

On Second Thoughts

Minerva studied the boys' faces and wondered when the true gravity of what they'd done would hit them. Would they ever understand how much harm they'd done? They were certainly quiet enough now. She sighed, and finished what she had to say. "If we find your things, we'll send them to your parents. Don't expect the Ministry to be merciful. Your arrogance has cost you dearly, boys. I hope you learn a lesson from it."

She watched the boys' faces as they turned to go. Maxwell Parsons and Philip Graves were intelligent boys, but didn't seem to have a knut's worth of empathy between them, and they still carried themselves with a hint of their usual swagger. Of course, it was possible that the tragedy resulting from their actions simply wasn't real to them yet. They seemed to have no concept, no understanding of what they'd done. Minerva couldn't allow that. It wasn't right. It wasn't fair to those who had suffered so much because of their actions.

"Wait!" she said, her tone imperious. The two boys turned and looked at her, then shivered when they saw the cold, hard expression in her eyes. "On second thoughts, I believe you should see the results of your folly. Come with me."

She glanced at Professor Flitwick, the boys' Head of House, who was beside himself with grief over the devastation caused by these boys: several students dead or dying, many others injured; three dragons and Sebastian, the giant squid, all dead; Hagrid injured; and Harry Potter horribly burned and mutilated, hovering between life and death after the dragon had fallen on him. Now Flitwick met the headmistress's eyes and gave a small nod. She nodded back as she swept past him and the two students and went through the office door, riding the spiral staircase down to the corridor. Flitwick brought up the rear, making sure the boys kept up with McGonagall's quick steps.

When they reached the Hospital Wing, McGonagall turned and glared at the boys. "You will see horrors here that may make you ill, or may make you want to cry out in shock. You. Will. Remain. Silent. You will guard your expressions so you don't upset them with looks of horror or disgust or anything else but kind-hearted sympathy. You will not disturb these patients in any way. If you do, I will make you wish you had not! Do you understand me?" Both boys swallowed hard and nodded. McGonagall's glasses flashed furiously for a moment and then she spun around and opened the door to the hospital wing as quietly as possible. She lifted a finger to her lips and made certain each boy saw her warning, then tiptoed down the aisle between beds, skirting the curtained area behind which Harry Potter was trying to rest after going through excruciating pain while being treated.

Harry's sons, Jamie and Siri, sat by the curtained area, feeling a bit relieved now that they'd had a chance to speak to their dad, but still worried sick. They knew he was still in very critical condition. Their mum was inside the curtained enclosure with him now, trying to find more ways to help and comfort him. The twins glanced up when the two professors and two boys in Ravenclaw robes passed them.

Maxwell and Philip glanced at the Potter twins, saw their pale, scared faces, their eyes a dark, turbulent green, exhaustion and heartache plain in their posture. Both boys turned their eyes away from the twins, following their headmistress's steps with dogged obedience.

Jamie and Siri looked from the Ravenclaw boys to their Cousin Minerva. They'd never seen such a thunderous expression on her face. Professor Flitwick looked so distressed, they thought he might be ill. The twins wondered if these boys were brothers of some of the injured or dead students. As the group moved on, Jamie and Siri looked at each other and shrugged. They felt sorry for the boys, who looked as if they were dreading something.

"Wonder who they are?" Jamie said as he watched the group move on.

"Dunno. What d'you suppose has Cousin Minerva so worked up?" Siri said, watching the headmistress's straight back and tense posture. "I've never seen her that upset."

Jamie sat quietly, watching the group walk away, thinking about what they'd seen. "I don't think she's upset," he said wisely. "I think she's angry."

"Glad she's not that angry with us," Siri said with a shudder.

Jamie sat up straighter as a thought occurred to him. "She's not just angry, she's *furious* with those blokes, isn't she?" he said. He turned to his twin. "What two boys from Ravenclaw do you think she'd be that angry with?"

Siri gasped. "The ones who stole the eggs and started all of this!" he growled. His eyes flashed livid green fire, matched by the rage in Jamie's eyes. "They nearly killed Dad!"

