some reluctance, that the replacement of the wards was necessary, there are some who question your decision to compensate staff members for unpaid salary when they were, for the most part, not aware that any such payment was due to them. There was also quite a bit of discussion regarding your decision to “fire” Professor Binns. There are some who feel that this decision was taken too hastily and without regard to the financial stability of the school.

There are those on the Board who question whether or not Hermione Granger ought to be allowed to continue studying at Hogwarts, given that she is unable to use a wand. Both Madam Longbottom and I spent a good deal of time trying to persuade the Governors that there is a place for Miss Granger at the school and in classes with her peers, but there are many who are opposed to this idea. Please be assured that, should Miss Granger be removed from Hogwarts, Narcissa and I will see to it that she is well cared for, educated, and established in a meaningful and profitable career.

Finally, a number of questions were raised regarding the proposed changes to the curriculum. I will not bore you with the specifics and will simply limit myself to saying that many Governors do not see a need to add to or change our current course offerings. While I do not believe that a final decision will be reached until the next regular meeting of the Board, it is likely that the budget allocations we discussed at Yule will be greatly diminished or eliminated entirely.

The Board recognizes that you might not agree with their position on these matters. Madam Umbridge made a point of recognizing the value of the contributions you have made to the school—as a teacher, as Head of Gryffindor, and as Deputy Headmistress. I believe it is her intention to offer to allow you to resume one or all of these positions over the summer. I have heard, through private channels, that she has held several discussions, over the past few months, with the Minister and other high-ranking Ministry officials regarding a suitable appointment to the position of Headmaster. While no offers have been made, Hyperion Turpin, Lauralee Yaxley, and Thorfin Rowle are currently being considered.

It has been an honor and a privilege to work with you and I have no doubt that the new Board of Governors will bring a fresh and interesting energy to Hogwarts.

Sincerely,
Lucius Malfoy

How dare they?

As she paced back and forth before the roaring fire, Minerva conjured up visions of each new Governor suffering under the influence of certain hexes that had been taught to her when she was a child. She hadn’t learned them at Hogwarts, of course—not even Armand Dippet or Albus Dumbledore would have been foolish enough to allow someone to teach blood-boiling curses to children—but there had been an old witch in her village who’d taken Minerva under her wing. The
woman had been vicious—and creative.

After a few minutes, she calmed down enough to start thinking rationally. She returned to her desk and studied the letter again. From the careful way Lucius had couched his words, it was clear that he expected that she would not be the only person to read the missive—and, indeed, there had been evidence that the letter had been opened and re-sealed before she received it. To all outward appearances, the letter was nothing more than what Lucius said it was - a rather dull report on the recent meeting of the Board of Governors of Hogwarts.

Minerva knew the truth; it was a warning.

While she didn’t know any of the new Governors well, she had met them all and knew they all came from what could charitably be described as the “conservative” section of society. Minerva gave an inelegant snort. Who was she kidding? All of those fools had either been Death Eaters or had been vocal in their belief in “pure-blood” ideals. They had no interest in making Hogwarts better—they just wanted to ensure that they and their children remained on the top of society’s ladder. They were incapable of seeing the damage that their narrow-minded bigotry was doing to their society.

With a sigh, Minerva put the letter down again and stared into the fire, thinking hard. It was beyond obvious that the Board intended to replace her as Headmistress. Turpin, Yaxley and Rowle were all woefully unqualified for the position and it seemed that the only thing recommending them was the fact that they were not in the least bit shy about spouting that blood-purity drivel. While Albus Dumbledore certainly had many, many flaws, he had, at least, been a teacher and understood the basics of how a school ought to be run. It also had to be said that, whatever his other faults, he was not a bigot. Minerva had talked with Arthur Weasley, at length, and knew that Hogwarts was one of only two magic schools in Great Britain that still took Muggle-born students. She had a sneaking suspicion that, if the Board had their way, that number would be reduced even further.

If the Board was allowed to have its way, Hogwarts would irrevocably lose the small shred of credibility it had left and that would be a disaster, both for the school and for the country as a whole. After Albus had been unceremoniously booted from the castle, it had taken Minerva nearly a month to go through all the various Ministry and I.C.W. reports that had piled up on a table in his office, unread and unheeded. She’d been appalled by what she’d learned—Muggle-born and half-blood Hogwarts graduates were leaving the country in record numbers because they couldn’t get decent jobs or Apprenticeships in Britain, while the Aurors, the Healer’s Guild, and the Enchanter’s Consortium had all been required to develop extensive training programs for those wishing to join their ranks because Hogwarts wasn’t teaching them the basic skills needed to succeed in those fields. If one of the Board’s picks became Headmaster, it would only get worse and Minerva knew she wouldn’t be able to stay. She thought it might be possible to convince the Board to keep her on as Headmistress, but they would only agree to do so if she kowtowed to their ridiculous demands.

“Excuse me, ma’am!” Minerva was somewhat startled to find that she was being addressed by Doxy, the Head Elf at Hogwarts, and that Doxy was carrying the Sorting Hat. Like the portraits of former Heads, the Hat had been removed from the Headmaster’s office and returned to its proper place—an alcove I the Entrance Hall—so that it could observe and participate in the daily life of the school. “Hogwarts is wanting to be speaking with you.”

“Er….all right. Thank you.” Minerva took the Hat and Doxy bowed low, then disappeared. Gazing at the ancient fabric with a bemused expression, Minerva wondered if she was going to have to put the foolish thing on. She was just about to take her wand out and activate the privacy wards on her office when the familiar rip at the brim opened and the Hat began to speak.

“Could you do it, Minerva McGonagall? Could you leave this school to fall into decay and
despair?” Minerva had no idea how the Hat knew what she had been thinking, but she’d learned, long ago, that Hogwarts had a mind of its own. It was best not to ask what it knew or how it knew it, but she never doubted that the castle was a force—a presence—that was unique and quite apart from the students, the staff, or even the Headmaster.

“I cannot stay and watch as a bunch of inbred idiots deliberately ruin the lives of another generation of children.” She said, softly.

“You could fight.” The Hat wheedled.

“I could.” Minerva sighed. “I could pander to the wishes of those senile old fools and convince them that I ought to be named Headmistress, but that would mean becoming the Board’s servant and mouthpiece. I could stay on as a teacher—providing that whoever they put in as Headmaster didn’t sack me—but then I’d be equally helpless. I could try to take my arguments to the press, but the Ministry practically owns The Daily Prophet, so it is unlikely my views would ever be published. I could appeal directly to the parents, but I’m afraid that a majority of them would side with the Governors. I have learned to pick my battles and this is one that I cannot win.”

“Possibly.” The Hat conceded. “However, wars hinge on battles such as these. Hogwarts is weak, my lady. If she falls into the hands of narrow-minded fools who insist on believing that something as trivial as their ancestry makes them more deserving of magic than others, then she will die. And magic will die with her. Already the sickness is spreading. Can you not feel it?” Minerva was stunned into silence for almost a full minute.

She had never put much stock in Divination, seeing as how it was usually practiced by those with no real training, like Sibyl Trelawney, or out-and-out charlatans. However, the Hat’s words rang with a truth that could not be ignored. She understood exactly what the Hat meant by “sickness” too—the Muggle-borns were leaving the magical world in droves, the number of Squibs born to magical families was increasing and the blood-purists were spreading their hatred beyond the borders of the United Kingdom. While it wasn’t as entrenched in other countries as it was in the U.K., there were signs of it everywhere one looked.

“What can I do?” She asked, feeling both very young and very old at the same time.

“You can be the leader that this school needs. You can stand against the forces of darkness and you can say ‘No!’” the Hat declared. “I cannot promise you victory, but I can promise that you will not have to fight this battle alone.”

Slowly, a grim smile touched Minerva McGonagall’s lips. The Hat was right. Even if she couldn’t save the wizarding world, she could help save these children by ensuring that Hogwarts remained what it had always been and was always meant to be—a place where all magical children could learn in peace and safety.

“Thank you.” She said.

“You are welcome.” The rip closed and the Hat was silent once more. Standing, Minerva called for an elf to take the Hat back to its usual resting place. “Oh, and Doxy?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Please bring me the original copy of the HOGwart Charter.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Minerva wasn’t certain, but she thought she saw an expression of vicious glee cross the elf’s face just before she disappeared.
AMELIA

“You did **what**?” Amelia stared at Cornelius Fudge. The Minister of Magic looked like the cat who had feasted on fresh roasted canaries in cream sauce.

