

In His Name

by moiramountain

"We will not speak his name for fear of losing him forever." Bearing the weight of the Dark Lord's curse, Severus is hidden away under the protection of a trio of Secret Keepers and a Muggle Knowing One. Will it be love -- or an obligation -- that frees him?

Chapter One: Honoring the Intent

Chapter 1 of 14

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Author's Notes: The first four chapters of this story were REVISED and EXPANDED from their original posting. I take no credit for those characters who belong to J.K. and I thank her for allowing me to begin a new journey with them.

Some of the Welsh in this first chapter--(I'm not a Welsh speaker so if any are, please do feel free to correct me).

Hust, ngh, hust - Hush, dogs, hush.

Hawddamor, da ddewines, da brudiwr. - Welcome, good witch, good wizard.

Cwn annwn - Hounds of the underworld

Duine sidhe - The harbinger of Death

'R lath chan brudiwr - The wand of a wizard

Ymwroli - Take heart

Chapter One: Honoring the Intent

Old beyond memory, gouged from the earth by fists of glacial ice, the Valley of Gwaun rests at the mouth of the Abergwaun beneath the shadow of Carn Ingli, the Mountain of Angels. The hills bear traces of primal forests, with the ruins of henges and long-abandoned stone buildings scattered among them. A hearty and resourceful lot, the people of this Valley still honor the Old Ways, aiding neighbor or stranger as needed and respecting the heart's desire of any who seek sanctuary in a place so shrouded in solitude.

Cleaving to the top of one such hill, encircled by birch groves shivering pale against the surrounding heath, stand the remains of a fortress dating back to those times when the Romans came in conquest. A solitary man, Gareth Islwyn, makes his home there. As is the custom, the Valley folk refer to him simply as "Gareth the Healer," believing he is beloved by those who inhabit the Otherworld and that he is fey, kin to the Tlwyth Teg, "The Good People."

His features are hewn by weather and age, marked by fog-grey eyes that look away into the past. No one is quite certain of his true age. Small in stature, wiry and tough as

a tree root, he stands resilient and strong, belying his years. Thick grey hair, threaded with crow's wing black, pulled into a long plait, runs down his back, contrasting with skin darkened by the sun and the distant bloodline of those long-departed Roman warriors.

He is a familiar sight everywhere in the Valley, trekking the hills on foot or on horseback, his dogs at his heels, gathering all manner of healing plants and elements, watching over the Addoldai, the sacred places. Like most in the Valley, he honors the Christ for His sacrifice and loves the Blessed Virgin for Her gentle intervention, regarding both as manifestations of far older Deities and the ways of Magick. Many stories are told about him, and those who have known him the longest claim all are true—at least in part.

While still a boy, he understood "The Good People" had indeed twice blessed him...granting him the gift of empathy and the clarity of vision to perceive the aura of magic. Knowing early on that his path would be that of Knowing One and Healer, for him the stories of dewinesau and brudwyr were never mere tales—they were fact. As he grew in age and wisdom, his gifts had allowed him to encounter more than a few who were clothed in great magic, but regrettably, such occurrences were becoming far rarer of late.

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Shortly after moonset on a mist-shrouded May morning, tending his hives tucked amongst the slender birches, Gareth was keenly alert, scarcely able to concentrate on his work. His dreams over the last several nights had been foreboding, full of undefined flickering images, brilliant flashes of light, cries of anguish and exaltation... and eyes... eyes set in phantom faces he could not see clearly.

Beautiful green eyes... youthful springs of hope and honor. Gentle blue eyes... ageless wells of wisdom and unceasing love. Piercing red eyes... soul-rended pits of madness and nameless obsession. Riveting black eyes... bitter chasms of rage and devouring loneliness.

These haunting visions had wrenched him from a restless sleep, urging him into the grove to work and ponder, to calm his mind in anticipation of some extraordinary event. The energy of magic quivered in the air, thrumming like the bees he tended.

And so it was that they arrived... with a sharp crack like rock splitting asunder... a cluster of individuals appearing on the crest of the nearby hillside. Gareth's mind raced with anticipation as he perceived the auras of both witch and wizard, their magic shining around them in a nimbus of light that slowly faded.

There were three. One a regal woman in dark tartan robes, a witch whose dignity and courage were as a shield before her, the eyes behind her square spectacles exhibiting sharp intelligence and deep sorrow, standing stalwart as a lioness guarding and watching. Close behind her towered an enormous man, tall and broad as an ancestral oak, with hair and beard thick and wild as the brush which tangles on the flanks of mountains. Tracks of tears dried upon his face, his bright eyes sweeping the surrounding hills, he carried the third person in his arms with a massive strength which seemed barely restrained, as though he were prepared to do battle in defense of the burden he carried.

Gareth focused his attention on this third person... white as a sliver of bone, deathly still, slight as a youth in those huge arms, without defense other than the shelter they provided. Long, oily, raven hair matted with gore and sweat fell across the man's brow, veiling the harsh profile of a hawk, the gaunt face blank as silent stone. No light shone from him, only the rising darkness of impending death. His limp body was dressed in black robes bearing the stains of violent struggle, with the blood-soaked remnants of a once-snowy collar encircling a torn and swollen throat.