"Let's go and listen to what's going on," Jamie said, getting to his feet and starting to follow the group.

"Boys?" Ginny called, peeping out from the curtained area. "Would you help me a minute?"

Both boys glared at the backs of the Ravenclaws now being dragged between beds on one side of the room, then turned to their mother. "What can we do?" Jamie asked, knowing that caring for his father was more important than revenge at the moment.

"Jamie, would you go bring me a bowl of clean water and a flannel? Your father's sweating with pain again and I want to wash his face." She looked

worn out herself now. "It should comfort him a bit."

"OK," he said, running to the supply cabinet.

"Siri, you can help me in here," she said to her second son, who followed her inside.

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Professors McGonagall and Flitwick led the boys from bed to bed, asking whoever was working there to tell them the extent of each person's injuries. The professors spoke encouraging words to the patients who were awake and words of comfort to their families, but Maxwell and Philip remained silent, glancing apprehensively at McGonagall from time to time. Several times they were forced to swallow the bile that threatened to overwhelm them. They knew better than to be ill in front of McGonagall when she'd specifically forbidden it.

They stopped at one bed where a tiny first year girl was gasping for breath. She'd been crushed by the falling stones of Ravenclaw Tower. Her parents sat weeping by her bed, unable to hold her hands or brush the hair off her damp forehead because she was so badly injured and in agony despite high doses of pain potion. Professor McGonagall looked over the parents' bowed heads at the Healer working on the child. He held her look and gave a minimal shake of his head, then went back to work on the child.

Suddenly, the girl exhaled a long breath and didn't inhale again. The mother began to wail, the father sobbing as he tried to comfort his wife. McGonagall dug hard, sharp fingers into the shoulders of the two culprits and pulled them away from the grieving parents. Professor Flitwick stayed to try to comfort the couple, wiping his own streaming eyes as he pulled the curtain around the bed for privacy.

Maxwell and Philip swallowed hard, their eyes wide and frightened now, their faces pale as they stared at the closed curtain. Their swaggers were gone now.

"Do you see? *You* caused that child's death with your stupid, irresponsible actions," McGonagall hissed, her back ramrod straight, her nostrils pinched and white, her lips thin and angry. "Not the dragon. You. Do you understand what you've done?"

Both boys nodded, glancing toward the hospital wing doors, hoping she'd let them leave now.

"No, I don't think you do," she said after watching their faces for a moment. "Come along." They stopped by several other beds, staying for just a moment or two with each patient. Fortunately, no others died while they were there.

Finally, they reached the end of the hospital wing and entered a curtained area. Six beds stood silently in this area, each with a small, still form covered in a sheet.

"No, I don't—" Maxwell began, trembling as he turned to leave. Philip stayed silent, his face plainly terrified.

"Yes, you will," McGonagall snapped, shoving him further into the enclosure. She led them from bed to bed, pulling back the sheet and forcing the boys to look at the battered, mangled bodies lying there. The boys gagged and swallowed hard, remembering McGonagall's injunction against reacting in any way.

When she covered up the last body, something caught her attention, making Minerva look up toward the ceiling. Three ghosts hovered there uncertainly.

"Ah, there you are," the headmistress said kindly, smiling a bit at each ghost. "Don't be afraid. I'm sorry to tell you that you died. You don't have to stay here now. There's a wonderful world waiting for you if you'll just go toward the light."

"The light?" one of the ghosts, a second-year girl, said uncertainly. Golden curls framed her face, giving her an angelic look that tugged at McGonagall's heart..

"Look up, dear," Minerva said in a gentle voice. "I can't see it, but you should be able to." She pointed toward the ceiling and watched their faces. "Do you see it?"

"I see it!" the ghost of a dark-haired boy said excitedly. He raised his arm and pointed. "There it is! See it?" The others nodded and began chattering excitedly.

"Just go toward it, and you'll be fine," McGonagall said, tears welling in her eyes as they followed her instructions. "You were wonderful students. I enjoyed having you in class. Don't linger," she warned as the two boys looked back toward them. "The light doesn't stay for long, I'm told."