“I issued a Ministerial pardon to Albus Dumbledore.” He was beaming. Amelia drew in several deep, calming breaths.

“For which crime?” she asked.

“All of them, of course!” Amelia had to work to unclench her fists and remind herself that she could not, in fact, hex the Minister of Magic in his own office, however satisfying it might be to do so.

“Why did you do that?” She spoke in the same overly patient tone of voice she’d honed to perfection when Susan was a rambunctious toddler.

“Oh, come now, Amelia.” Fudge looked at her as though she was an idiot for not knowing the obvious answer to her own question. “He’s Dumbledore! He’s a hero to every witch and wizard in Great Britain! They’ll never stand to see him in Azkaban….there’d be riots in the streets if we even tried to lock him up.”

“I…see.” Amelia was beginning to suspect the source of this lunacy. “And how, precisely, did you come to learn about this potential for civil unrest?”

“I heard about it from several very reliable sources.” For the first time, Fudge looked slightly uncomfortable.

“And would one of those sources happen to be Elphias Doge?” Doge was one of the most prestigious, expensive solicitors in the country. He had handled Dumbledore’s defense, but had seemed to give up about half-way through the trial. Now, Amelia understood why. He’d obviously realized that there was no way Albus could escape conviction and had decided to push for a pardon instead.

“What of it?” Fudge was starting to sound defensive. “He’s very in touch with popular opinion.” Amelie bit back a harsh laugh. She strongly suspected that Doge hadn’t willingly spoken to a witch or wizard with under a million Galleons in his or her vault in at least two decades—unless, of course, it was to order something in a shop.

“Was public opinion the only reason Doge gave for why you should consent to this….this….travesty?” Fudge’s hesitation was very telling. Despite general opinion to the contrary, Cornelius Fudge had never accepted a bribe in his entire career. He was far too politically savvy for that sort of obvious corruption. No, Fudge’s weakness was that he was too prone to hints and suggestions that this action or that action might benefit his career down the road….or might ruin it. He was so focused on his own short-term ambition that he rarely considered the long-term ramifications of his decisions. “Cornelius, what….exactly….did Doge say to convince you to pardon Albus?”

Cornelius Fudge knew better than to lie to her.

“Albus has information.” He said, slowly. “About…You-Know-Who. Apparently, he’s not as dead as we all thought.”

“I would think that the fact that his spirit was possessing a teacher at Hogwarts was ample evidence
“Yes, well, Albus knows how and why he survived and he has a plan to get rid of him, once and for all.” Amelia resisted the urge to bang her head against the table. Clearly, Fudge had not been reading the reports from his department heads.

“Have you already signed the pardon or are we still at the ‘talking’ stage?” She asked, carefully.

“I’ve signed it, of course.” Fudge looked affronted that she would even ask such a question. “I’ll make the formal announcement at the start of tomorrow’s Wizengamot meeting.”

As she stalked out of the Minister’s office, Amelia was grateful for one thing—there was absolutely no way Cornelius’ stupidity could come back to bite her in the arse. Her reports had all been properly filed in a timely fashion, as had Croaker’s—it wasn’t their fault the idiot hadn’t read them.

Once she was in her office, she threw a pinch of Floo powder into the fire and stuck her head in the flames.

“The Grim Old Place, Sirius Black!” Her head swam for a moment, then she found herself staring into the kitchen of Number 12, Grimmauld Place. Remus Lupin was sitting at the table with a cup of tea and a book.

“Hello, Amelia.” He said, sounding somewhat startled. “What’s up?”

“Can I come through? I need to talk to Sirius.” She said. Remus frowned.

“He’s at a session with the Mind-Healers. Is this something I can help you with?” Amelia briefly considered the question, then nodded. “Then, by all means, come through.”

A few minutes later, Amelia was settled at the table with a cup of tea in her hands. Glancing around, she noticed that the kitchen was spotless and, despite its size, looked cozy and welcoming. A far cry from the sad state it had been the last time she was here.

“I like what you’ve done with the place.” She said.

“Yes, well….ever since that dreadful locket was destroyed, Kreacher’s made a remarkable improvement.”

“What about the rest of the house? Has it been similarly….transformed?”

“It has.” Remus nodded. Amelia arched an eyebrow.

“Did you manage to get rid of the screaming portrait?” Remus laughed, suddenly, snorting tea up his nose in a manner that Amelia was sure would have horrified his mother.

“Indeed we did!” He beamed. “it was Harry’s friend, Hermione, who solved it for us. She was here over the Easter holidays.”

“How?” Amelia was gobsmacked. The Unspeakables had tried everything they could to get that ruddy portrait off the wall—or to get it to shut up, at least—with no success. She couldn’t imagine what a first-year Hogwarts student who couldn’t even use a wand could do….

“It took her all of five minutes to figure out that the frame was stuck to the wall, but that there was nothing keeping us from ripping out the canvas. A few slices with a sharp knife and Sirius’ Mum was relegated to the back of the Black vault at Gringotts. There’s a lovely portrait of Lily and James of that fact.” Amelia said, drily.
hanging in that frame now.” After a moment, Amelia shook her head, ruefully. It was amazing the way in which having magic made one forget one’s common sense. “Anyway, I don’t suppose you came by to talk about interior decorating, so what’s going on?” Amelia sighed.

“In his infinite wisdom, Cornelius Fudge has seen fit to grant Albus Dumbledore a full pardon.” She said. “He’ll announce the pardon during tomorrow’s meeting of the Wizengamot, after which, Albus Dumbledore will be released from custody.” This time, Remus did not snort his tea. He put the cup down on the saucer, gently, as if afraid he might break it.

“Why?”

“I’m not sure what, exactly, Dumbledore told him, but it was enough to convince Cornelius that Voldemort is coming back and that only Albus Dumbledore can defeat him. Needless to say, Cornelius has not read any of the reports that Croaker and I have sent him.” Remus rubbed a weary hand over his forehead.

“What does this mean for us?” He asked. Amelia shrugged.

“Not much, really. He may be free to annoy the crap out of all of us, but Dumbledore was still convicted in a very public trial. There’s no way he’ll ever become Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot again, let alone Headmaster of Hogwarts.”

“But he still has a seat on the Wizengamot.” Remus pointed out. Amelia shook her head.

“Convicted, remember? Same holds true for Aberforth. Neither of them can hold their family seat. Unless one of them somehow manages to produce an Heir, the line of Dumbledore will be dead within thirty years and their Wizengamot seat will be up for grabs.”

“What if he starts putting pressure on Fudge to take Harry away from us?” Holding Lupin’s gaze, Amelia began to grin.

“Last week, I asked Chief Warlock Ogden to add an item to the agenda—a joint report by the DMLE and the DoM on the results of our investigation into the matter of Quirrimum Quirrell’s possession. Our presentation will include Pensieve memories of the destruction of all of the Horcruxes and, for our grand finale, we intend to hurl the crystal containing the last piece of Tom Riddle’s soul through the veil. We’ll also have the prophecy with us.

If Dumbledore tries to drag Harry into this mess, we’ll show everyone that it has gone dark.” Remus stared at her for a moment, then began to laugh.

**

NARCISSA

Narcissa Malfoy didn’t like the Burrow. It was not the lack of expensive trinkets that bothered her so much as the fact that Molly Weasley went out of her way to flaunt her domesticity. Take the tea cozy; it looked like a little replica of her house, complete with rooms jutting out at impossible angles and a chimney, and it was clear that Molly had knitted it herself. There were doilies everywhere and Narcissa couldn’t look at that wretched clock without feeling slightly ill.

At least she was sitting with her back to the open door of the living room, so she didn’t have to look at the walls of photos of various Weasley children at play. Narcissa didn’t mind family photos—her private drawing room at Malfoy Manor had more than a few of her husband and son—but Molly’s choice to make such a public display of these personal family moments, combined with the hordes of knitted afghans and the cookie jar that was shaped like a bear and was charmed to growl every time
someone opened the lid, just gave the whole house an aura of domestic superiority.

The Weasley matriarch herself was sitting at the head of the table, frowning.  

“I don’t like it.” She said, finally.  

“Why not?” Over the past few months, Narcissa had come to know Arthur Weasley well enough to read his facial expressions. Right now, she could see that he was mildly irritated, but willing to be patient and listen to what his wife had to say.  