As silently as the rising mists, the group approached the grove where Gareth waited, his dogs circling anxiously around his feet, whining for reassurance. Quieting the dogs with a low "Hust, ngh, hust," he hastily pulled off his netted hat and canvas gauntlets, dropping them to the ground, momentarily regretting that he would greet such visitors in nothing better than worn corduroys and a faded woolen work shirt.

Advancing ahead of the others, the witch halted a few feet away from him, extending her open hands, the right cupped within the left in indication of peaceful purpose and great need, inquiring in a low but resonant voice, "You are the Knowing One who is called Gareth the Healer?"

Presenting his hands in the same fashion, left within right, thereby receiving her unspoken entreaty, he nodded, "I am Gareth Islwyn."

Remaining in this solemn attitude, the witch made response, her eyes keenly searching his face.

"You reveal yourself with this 'I am' and allow me power over you, should I choose to take it. Is that your intention? "

"Such is the Old Magick," Gareth replied in the cadence of ritual. "I offer you the trust of my true name. And will you do likewise?" He lowered his eyes in deference, awaiting her decision.

Standing arrow straight, she answered in quiet affirmation, "I am Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress, and Professor of Transfiguration... but Professor will suffice."

Carefully shifting the weight of the man in his arms before coming closer, her enormous companion raised his shaggy head, his voice a muted rumble.

"I am Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of the Keys an' Grounds, Professor of Care of Magical Creatures. Jus' Hagrid ter most that know me."

Lifting his eyes, Gareth nodded to each in turn, "Hawddamor, da ddewines, da brudiwr." He understood that while much had just been revealed, far more remained hidden.

Gazing on the lifeless figure in Hagrid's arms, Gareth queried gently, "What name, then, acknowledges this man, whom Death is seeking?"

Gesturing towards the rolling heath, he continued, "Corpse candles have shone on our hills for three nights running, and the cwn annwn have been heard growling, foretelling someone's coming with Death at his side."

Hagrid began to speak, but was quickly silenced by a firm look from the witch as she cautioned, "His name must not be spoken." Hearing his gasp of protest, she gently admonished him.

"No, Hagrid, my intention is not to shun him, but only to protect him. We will not speak his name for fear of losing him forever."

Her voice constricted, masking all emotion, she turned back to Gareth.

"He lives, Healer, although we hardly believed it when we found him. We're not certain whether it's Dark Arts or some unknown protection which keeps him alive... It could well be both. He has been bitten, poisoned by the venom of an awful snake which served a Dark master. His bleeding has slowed, but he does not respond to our efforts to wake him."

As she spoke, Hagrid lowered himself slowly to take a seat on a low stone wall, taking great care to be gentle with his burden. Grim-faced, Minerva bent beside him, taking one of the pale wizard's hands in hers, as though seeking assurance that some vestige of life still lingered.

Gareth stepped closer to stand before Hagrid, reaching out to touch his huge forearm, but respectfully avoiding contact with the man he carried. Looking into those bright eyes, welling with concern and compassion, he deemed it proper to address his next question directly to this great guardian of magical creatures.

"Will you give permission for me to touch his thoughts?"

Some silent agreement was achieved in the look which passed between Hagrid and Minerva, and with a nod, his request was granted, though the witch's expression remained uneasy, and she did not release her hold on the wounded wizard.

Placing one hand on his own heart, the other on the pallid man's dank brow, Gareth leaned close to whisper a Charm of Accord, the Unoliaeth, into his ear.

"As thou to me and I to thee, in breath and blood may one life be. In sense and thought, may one mind be. May Oneness be, as thou to me and I to thee. If you permit, so may it be. I wish it so, so may it be."

His breathing slowing into a deep and measured pace, Gareth's lids drooped as he sank swiftly into trance, but only an instant passed before he lurched back, gasping with agonized sobs for breath. Groping wildly, desperately, for something out of reach, he wavered glassy-eyed and ashen, with the rattle of death in his throat. Hagrid flung out one massive hand to catch him as he slumped to the ground, Minerva dropping to her knees beside him, seizing his face between her hands, commanding his attention.

"Healer Islwyn... listen to me... end this joining... release from him. You are Gareth Islwyn only... Do not remain with him."

Gareth curled onto his side, retching and panting with pain, shivering violently with cold, his hands still struggling in a frenzied effort to touch the unseen. His voice began to rise in a thin wail, a desolate keening that struck Minerva sick with dread.

"Merlin protect us, Hagrid... what possessed me to permit him to even try such a thing. Healer, please... I should not have allowed you... Return now... we are here with you. Leave him... leave..."

Minerva sat back on her heels, pulling the heavy cloak from around her shoulders to throw over Gareth, watching him closely as his eyes began to clear and his breathing slowed, murmuring to him in reassurance, "The joining is ended, come back, come back," until his hands at last lay quiet, and his wretched lament fell silent.

Gingerly sitting up after a moment, Gareth took a shuddering breath before slowly rising to his feet, supported by Minerva's steady hand.

"Healer Islwyn, what did you see?"