"Thanks," one of the boys said, then turned and followed the others. Soon all of them were gone, leaving Professor McGonagall weeping and the two culprits shaking.

With a mighty effort, Minerva managed to stop crying, swiping angrily at the tears before facing the two boys again. Maxwell had crumpled to the floor, crying as silently as he could. Philip stood stony-faced, biting his lip to keep himself from reacting in any way.

Minerva watched the two boys, her teacher's heart wanting to comfort them, but the six small bodies on the beds before her reminded her why they were there. "Get up, Mr. Parsons," she snapped at Maxwell. "We're not finished yet."

Both boys gaped at her. "W-w-we're not?" Maxwell gasped as he struggled to his feet.

Philip shook his head over and over, muttering "No-no-no-no-no!"

"Yes," Minerva snapped, grabbing each boy's shoulder and shoving them toward the curtain. "We have one more stop to make, and I promise you, if you make a sound of any kind, or if you have anything less than a pleasant expression on your face the entire time, you will regret it more than anything in your life. Do you understand me?"

The boys nodded, biting their lips and trudging beside her up the aisle between beds. Their little procession stopped at the curtained area where the two Ravenclaws had seen the Potter twins. The boys shuddered and resisted as McGonagall pushed them toward the curtain.

"Do not disobey me in any way or I will hex you," she snarled.

The boys gulped and turned toward the curtain, but still didn't step through it.

Minerva squeezed each boy's shoulder, a bit more painfully than necessary. "Remember. Pleasant expressions and not a single sound. Clear?"

They nodded and stepped through the curtain with her.

"Ginny, dear, I'm so sorry to disturb you," Minerva murmured kindly to Ginny, who was bent over Harry with her back to the newcomers. "I just wanted to see how he is."

"He's on a huge dose of pain potion," Ginny said, trying not to snifle as she turned toward the headmistress. "He's dozing a bit from time to time." She looked at the two boys, exhaustion and grief plain on her face. "More injuries? Where are you hurt, boys?"

"They aren't injured," Minerva said quickly. "I'm teaching."

"Ah, I see," Ginny said, so distracted by her worry about Harry that she didn't really "see" at all.

Her sons, standing beside her, knew exactly who those boys were. They'd sat outside their father's curtained area again after helping their mum and seen the boys going from bed to bed with an obviously furious headmistress and a horribly grieving Flitwick. Flitwick had dropped out of the procession at one point, staying in an area where a curtain had been drawn quite suddenly. Jamie and Siri had seen that happen enough by this time to know that it signified nothing good, especially when they could hear the wailing of the parents until someone thought to put a Silencing Charm on that area. Jamie and Siri had been called in to help their mother again just as Minerva was taking the two Ravenclaw boys into the enclosure where the bodies lay.

"Jamie?" Harry whispered to the son standing closest to him. Even without his glasses, he could see the small mole behind Jamie's left ear, the only difference between them, which most people never noticed.

"Yes?"

"Who's here?" Harry didn't have his glasses on, so he was seeing a tall, thin woman in black he thought must be Minerva, and two students. Why were they here?

"It's Cousin Minerva and a couple of students, Dad," Jamie murmured. "Don't worry about them. Just rest."

"Are you thirsty, sweetheart?" Ginny said, bending down to be on his eye level.

"Yes." He did his best to smile at her.

"Water or pumpkin juice?" she asked as she ran a gentle finger tenderly down the undamaged side of his face. He was lying on his side and floating a bit above the bed so he'd be as comfortable as possible given his extensive wounds. He had a lightweight blanket covering his hips for modesty's sake, but his horribly burned torso, with its deep gashes from the dragon's claws, was there for anyone to see.

"Water." He sighed, wishing he wasn't so weak. Talking was a real effort for him.

"Siri," Ginny began, then smiled as her son approached with a goblet of cool water already in his hands, a straw in it to help his father drink. "Thanks."

Siri held the glass while Jamie and Ginny worked together to lift Harry's head a bit. When he was finished, he smiled his thanks and relaxed again, watching his family move around him.