“It’s not the classes I object to—you’re right. The Ministry ought to start doing those again and I cannot imagine what Albus was thinking of by stopping them. But bringing the Muggle-borns in when they’re six? And having all of the children attend some sort of primary school? That’s not the way things are done, Arthur.” Narcissa had to bite her lip to keep her caustic comments to herself.  

It had been Arthur’s idea to lay out their plan for his wife and, Narcissa had to admit, his reasoning had been sound. In many ways, Molly Weasley was about as good a representative of the “typical” British witch or wizard as one could find. She was a pure-blood, but from a family that had never shied away from embracing muggle-borns as friends and spouses. She had trained as a Medi-witch, but like so many other mothers, had quit her job to stay home with her children. She read Witch Weekly, had a shelf full of books by Gilderoy Lockhart, and worshipped Harry Potter with an almost religious fervor. If they wanted to know how the public would react to their proposals, there was no better person to ask than Molly. All of that, however, didn’t stop Narcissa from finding her to be thoroughly irritating.  

The June sun streamed in through the window and a soft breeze came in through the open back door. The children would be home in a week for their summer holidays and Arthur had wanted to do this while he was still sure of having his wife’s undivided attention.  

“Molly,” Arthur said, slowly. “You’ve read the papers. You’ve seen the interviews with Harry Potter and that other little Muggle-born girl….what’s her name?”  

“Perks.” Narcissa supplied, ignoring the glare Molly shot her. “Sally-Ann Perks.”  

“Yes.” Arthur nodded. “You’ve heard what their home life was like.”  

“Yes, but Harry’s Aunt hates magic!” Molly protested.  

“And the Perks girl’s parents were so terrified of her that they locked her in the basement!” Arthur said.  

“Those are two of the most extreme cases, it is true,” Narcissa added “but every single Muggle-born student we’ve spoken to has told us stories about how their families spent time and money trying to find a ‘cure’ for their accidental magic. By introducing the children to the wizarding world earlier, we can save them and their parents a lot of heartache and bother. The French have been doing it this way for years…”  

“Oh, the French!” Molly made a dismissive gesture. Narcissa exchanged glances with Arthur, who shrugged and gamely carried on.  

“It will also give the children an opportunity to socialize with their peers before they go to Hogwarts.” He said. “All the Muggle-borns we talked to told us how frightening those first few days can be, not knowing anyone, yet being surrounded by children who have been friends their whole lives….”
“But that’s what the train ride is for!” Molly said. “To make friends!” Narcissa resisted the urge to shake the woman.

“As for the idea of a grammar school….” She said, instead “that was something Minerva McGonagall suggested. Not only will it help the Muggle-borns learn about our world, but it will ensure that children raised in magical homes come to Hogwarts with all the basic information that their teachers expect them to have on the first day.”

“Like what?” Molly looked suspicious.

“Like how to prepare basic potions ingredients.” Arthur said. “And how to behave around magical plants and animals.”

“But the children learn that sort of thing at home!” Arthur shook his head.

“Not all of them.” He said. “Since there’s no standardized pre-Hogwarts curriculum, the students only learn what their parents can teach them or what their parents think it is ‘appropriate’ for their tutors to teach them.”

“According to Minerva, some students from magical homes arrive at Hogwarts barely knowing how to read and write.” Narcissa added. “The teachers told us that the first-year muggle-borns are the only ones who know how to write a proper essay.”

“That’s not all.” Arthur leaned forward, intently. “Students from magical homes consistently have the lowest O.W.L. scores in Arithmancy because they come to school without ever having learned even the most basic arithmetic…”

“No.” Molly shook her head, vehemently. “It will never work, Arthur. The Muggles may think it’s a good idea to send their children off to school when they’re still babies, but that’s not how we do things.”

Narcissa sighed and exchanged another glance with Arthur. He gave her a small, resigned nod before turning back to his wife.

“As you say, Molly. But you do think it’s a good idea to bring back the Muggle-born Orientation classes?”

“Oh, absolutely!” Molly was, once again, all smiles.

“Would you be willing to work with us on designing a curriculum?” Narcissa’s voice was all honey. As much as she disliked Molly, Arthur was a good man and a valuable asset to their cause. Giving his wife a small role in their endeavors would go a long way to ensuring domestic harmony at the Burrow which would, in turn, benefit the project as a whole. Molly beamed.

“I’d be delighted.”
Chapter 8/Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Molly, Minerva, and Narcissa all try to solve their problems (with varying results), while Amelia tries to avoid problems of her own.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

MOLLY

Platform 9 and ¾ was crowded, as usual. Molly had to stand on tiptoes and nudge people aside so that she could have a good view of the train. At first, she didn’t see any of her targets, but then the twins emerged from a car near the middle of the train. They stood by the door, obviously waiting for someone. After a moment, Molly saw Percy join them. He had obviously come out of a different door, but, for once, did not seem to be telling the twins off. In fact, they were laughing together about something. That was nice to see.

After a moment or two, Harry Potter emerged from the same door the twins had used, followed by a girl with bushy, brown hair. Molly kept her eyes peeled for Ron—surely, he would have ridden home in the same compartment as Harry—but saw no sign of him. She did note that both Harry and the girl stopped to speak to Percy and the twins and she wondered whether Ron had remembered to invite Harry to the Burrow this summer. She was just about to go over and issue the invitation herself, when two older men joined the group. She recognized Sirius Black, of course, but she had no idea who the other fellow was.

Molly had been equal parts heartbroken and horrified when she’d learned that on’s pet rat had been an animagus in disguise and, even worse, that said animagus was the man who had betrayed James and Lily Potter to You-Know-Who. She and Arthur had discussed the matter, at length, and agreed that they would buy Ron his own owl this summer to make up for his loss. Molly only hoped that the revelation hadn’t put too much of a strain on his friendship with Harry.

“Mum!” Molly nearly jumped when she heard her youngest son’s voice. Turning her head, she saw that he was coming towards her from the far end of the train, dragging his trunk behind him.

“Ron!” She hugged him, then frowned. “Why aren’t you with the others? And why didn’t you ask one of your brothers to cast a featherlight charm on your trunk?”

“Fred and George say they haven’t learned it yet and Percy refused.” Ron was clearly in a bad temper. “Let’s go…I’m hungry!”

“We’re waiting on your brothers, dear….” Molly turned back to look at the other boys and saw that Harry and the brown-haired girl were walking away with Sirius Black and his companion. She frowned, wondering whether Ron and Harry had said their goodbyes on the train. They waited, more or less patiently, while the other Weasley boys waded through the crowd towards them. This took a while because they kept getting stopped by friends and well-wishers. To Molly’s delighted surprise, a particularly pretty girl with curly, dark hair gave Percy a kiss on the cheek. Percy’s face went as red as his hair and Molly made a mental note to ask about that later.
She waited until they were all home before pulling Percy to one side. “Ron says you refused to put a featherlight charm on his trunk. Is that true?”

“Yes.” Percy nodded. Molly’s first instinct was to start yelling but, of all her children, Percy was the most rational and level-headed. He never did anything without a reason.

“Why?” She asked. Percy sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

“Ron…Ron’s been a real prat this year, Mum.” He said, finally. “He’s always been kind of….well, insensitive. You know that.” Molly nodded. She refrained from saying that all her sons had been the same way at that age. “But….well, he’s gotten downright mean. I didn’t do a charm on his trunk because he was making fun of Hermione Granger for not being able to do a charm on hers.” Molly gasped. Everyone knew what had happened to Hermione Granger, of course, and it horrified her that her son was being cruel to the poor girl. “I got mad and…..well…….” Percy gave an apologetic shrug.

“I understand.” She sighed, patting his arm, then was struck by another thought. “Do you know when Harry Potter is planning to come visit?” Percy gave her a blank look.

“Why would Harry Potter be coming here?” He asked. Molly rolled her eyes.

“Oh, I knew I should have written a letter to Sirius Black. Ron forgot to ask him, didn’t he?” Percy’s expression became pinched.

“Mum, I’m not sure what Ron’s told you, but he and Harry are not friends.”

“But…but….Ron said they met on the train to school and….and…..” Molly sputtered.

“Yeah, they did.” Percy nodded. “They were friendly enough at the beginning of the year, but after the…er….Howler and that thing with Hermione’s wand, Ron was really cruel to her and to anyone who stuck up for her or befriended her. That includes Harry and Harry….well, he doesn’t like bullies.” As Percy wandered off to speak to his father, Molly tried to process what he had told her.

“RONALD BILIUS WEASLEY!”

**

AMELIA

Amelia knew that Sirius Black and Remus Lupin were both officially sane. No less than six I.C.W. certified Mind-Healers had testified to this fact when Albus Dumbledore had attempted to contest their guardianship of Harry Potter. After the proposal she’d just heard, however, Amelia was starting to suspect that Black had used some of his enormous wealth to buy those reports.

“Are you out of your minds?” She looked from one man to the other, hoping to see some sign that this was merely a prank they’d cooked up between them. The three of them were tucked into a corner of the drawing room at Grimmauld Place while the party ebbed and flowed around them.

It was Harry Potter’s twelfth birthday and, as was traditional in the wizarding world, his guardians were using the occasion to officially begin his introduction to Society. The date was, however, just about the only “traditional” thing about this party.

To begin with, Harry’s birthday wasn’t the only reason for the family’s celebration. The day he and Hermione had come home from Hogwarts, Sirius had announced that Hermione was being officially adopted into the House of Black. This had, of course, stirred up a hornet’s nest of rumor, gossip, and
discussion. Sirius had ignored most of it, but Amelia had heard him utter a few….choice words to certain Ministry officials who had attempted to impede his efforts. He was determined to give Hermione a proper home and wasn’t going to let anyone stand in his way. The final paperwork had been completed just a few days ago, so they had decided to use this occasion to formally welcome Hermione into the family.

Another big difference was that this was clearly a children’s party. Usually, the guest list for these events started with the relatives, friends, and allies of the celebrant’s parents or guardians. The sons and daughters of adult guests were invited, but little to no regard was paid to whether the children got along well or, indeed, whether they knew each other at all.

Sirius and Remus had made it clear, however, that this event was being held, above all else, for the enjoyment of Harry and Hermione. Therefore, they had come at things from the other end—the children had been allowed to invite their friends from school and the parents of those friends had been included in the invitation, regardless of how Sirius and Remus felt about them personally.

Amelia found that she rather liked Sirius and Remus’ twist on the traditional birthday celebration and she also approved of the way that Sirius and Remus had welcomed Hermione into their home and family without hesitation or reservation. The only things that mattered to them was that she was Harry’s friend and that she needed a home of her own.

One interesting side effect of the adoption was that Sirius had (publicly, at least) reconciled with Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy. Over Sirius’ shoulder, Amelia could see Lucius, deep in discussion with Gerald Abbott and Matthew Ogden (and wasn’t that shaping up to be an interesting new alliance?) and she’d seen Narcissa hovering around the children not too long ago.

Amelia had accompanied her niece, Susan, to the party and her hosts had cornered her while the kids were busy telling each other about their holidays.

“No, we haven’t.” For once, Sirius Black looked completely….well….serious. “You’d be a damn fine Minister, Amelia.”

“He’s right.” Lupin handed her a goblet full of pumpkin juice. Again, they had eschewed the “tradition” of serving alcohol to the adults, citing the bad example it would set for the children. “We’ve heard some rumors about some of the people who are planning to submit their names for consideration and…well…”

“They’re either inept, hopelessly corrupt, or have to keep their arms covered, lest anyone ask about their interesting tattoo.” Sirius nearly growled.

“We need someone who is honest and honorable and is willing to put his her own needs aside to serve the community as a whole.” Remus added. “The I.C.W. is threatening sanctions and we’ve…ah…heard some things, recently that lead us to believe that the Muggles government is rapidly losing patience with us.” Amelia couldn’t help but nod in agreement. She had no idea who Black and Lupin had been talking to, but she’d heard similar rumblings.

“While I don’t disagree, I have no desire to be Minister of Magic.” She declared. “Fortunately, Rufus Scrimgeour is saving me the trouble of having to run just to keep the vermin out. He’s filing the paperwork as we speak.”

“Scrimgeour?” Sirius made a sour face.

“He’s not incompetent or a Death Eater and I think there’s already a betting pool on how long the first person who tries to bribe him will have to stay in lock-up.” Amelia reminded him.
“Yeah, but his broom’s stuck so far up his arse I doubt he can bend at the waist.” Sirius grumbled and glared at Lupin, who had applied a sharp elbow to his ribs for his poor language. Amelia rolled her eyes. There had been bad blood between the two men ever since Scrimgeour had tried to arrest Black for breaking and entering and destruction of Ministry property. Amelia had been forced to intervene and had given her Head Auror a sharp dressing down about Black’s right to be in Godric’s Hollow and the Ministry’s lack of rights where that property was concerned.

“Rufus may be a bit…er…rigid, but no one can question his integrity.”

“I’m sure people said the same thing about Barty Crouch.” Amelia winced, knowing that there was no way she could really respond to that. Peter Pettigrew’s revelation that Crouch had masterminded his son’s escape from Azkaban and then kept him prisoner using the Imperius curse had rocked the Ministry to its core. While they had managed to keep it out of the press, she’d had no choice but to inform the Wizengamot.

“Sirius…” Remus said in a warning tone, casting a significant look at the children.

“Yeah. Right.” Sirius ran a hand through his hair. “Sorry, Amelia. It’s just that…times are changing. You know that as well as we do. We need someone at the top who is willing to acknowledge that and not fight it at every turn. You can’t deny that Scrimgeour’s views are…well…conservative.” To Amelia’s surprise, Remus groaned, reached into his robes, pulled out a Sickle, and handed it to Sirius.

“What word did he use?” Apparently, Harry had seen the exchange. His grin was an almost exact duplicate of the one Sirius was wearing.

“Conservative!” Sirius called back.

“Nice! That’s…twenty-eight!” Harry crowed.

“No, it’s twenty-seven.” Hermione corrected. “He used ‘catatonic’ twice, remember?”

“I was….chiding Sirius for his poor vocabulary.” Remus explained seeing Amelia’s confused expression. “So, now I have to pay every time he correctly uses a word with four or more syllables in normal conversation.”

“How much?” Amelia snickered.

“So far? One Galleon, twelve Sickles.” Remus pouted. “The kids have a side bet on how many different words he uses. Fortunately, this ends when they go back to Hogwarts.”

“Scrimgeour has been fighting Arthur tooth and nail on his Muggle-born project.” Sirius said, returning to their original topic. Amelia took a sip of her juice to avoid having to respond. While she liked and respected Arthur Weasley and had to concede that he had several valid points, she thought that his idea of introducing Muggle-born children to wizarding society before they received their Hogwarts letters was simply ridiculous. “And he wants us to reduce our contact with the Muggle world which, besides, being impossible, would only make them more annoyed with us than they already are.”

Fortunately, the Floo saved Amelia from having to come up with a politic response. Green flames burst into life in the fireplace and, one by one, members of the Weasley family began to emerge into the room. Sirius swore quietly, then winced as Remus elbowed him again.

“I thought Arthur agreed….” Sirius began.
“He did. I suspect that this is Molly’s doing.” Remus sighed. “We can’t make a scene, Padfoot. We’ll just have to keep an eye on him.” The two men wandered off, heads bent together in intense conversation.

“Oh dear.” Amelia turned to see that she had been joined by Narcissa Malfoy. “I do hope there won’t be any trouble.”

“Why would there be trouble?” Amelia asked. Harry, Hermione and their friends were greeting the arrival of the Weasley twins with cheers and raucous laughter, while their older brother had already been pulled into a small group with some of the other teenagers. Only the two youngest Weasleys seemed out of place. The boy looked sulky and the girl was staring at Harry with an almost hungry expression.

“Molly Weasley has her heart set on the idea of her youngest son becoming friends with ‘the-Boy-Who-Lived.’” Narcissa’s lips were barely moving but Amelia had no difficulty hearing or understanding her. “Sadly, Ronald is….well, let’s just say that he appears to have inherited a combination of his parents’ least admirable traits and leave it at that.”

“I take it there’s no love lost, then?” Narcissa gave a delicate little sniff of amusement.

“That’s putting it rather mildly. Ronald has been abominably cruel to Hermione and he vacillates between worshiping Harry and vilifying him.”