Ginny glanced up at Minerva. "If you want to speak to him, this would be a good time. He just had another dose of potion, so he'll be asleep again soon."

Minerva leaned down and murmured, "Stay here," to the boys, then went and bent over Harry, who seemed to be only about half-awake now. She whispered something to him and then smoothed his hair off his sweaty face and kissed his forehead. When she straightened up, she smiled at him, as warm a smile as anyone had ever seen from Minerva McGonagall. The smile Harry tried to give her nearly broke her heart. His spirit was strong, but his body was so badly damaged. She continued to smile at him until his eyes drifted shut. Minerva cleared her throat and wiped away the tears that were resisting her strict emotional control, then turned and hugged Ginny.

"Let me know if there's anything, and I do mean anything, that I can do for you, or if you need something," Minerva said as she released the younger woman.

"I will. Thanks," Ginny said, trying to smile.

"You look shattered. Why don't I have another bed brought in here for you so you can rest?"

“No, I need to stay awake to check on him,” Ginny replied, rubbing the back of her wrist across her forehead wearily. “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not, but you will be,” Minerva said, giving the young woman’s shoulder a fond squeeze.

Ginny glanced up at her as a thought struck her. “Oh, is that chair I used to sit in still here? That squashy old thing I slept in when I was watching over him here while we were in school?”

“I’m sure it’s around somewhere,” Minerva said. “I’ll find it, have it cleaned if necessary, and send it up as soon as I can.”

“Thanks.” Ginny went back to tending her husband, her concentration fully on him again.

“Are you boys all right? Do you need anything?” Minerva asked the twins kindly.

“We need Dad to get well, that’s all,” Siri said, gazing at his father with sad eyes. His eyes hardened as he looked at the two boys standing near the curtain, but he didn’t say anything else.

“Well, let me know if you do,” Minerva said as she patted each of the Potter boys on the shoulder.

“We will,” Jamie replied, giving her a wan smile.

Minerva looked at Harry once more and sighed before retuning to the Ravenclaw boys. She turned them sharply toward the curtain and pushed them through it. They were heading toward the doors of the hospital wing when she felt two spells fly past her. She spun around, catching Jamie and Siri both with murderous looks on their faces, their wands pointed at Maxwell and Philip. Maxwell now sported huge stalks of rhubarb from his ears, nose and mouth, while Philip was battling the biggest batch of Bat Bogeys Minerva had ever seen. She stifled a laugh and mouthed *well done* to the Potter twins as she shoved the two Ravenclaws through the door.

“I think I’ll just leave you like that for a while,” she said with satisfaction as she steered them toward the Great Hall where their parents and Aurors were waiting for them. She finally took pity on Maxwell and removed the rhubarb from his nose so he could breathe, but Philip, who’d been unmoved for most of their tour of the hospital wing, was left to battle the Bat Bogeys on his own. With no wand and no knowledge of the spell, he had no chance of reversing it. Students they passed in the hall stared wide-eyed at the two boys, then moved off murmuring together.

Good, Minerva thought, thinking more like a relative of the Potters than a headmistress at the moment. *Maybe now the other students will learn that it’s dangerous to bother the Potters!*

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As the Aurors led Maxwell and Philip away, Minerva sighed. Both boys’ parents were broken-hearted. They’d had such high hopes for their intelligent, creative sons, but had ignored their latent arrogance. Look where that intelligence and arrogance had taken them – a one-way ticket to Azkaban. The evidence was indisputable, and the boys had confessed. With so many students hurt, the Ministry would push this trial to the top of the list to get it behind them. These boys wouldn’t be in the Ministry’s holding cells for long. Minerva was certain of that.

Minerva looked around the Great Hall, seeing clusters of students here and there talking quietly, or consoling each other as they cried. *Back to work*, she thought, and went about the business of comforting her students and getting her school back to normal as quickly as possible. And at the top of her “to do” list was finding that chair and sending it to Ginny so she’d be comfortable as she watched over Harry again.