“So why was he invited?” Amelia asked, mystified. Narcissa took a sip from a crystal goblet. For those who didn’t want pumpkin juice, Sirius and Remus had provided a Muggle concoction known as sparkling cider. Amelia hadn’t been brave enough to try it, though Narcissa seemed quite taken with it.

“Harry and Hermione wanted to invite Percy and the twins.” She said. “Therefore, Ronald had to be included in the invitation. Sirius and I explained the situation to Arthur, who agreed that Ronald would be left at home.”

“And the girl?” Amelia found the child’s unblinking stare to be rather unnerving. Apparently, Harry did too, for he kept trying to move out of her line of sight. Hermione had noticed Harry’s discomfort and was doing her best to place herself between her friend and his…admirer. “Is she even old enough to go to Hogwarts?”

“Ginevra turned eleven last month.” Narcissa replied. Despite the fact that her expression hadn’t changed, she fairly radiated disapproval. “She was certainly not included in the invitation and I cannot imagine why Molly thought it was appropriate to bring her.”

“Where is Arthur?” Amelia scanned the room, but didn’t see the head of the Weasley clan anywhere.

“He’s in the other room, talking to Amos Diggory.” Narcissa replied. Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly. “I suspect that Molly saw his decision to come early as an…opportunity. She knows Arthur won’t kick up a fuss in public.”

As the afternoon progressed, the crowd of children began a game of “Old Maid’s Rumble”—a popular game among wizarding children that was ideally suited to large groups. Neither Harry nor Hermione had played before, so the other children all pitched in to teach them the rules. Ronald Weasley made one unpleasant remark regarding his hosts’ ignorance before his older brothers hauled him away. Ginevra, meanwhile, stayed on the sidelines and simply watched the proceedings. Amelia saw several guests approach her and try to strike up conversation, but they were either
dismissed or gave up quickly after finding her company disagreeable. Susan fell into the latter category and Amelia caught her arm as she was passing by.

“Having fun?” Susan’s smile was genuine, though slightly strained.

“Yes, Aunt Amelia. Harry and Hermione and the others are great, but…”

“But?” Amelia prompted. Susan’s face flushed, but she didn’t say anything. “Does this have anything to do with Ginevra Weasley? I saw you talking to her a few minutes ago.” Susan nodded, then leaned in, lowering her voice.

“Hannah and Morag and I felt rather bad for her…you know, she doesn’t know anyone here except her brothers and since she hasn’t started Hogwarts et, she doesn’t really have anything in common with the rest of us."

“Go on."

“So, we’ve been trying to talk to her…but all she wants to do is talk about Harry Potter. She keeps calling him ‘The-Boy-Who-Lived,’ even though we’ve all told her that he hates that!”

“Well,” Amelia temporized “I suppose it’s only natural. You were quite eager to meet Harry Potter yourself, not so long ago.” Susan frowned, slightly.

“Yes, but, even then, I knew he was a real person, you know? Ginny—she seems to think that he’s a prince from a fairy tale…and that she’s the princess. She told me that he’s going to marry her and take her to live in a castle. She’s already got her wedding robes picked out!” Amelia’s eyes widened in surprise. That did seem rather…unhealthy. Then again, girls that age did get crushes and spend hours planning their weddings… “Plus, she said some really mean things about Hermione.”

“Have they even met?”

“No. I think Ginny’s just repeating what Ron says, but still…” As Susan wandered off to rejoin the other children, Amelia shook her head, sadly. She was certain that there would be trouble—if not today, then a few years from now, when all the interested parties hit puberty.

The Weasleys were soon forgotten as Amelia continued to make the rounds at the party. She spent a delightful half-hour debating Barnabas Ollivander on the chances of the Winbourne Wasps in the upcoming All-England Quidditch League Tournament (which, despite its name, included teams from all parts of the United Kingdom) and had several very productive chats with various members of the Wizengamot concerning legislation that was due to be proposed at the next session. Oddly enough, the party’s relaxed atmosphere seemed to invite people to let their guards down which, in turn, led to a surprising amount of open-mindedness.

At three o’clock, all the guests were provided with cake and ice cream. The children sat on low chairs and poufs around the room, while more chairs had been provided for the adults, as well as tall tables for the use of those who wished to stand. Amelia joined Augusta Longbottom at one of these and the two were soon happily discussing their favorite subject: their respective wards.

“…Hogwarts really has been so good for Neville.” Amelia watched as Augusta’s grandson laughed and ducked as Seamus Finnigan tossed a paper napkin at him. “I swear, I almost didn’t recognize him when he got off the train!”

“I know what you mean.” Amelia nodded. “I don’t know a single parent who hasn’t said something similar at least once this summer.”
“It’s Minerva’s doing. You can be sure of that. She’s not one to put up with any sort of nonsense—from the students or the staff. Or the parents, for that matter.”

“Oh?” Amelia was surprised to see a faint tinge of color on Augusta’s cheeks. For a moment, she thought the other woman wasn’t going to answer, but then Augusta let out a long sigh.

“I’m afraid I allowed my…distress over losing Frank to influence the way I raised Neville.” Augusta’s voice was quiet and laden with sorrow. “I foolishly thought that if Neville wasn’t exactly like Frank was at his age, then there was something wrong with him. I….sent him to Hogwarts with Frank’s old wand. Ridiculous, of course, since they are totally unsuited for one another. But I thought….well, it doesn’t matter what I thought. Minerva found out about it just before the winter holidays. She came over to Longbottom Hall and had words with me.” Amelia grimaced in sympathy.

“I can’t imagine that was pleasant.”

“It wasn’t. I’m glad she did it, though.” Augusta watched her grandson a moment before returning her attention to Amelia. “Neville is a fine young man who is the best of both of his parents. I…I regret not seeing that earlier. And I’m grateful that Minerva was looking out for my boy. Have you spoken with her recently?”

“Only briefly. She’s been quite busy getting things ready for the new year, you know.”

“I’m aware.” Augusta chuckled. “There are a number of people who are quite…unhappy with the changes she’s making. They keep owling and fire-calling me and demanding I do something about her. I don’t know how many times I’ve had to remind people that the Board of Governors doesn’t exist anymore.” Amelia rolled her eyes.

“Before the Wizengamot kicked him out, Cornelius Fudge actually demanded that I arrest her. When I asked him what crime she’d committed, he claimed that she’d stolen Hogwarts from the Ministry. I must admit that I took a great deal of pleasure in telling that man that Hogwarts is a private institution and that it was never the Ministry’s property to steal. I also made sure to give him a detailed account of how Hogwarts had fallen under Ministry control in the first place.”

“I did find it somewhat ironic that our former Minister’s ancestor is the one who made the mess that Minerva has to clean up. Much like the new Minister will have to clean up after Cornelius.” Amelia caught Augusta’s sidelong glance. “Any hints on who that might be?”

“I’m planning on casting my vote for Rufus Scrimgeour.” Amelia used her most non-nonsense, “there’s no point in arguing so don’t even try” voice. To her surprise and displeasure, Sirius and Remus hadn’t been the only ones at the party to suggest that she stand for election. Augusta nodded and said no more on the subject, though Amelia did see a slight frown cross her features.

**

NARCISSA

“Mother, who was that?” Narcissa mentally braced herself for a conversation she knew would be difficult.

“Sit down, Draco.” She summoned a House elf and requested tea for two. She was tempted to ask the elf to furnish them with some of Draco’s favorite treats—a mother’s effort to soften the blow, perhaps—but decided against it. She had learned much about her son over the past ten months, including the fact that, underneath the spoiled arrogance of youth, lay a clever and cunning mind that
had an instinct for finding and exploiting the weaknesses of others. She had also learned that her son was as stubborn as a hippogriff. In the face of such obstinacy, she was going to have to be as unyielding as stone.

“That man,” she began, slowly, once they both had cups of tea in their hands “was Casper Warwick. He is the Headmaster of the Academy of Magical Studies in Canada. We were finalizing certain details concerning your education and…” Draco’s eyes lit up.

“I’ll be able to do magic?” He asked, eagerly. Narcissa sighed. Some fool had told Draco that he might be allowed to use magic if he left Britain. Both she and Lucius had explained—repeatedly—that the procedure he’d undergone when his wand had been snapped rendered any further use of magic impossible, but Draco clung to his fantasy.

“No. The Academy is not a place where one learns magic, Draco, it is a place where one learns about magic and about other subjects of great importance to the wizarding world. Do you understand the difference?” He scrunched up his face in thought before shaking his head. “At the Academy, you will not learn how to do spells. Rather you will learn why the spells work. You will learn how witches and wizards from around the world are able to harness raw magical power and transform it into something useful. You will also learn about their cultures, laws, and business practices.”

“But…” Draco looked more perplexed than angry, but Narcissa knew that wouldn’t last. She pressed on, hoping to give him as much information as possible before he exploded and stopped listening to her altogether.

“The Academy specializes in dealing with students like you—children who are from magical families, but are unable to use magic themselves.”

“Squibs?” Draco’s shriek reminded Narcissa of the noises she and her sisters used to make when they were half his age. “You’re sending me to school with Squibs?”

“Yes!” Narcissa snapped, her patience worn thin. “The other students cannot use magic, either, but that does not mean that they—and you—cannot lead productive, useful lives within the magical world!”

“Doing what?” Draco sneered. “Serving an Apprenticeship with Argus Filch?” Narcissa pinched the bridge of her nose.

“I really hate how poorly you’ve been educated.” She sighed. The worst part was, she couldn’t lay all the blame at Dumbledore’s feet. Before he’d gone to Hogwarts, she and Lucius had hired tutors for Draco. In retrospect, those tutors had been chosen for their lineage, rather than their skills or academic achievements. That had been a mistake. “While it is true that many Squibs lack the education to get decent jobs within the magical world—in Great Britain, anyway—there are plenty of career options available to you.”

“Like what?” Draco sneered.

“Magical law, Diplomacy, Research…” Narcissa ticked the possibilities off on her fingers.

“No!” Draco folded his arms across his chest and, aside from his height and lack of baby fat, he looked almost exactly as he had when he was four. “I won’t go and you can’t make me.”

“We can and we will. Headmaster Warwick will be escorting you to the Academy via Goblin Gate a week from today, so that you will be all settled in by the beginning of the new term. If I have to, I
will put you in a Body-bind until then.” Narcissa’s eyes narrowed. “What we cannot do is force you to take advantage of the opportunity you are being given. That, you will have to decide to do for yourself.” She could see that she wasn’t getting through to her son and decided that drastic measures would need to be taken. Lifting her wand, she cast the mildest stinging hex she could at his arm. Draco gasped in pain and stared at her, with wide eyes.

“What did you do that for?”

“I want to be sure I have your attention. Listen to me very carefully, Draco, for I will not say this again. You will never use a wand again. Therefore, you only have only two choices. Either you can leave the magical world and live out the rest of your life as a Muggle, or you can stay and make the best of a bad situation. If you wish to live as a Muggle, please tell me or your father and we will make the appropriate arrangements.”

“Live as a Muggle?” Draco gaped at her. “You must be joking!”

“I am not.” Putting her wand away, Narcissa took a steadying sip of tea. “I am quite serious, Draco. If that is what you choose to do, your father and I will not stand in your way. If living in the Muggle world is not to your taste, you will go to the Academy. Either way, your father and I have agreed to see to it that you have the opportunity to receive a first rate education. What you do with that opportunity is entirely up to you.”

“What do you mean?” Narcissa paused for a moment, choosing her words carefully.

“Tell me something. If you had known…no, let me rephrase that. If you had believed that you would be punished for breaking Hermione’s wand, would you have done it?” Draco stared at her, slack-jawed. Narcissa waited patiently until he recovered enough from his shock to answer.

“No.” He sounded rather sullen.

“And if you had believed me when I warned you that it would not be wise to antagonize Miss Granger over tea, would you have done it?” Draco grimaced and his fingers moved to his cheek, as if to make sure that the deep cuts had healed. He didn’t answer, but his silence spoke volumes.

“In both those situations, you knew perfectly well what the consequences would be and yet, for some reason, you refused to believe that they applied to you.” Narcissa gave her son a sympathetic smile. “This is not entirely your fault. Your father and I were…overly indulgent when you were younger. We allowed our own pride and sense of superiority, as well as our desire to see that you never wanted anything, to overrule our common sense. We are all paying the price for that now.” There was an awkward silence as Draco digested this. After a moment, Narcissa continued in a sharper tone.

“Regardless of whether or not you expected to suffer any consequences for your actions, you knew that they would cause suffering to others. Your father and I did not raise you to be cruel! Nor did we raise you to be so ignorant as to believe that your family name and lineage were the only things you needed in order to succeed in life.”

“But…” Narcissa raised a hand to stop her son’s protests.

“Since you…came home, your father and I have done our best to educate you and to help you deal with your new circumstances. You’ve rejected our assistance—and that offered by others—at every turn and it is clear to us that you expect to be allowed to simply go on…moping for the rest of your life.”
“Well, what else can I do?” Draco asked. Narcissa was rather surprised to note that he sounded more desperate than defiant.

“That is for you to decide.” She was tempted to hold Hermione Granger up as an example, but knew that would be counterproductive. “You have many options and the Academy will help you to explore them. But if you do not engage in that exploration—if you choose to sulk and make poor marks—then your father and I will not be able to help you.”

“You won’t h…help me?” Draco was starting to look rather frightened and Narcissa decided that this was all to the good. At the very least, he was actually listening to her now.

“Not unless you are prepared to help yourself. You will be spending six years at the Academy.” Narcissa poured herself some more tea. “If you apply yourself and do well, you will be in an excellent position to set off on any one of a number of different career paths. Your father and I can help you with that—we can give you the money to establish yourself. We can introduce you to many different influential people or we can help you obtain an Apprenticeship in your chosen field. I’m sure you are aware that the Malfoy name can open many doors for you.” Draco nodded, apparently struck mute.

“However…” Narcissa held up a warning finger. “if you do not apply yourself…if you spend your time moping and complaining or in idle pursuits, your father and I will do nothing for you when you return. We will not give you a Knut more than what you need to feed yourself and keep a roof over your head. You will not live in the Manor, our House Elves will not answer your call, and we will not use our influence to help you obtain employment. In that situation, you really would have no choice but to Apprentice with Mr. Flich! Do you understand?”

Draco had gone quite pale and his eyes were as round as Galleons. Part of Narcissa hated having to be so harsh, but another part of her rejoiced to see that…finally…her son seemed to be truly listening to what she was saying and, more importantly, thinking about it.

“Why…why are you doing this?” He asked, quietly. He sounded as though he was about to start crying.

“Because,” Narcissa sighed. “as much as your father and I love you—and we do—we know that if we allow you to go on as you have been, you will come to a bad end. At best, you will be a bitter, lonely and desperately unhappy man. At worst, you will wind up dead or in Azkaban. We cannot stop you from destroying yourself, but we will not help you to do it, either.” There was another silence.

“What do I need to do?” Draco asked, finally. Narcissa did her best not to show her son how relieved she felt. It seemed that…at last…he had turned some sort of corner.

“Go to the Academy with an open mind. Learn what they have to teach you. Consider your options carefully and plan for your future.” Narcissa gave her son a sad smile. “I would also suggest you spend some time getting to know yourself—think about your strengths, your weaknesses, your dreams, and the kind of man you truly want to be.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” Narcissa had to resist the urge to laugh at her son’s baffled expression.

“Oh, my love, if I could tell you that, I would. Unfortunately, that is a path you must walk by yourself. Now,” her tone became very businesslike. “as I said, you and Headmaster Warwick will be traveling to the Academy in three days’ time. Students usually begin attending the Academy at the age of eleven and they also usually have a more…well-rounded primary education than the one
you received. I’m afraid that you will have a great deal to do to catch up with your year-mates. As I understand it, you will attend a few classes with them this year, but you will spend much of your time receiving private tutelage in subjects with which they are already familiar. It is Headmaster Warwick’s hope—and mine—that you will be able to fully join your year-group next September.” Draco frowned, but nodded.

“There is one other thing I’d like you to think carefully about before you go.” Narcissa knew that she had already asked a great deal of her son over the past few minutes, but she knew that they would both regret it if she didn’t ask for one thing more. “The students at the Academy may not be able to use magic, but they come from some of the best families from around the world. I hope you will keep an open mind about them, as well. If you can learn to restrain your more…intemperate behaviors, you have a chance to make alliances now that most of the other British students your age will work their whole lives to achieve.”

From the calculating look in her son’s eyes, Narcissa knew she had won this battle.

**

MINERVA

“Albus.” Minerva stared down at the somewhat forlorn figure of her former mentor and wondered, not for the first time, how she had missed the obvious signs of the man’s mental instability.

“Ah, Minerva…” He wore his most ingratiating smile and his eyes were twinkling so hard they were practically throwing off sparks. “Thank you for coming so quickly. I wanted to have a quick word with you about…”

“Usually, when a wizard wishes to speak to a witch, he sends an owl and requests a meeting.” Minerva smiled a little as Hogwarts provided her with a table, a comfortable chair, and a fully laden tea-set. Albus didn’t seem to notice any of this or, if he did, he didn’t seem to comprehend the significance.

“Yes, well…you’ve made it quite clear that you wished to keep your distance.” He scowled. “I have sent you a number of messages and you haven’t responded to a single one of them…”

“So you decided that the most logical course of action was to attempt to illegally enter the castle by means of a secret passage?” Minerva arched an eyebrow.

“Hogwarts does not belong to you, Minerva. It belongs to all of Wizarding Britain. Now that my…er….legal difficulties have been concluded, you have no right to keep me out!” Minerva couldn’t help but goggle at the way he managed to say this with a completely straight face. For a moment, she honestly didn’t know how to respond to that level of hypocrisy.

“I take it you haven’t been keeping up with the news.”

“I subscribe to The Daily Prophet….” Minerva laughed.

“The Daily Prophet id, as I’m sure you’re aware, nothing more than thinly veiled Ministry propaganda. Every other newspaper, magazine, and journal in Wizarding Britain has carried the story—even Witch Weekly ran a piece on it!”

“And what story would that be?”

“Hogwarts is, once again, a privately funded institution and, thus, is no longer subject to Ministry oversight or control. So, no, Albus…you do not have the right to come and go as you please.”
“Privately funded?” For a moment, Dumbledore’s mask of genial good humor dropped and he sneered. “No doubt that was Sirius Black’s doing. And no doubt he’s using Potter money to do it…”

“Hardly.” Minerva snorted. “As wealthy as the Blacks and the Potters are, they could not afford to sustain Hogwarts, unaided, for more than five years or so. No, Albus. Hogwarts is being funded by the Magister’s vaults. There is enough in there now to keep the school running for at least another 150 years.”

“The…Magister’s vaults?” Minerva didn’t miss the acquisitive gleam in Albus’ eyes. “I was not aware that such resources were available to us….”

“Not to us, Albus….to me! I was granted access to those vaults because I swore a magically binding oath dedicating myself to the service of this school. I am not merely its Headmistress, I am its Magister.”

“I…see.” The look of deep disappointment on Albus’ face made Minerva want to burst out laughing. “I heard you informed the parents that Hogwarts is no longer charging tuition and I’d wondered how you managed it. I was not aware that swearing the Oath came with monetary benefits.”

“Would you have done it, If you had known?” Minerva was genuinely curious about this point. Thanks to the elves, the Sorting Hat, and the portraits of the former Headmasters, she knew that Albus had been given the opportunity to swear the Magister’s oath, as had all his predecessors. The amount of money in the vaults was staggering, it was true but for many, the price one had to pay in order to have access to all those Galleons was higher still.

Minerva hadn’t been lying or exaggerating when she’d said she’d dedicated herself to Hogwarts. While the castle had been her home for years, she was now bound to it in a way she had never been before. She had a new awareness of every square inch of the building and the lands on which it sat and she would not be able to leave for more than a day without suffering painful consequences. She would also never be able to swear any other magically binding vows—not even those of marriage. Hogwarts had to be her first, last, and only consideration and woe betide her if she deliberately took actions that brought harm to the school or its students.

Had Albus sworn the Oath, he would never have been allowed to sit on the Wizengamot, let alone become Chief Warlock, and he would have lost his magic the first time he’d allowed his ambition or prejudices to affect his treatment of a student.

Seeing that Albus wasn’t going to answer, Minerva made herself more comfortable and eyed him over the rim of her teacup.

“So. Are you going to tell me why you were so desperate to speak with me that you felt it necessary to sneak around like some common criminal?” In an instant, Albus’ façade of cheerful good humor was back in place. Minerva wondered how she’d managed to be so blind to the man’s blatant manipulation for so many years.

“May I join you?” At the moment, Albus was on his knees, stock-still, in the middle of the small chamber, unable to move anything other than his head. Minerva briefly debated leaving him there as a living stalagmite, but decided that her momentary amusement wasn’t enough to justify how irritating he would become. She asked Hogwarts to provide another chair then released Albus, who rose and sauntered to his seat as if he hadn’t just been held captive by a magic castle. He frowned when a second teacup was not forthcoming, but said nothing.
“Well?” Minerva was getting impatient. She’d been in Hogsmeade when the alarm had sounded, enjoying a late lunch and a spot of gossip with Rosmerta at The Three Broomsticks. The children were due to arrive in three days, so she wouldn’t have another opportunity to indulge in such leisurely pursuits for a long while.

“Ah, yes….” For a brief moment, Albus looked nervous. Then his eyes widened slightly and his expression went blank for just a moment. Minerva stifled a sigh. She was familiar with this expression—Albus always wore it when he had been struck with a particularly clever idea.

“I’ve come to warn you. There is a great danger hidden at Hogwarts.” Minerva resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

“Oh? Do tell.” The investigation conducted by the Aurors and the Unspeakables had been quite thorough. What was more, Minerva’s own heightened awareness of the castle and grounds would have alerted her to any threats long before now. Whatever Albus had to say was going to be self-serving drivel at best, but it behooved her to listen, lest his latest scheme pose a threat to Hogwarts.

“There is a monster—a terrible, giant serpent—lurking in a hidden chamber beneath the Black Lake.” Ah, so this was about the basilisk, then. Minerva made a mental note to mention to Amelia Bones that Albus had known about the creature and not said a word. It was unlikely Amelia would be able to do anything with the information at the moment, but Minerva trusted her to know how to best make use of it in the future. Albus mistook her silence for attentiveness and went on.

“The monster is asleep for now; held that way by a strong enchantment, but one student has the power—and, I’m afraid, the will—to awaken it.” Now Minerva really was paying attention. She suspected she knew what Albus was hinting at, but needed to be certain before she took any decisive action.

“Albus, I have no intention of sitting here all night, listening to you ramble. If you have something to say, please say it.”

“Harry Potter is a Parselmouth.” Minerva closed her eyes, counted to ten, and made a mental note to fire-call Remus Lupin as soon as this conversation was finished. There was no way to keep this a secret from Sirius, of course, but Remus would know how to keep him from hunting Albus Dumbledore down and ripping him limb from limb.

“I am aware of that fact, Albus. What does one thing have to do with the other?”

“Don’t you see?” She decided that his incredulity was sincere. “Harry Potter can talk to snakes. There is a giant snake in the chamber under the lake….”

“Which you just told me is under some sort of sleeping enchantment.”

“Yes, but the enchantment was cast in Parseltongue, as was the magic that hides the chamber from the world. Don’t you understand? Harry Potter will open the chamber and unleash this horror….”

“Balderdash! Even if Harry knows about the chamber and the monster—which I highly doubt he does—why would he wake it or use it to attack others?”

“Surely you know the child’s history….?”

“I know that you illegally placed him with Muggles who abused him.” Albus nodded and, to his credit, looked genuinely abashed.

“You will never know how deeply I regret not listening to you that night.” He murmured. “If I had,
perhaps Harry would not have started down such a dark path…”

“What in Merlin’s name makes you think that Harry is turning into a Dark wizard?”

“I just told you…he’s a Parselmoth! How else could he have acquired such an ability, if not by Dark magic?” Minerva felt her jaw fall open. A small part of her wondered whether this was all just an act, put on for the benefit of another one of Albus’ ridiculous schemes. Another part was convinced that the man had gone completely ‘round the twist. In the end, she supposed it didn’t really matter whether Albus believed what he was saying or not. There were others who would listen to Albus’ nonsense and that made him a threat to Harry. As far as she was concerned, Harry was a Hogwarts student until he graduated, regardless of whether or not he was actually in the castle. The rush of anger she could feel through her bond with the school told her than Hogwarts agreed.

“I would be very careful, if I were you.” With trembling hands, Minerva placed her teacup on the tray. The tray—and the table beneath it—promptly vanished. “You do not want Hogwarts as your enemy, Albus, and right now, she is perilously close to naming you as such. The ability to talk to snakes is not inherently dark.”

“But Voldemort…”

“Was one man! Tell me, Albus, how many other Parselmouths have you personally encountered?”

He shifted uneasily in his seat.

“Well, none….but there are stories….”

“Bah!” Minerva made a dismissive gesture. “For the record, your concerns are completely unfounded. Harry was born with the ability to speak to snakes. He’s descended from the Hightowers and that is a talent that ran in their family…”

“That’s impossible! The Hightowers died out in the middle of the last century and never intermarried with the Potters!”

“The magical line did, yes. However, some time before that happened, one of them gave birth to a Squib and sent the child to live in the Muggle world. He or she was Lily Potter’s distant ancestor. Sirius took Harry to Gringotts for a lineage test over the Easter holidays. From what I hear, the goblins were quite pleased to have those vaults opened again.” Minerva’s temper was cooling and she relished the gobsmacked expression on Albus’ face.

“But…”

“Furthermore, while parselmouths are rare in the British isles, there are quite a few in other places. There is actually a school in Japan where students can study magic that can only be cast by someone with that ability. That school is accredited by the I.C.W. and counts many of the world’s most prominent Healers and Enchanters among its graduates. Sirius has already promised Harry that he can spend a summer there if he does well on his O.W.L. exams.”

“He…he knows?”

“Of course he knows!” Minerva snapped. “He spent countless hours with Harry before James and Lily went into hiding and Harry’s talent was obvious, even then!” Tired of the conversation, she stood. “As for the creature under the lake—I thank you for the warning, but that has already been dealt with. If there’s nothing else, I’ll be taking my leave.”

“Minerva, Harry cannot be allowed to remain at Hogwarts. It’s far too dangerous.” Albus had, apparently recovered himself—what there was to recover, at any rate. He also stood and the chairs
vanished. “He must be properly trained to meet his destiny and, though you are an excellent teacher, I’m afraid you do not possess the knowledge necessary to do the job properly.”

“And I suppose you do?” Albus gave what Minerva was sure he thought was a gracious nod. Minerva gazed at him for a moment, then shook her head.

“Harry Potter and his education are no longer any of your concern, Albus. Take my advice and give up whatever scheme you’re hatching before it gets you arrested...again. Even if Minister Fudge keeps his job—which I highly doubt he will—he won’t pardon you a second time.”

“He’s coming back!” Albus was beginning to sound desperate. “I don’t care what Amelia Bones and Croaker think they’ve done—Voldemort is coming back and Harry Potter is the only one who can stop him!”

“Go home, Albus.” Minerva said, softly. “Go home and get some rest. Better yet, go to Saint Mungo’s and speak to one of their Mind Healers. Or go deep-sea diving in the Thames, if that’s what suits your fancy. I don’t really care. Just...don’t come back here. There is no place for you at Hogwarts anymore. She doesn’t need you and Harry Potter certainly doesn’t need you. Goodbye.” She turned and walked towards the entrance to the tunnel that would lead back to the castle.

“I’m sorry, Minerva.” Minerva didn’t hear the spell he cast, but felt the magic. She ducked and spun around, her wand in her hand. Before she could cast, however, her view of Albus was completely obscured by a wall of flame. The clarion call of a phoenix rang through her mind and the wall resolved itself into the shape of Pyrites, the phoenix formerly known as Fawkes. She had to blink several times to clear the dancing spots from her vision.

What she saw made her breath catch in her throat.

Albus was slumped against the far wall of the chamber, looking at the phoenix in sheer terror. His wand was no longer in his hand—it was in the bird’s talons. And it was starting to smoke.

“No!” he gasped. “Please....no!” Minerva watched in horrified fascination as the wood of the wand began to slowly crumble. It was only a matter of seconds before there was nothing left of it but a small pile of ash on the floor. Pyrites let out one more triumphant note, then disappeared as quickly as he had come.

:Albus Dumbledore has always had more power than was good for him. Hogwarts sounded both sad and reproachful. :In consequence, he has never bothered to think on the responsibility that those who hold such power must bear.

:He’s an adult. Minerva wondered if arguing with a castle meant that she was just as crazy as Albus. :Destroying his wand won’t break him the way it broke Hermione.

:Not in the same way, no. Minerva was startled by the words, but resolved to think of them more later. For now, she had other, more pressing matters to attend to.

“Albus?...Albus!” She had to say his name several times to get his attention. “Out of respect for our long years of friendship, I will not call the Aurors. However, it is clear that you pose a threat to me and to Hogwarts. Therefore, I cannot allow you to remain here. You are henceforth banned from all lands belonging to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, including the Dark Forest and the village of Hogsmeade. Good bye.” The last thing she saw of him before he disappeared was the mixture of shock and grief in his eyes.

With a sigh, Minerva turned and began the long walk back to the castle. She had several calls to
make. The children were due to arrive in a few days and she didn’t want Albus and his nonsense interfering with the way she ran her school.

She could already tell it was going to be a long year.

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AFTERWORD

September 1, 1992

Deep in the bowels of the Ministry lay the Department of Mysteries. The Department was far larger than most people realized. There were literally dozens of rooms that no one but the Unspeakables had ever entered.

One of those rooms was empty, save for a pedestal, on top of which sat a wide, shallow stone basin. The basin was filled with clear water. The surface of the water was rough—ripples spread out from various points, intersected, reflected back on themselves, and caused more ripples. All of this, however, occurred very, very slowly—it was as if the water had the consistency of molasses. There was also no apparent cause to the ripples. No breezes disturbed the air and the two men standing over the basin had already determined that they were the first to set foot in the room in at least 20 years.

“Well.” Mr. Smith said. “It’s never done that before.”

“It has, but it was long before your time.” Croaker examined the water carefully. “Last time it was like this was…1903, I believe. I had only been on the job a month and I nearly soiled myself the first time I came in here. Turned out it had been in that state for six months before anyone noticed.” He scowled. “That is why there is supposed to be someone in here at least once a week.”

“According to the log book, Greene has been coming in here every Tuesday morning, like clockwork, since July of ‘84.” Smith shook his head. “Clearly, that hasn’t been happening.”

“Given that Greene has been dead for nearly two years? I think that’s stating the obvious.” Smith winced. Technically, he was not responsible for this fiasco—the log book was kept and maintained by Miss Gray—but as Croaker’s second-in-command, he was Gray’s supervisor and he should have been more diligent about making sure she was doing her job properly. The dead man’s entries in the log book had only been discovered because Miss Gray had taken two weeks’ vacation for her wedding and honeymoon and Miss Scarlet, who had only recently joined the ranks of the Unspeakables, had been going over the old book on her own initiative.

Miss Gray didn’t know it yet, but she was out of a job. Smith had a meeting scheduled with Miss Scarlet to discuss her promotion.

“Any word on the identity of the ersatz Jones?” Croaker nodded, scowling.

“Athinus Carrow—younger brother of Amycus and Alecto. Works in the Floo Regulation office.”

“Hang on…I think I know him. Weedy looking fellow? Scar through his left eyebrow? Can barely string two sentences together?”

“That’s him.”

“How in Merlin’s name did he get down here?” Croaker let out a long-suffering sigh.
“He had inside help. I’ve got a team working on it.”

“Well, shit.” The two men stood in silence for a moment, before Smith gestured to the basin. “So, when did this happen? And what does it mean for us?”

“Let’s find out.” Croaker prodded at what he believed was the central point—the origin of the disturbance—with his wand. The air over the basin shimmered and an image of the Great Hall at Hogwarts appeared. The Hall was crowded with students. There was no sound or movement. It was, in fact, like looking at a Muggle photograph. Slowly, the view shifted and the focus narrowed, until they were looking at one bushy-haired little girl in Gryffindor robes. An elderly owl had collapsed into a plate of eggs on the table in front of her, a bright red envelope clutched in its talons. The girl’s face was locked in an expression of pleased surprise, while her hand reached out for the envelope.

Croaker waved his wand and the image froze. Another flick and a date appeared in golden letters.


It was Croaker’s turn to swear.

THE END....AND THE BEGINNING

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who has read, liked, and commented on this story. It means the world to me.

So - this story is actually a lot shorter than I had originally planned (this version is actually shorter than the one I posted to Rough Trade), but that’s okay. As my roommate pointed out, it makes an excellent prologue to the other stories.

And, I promise, there will be other stories. I’ve got plans for this universe

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!