She no longer bothered to keep the sharp edge of anxiety from her voice. Watching to be sure Gareth was not about to collapse again, Hagrid stood as well, his face almost as pale as that of the man he carried.

Gareth remained motionless, only his eyes moving, a pendulum of sadness that swung reluctantly to each of their faces. When he spoke, his voice was raw, as though he had been sobbing... or screaming... for hours.

"He is... there... but I could not see him. Strange for me... not to see him... His presence feels... splintered. I could not move beyond his pain... Nothing I could reach... nothing to hold onto... only a terrible darkness... and cold... forbidding me to enter..."

"You cried out with the voice of the duine sidhe," Minerva whispered, as though fearful she might waken that forlorn wail once again.

Gareth hesitated, releasing another ragged breath before responding, knowing his words would be devastating for them to hear.

"I felt... agony... a despair that cannot be comforted... drifting and alone..."

Covering his face for a moment with his hands, regaining focus, Gareth abruptly turned to leave the grove, motioning for them to follow. Hastily retrieving her cloak from the ground, Minerva immediately fell into step beside him, with Hagrid close behind, muttering to the man in his arms.

"Yeh jus' were never right, were yeh... always by yerself like some bitter ol' dragon in yer dungeon... and now see where yer at... off in some place where no one can do anythin' fer yeh. Yeh shoulda' told us... it wasn't right not ter tell us... Harry says it was Dumbledore an' yeh agreed ter all a' this, but yeh shoulda' said..."

His voice trailed away when Minerva turned back, urging him into silence, "Hagrid, please, he cannot answer and we must hurry."

Gareth quickly led them into the fortress tower, up steeply winding stone steps to a spacious room, the walls lined with heavily-laden shelves and cupboards, a high bed placed under one of the wide windows looking out across the Valley.

Though he struggled to climb the twisting steps and pass through the narrow doorway, Hagrid refused to relinquish his burden, not until he had carefully laid the unconscious man on the bed.

The Healer observed respectfully as for the first time a wand appeared, Minerva speaking soft incantations, placing protective wards, with Hagrid close beside her. He felt the full presence and force of their magic, as he silently cast his own blessing charm upon the room.

Crossing to the hearth where a stone basin sat among glowing embers, releasing the pungent vapors of steeping herbs, Gareth rolled his sleeves and began to drop clean linen cloths into the steaming water, his manner shifted now...no longer the mystic Knowing One in kindred with his patient's torment, but the well-trained Healer, assessing the needs of a broken body.

"Those robes and the other clothing must be removed, and the wound thoroughly cleaned before I can proceed. That, and warmth slowly brought back into him as well... not too rapidly... As long as he's so cold, the bleeding will remain slowed and whatever venom held somewhat in check... His body has fallen into some degree of stasis... but if he remains this cold for too long, his heart will stop entirely."

Her wand still in her hand, Minerva stood firmly between Gareth and the bed, shaking her head, frowning.

"He rarely permits anyone to touch him, even those he's known for years."

Cocking his head, Gareth looked up, frowning in his turn.

"Well now, I'd say I've already done so, wouldn't you? I can't help him, if you'll not allow me to touch him."

Minerva squared her shoulders, her guard up.

"That's hardly the point, of course you must. But he detests being fussed over... It should be Hagrid or me to deal with such matters as his robes. He's so particular about their appearance..." Her tone softened, "... but his hair is always such a..."

Her voice cracked, and Hagrid reached to comfort her with a pat on the shoulder, careful not to unsteady her with the weight of his great hand.

"I'll do this part, Professor. He'll not know it was me, and even if 'e does, still it's what I do best, carin' fer poor creatures... 'specially them as snap an' bite 'cause they're hurt so bad. Let me do this fer 'im, and when e's cleaned up some, I'll call fer yeh."

He shrugged with a soft chuckle when she looked askance, her eyes narrowed and questioning.

"Well, it'd be all right then, wouldn't it? If 'is eyes were ter open, at least it'd be me e'd see... and it's that might make 'im angry enough ter bring 'im round... back maybe from wherever it is this good Healer says e's at..."

His tone more serious, he turned back to Gareth.

"Take the Professor downstairs then, would yeh please, Healer, while I tend to 'im? She's about ter drop 'erself, and 'e surely wouldn't want 'er 'ere fer this."

Realizing that his patient's immediate care had been taken out of his hands, Gareth issued his instructions.

"No doubt, Hagrid, you'll handle this easily enough, but I'll warn you to be very careful. I've no idea what is keeping this man alive. The venom is certainly deadly, and his

blood may now be a poison as well. Don't allow either to touch you. Work quickly as you can but be thorough. I do believe this man should be dead, and I'm not certain it's a blessing to him that he's not."

Nodding to acknowledge he understood, Hagrid turned away while shedding his enormous overcoat, rummaging in one cavernous pocket to pull out what Gareth could clearly see was an umbrella, all the while murmuring a litany of comfort, as though to some wounded beast from his forest.

"S'all right then, s'only me, an' yeh know I don' mean ter harm yeh... Stay quiet now an' don' fight me... s'only Hagrid... yeh know me and yer goin' ter have ter trust me... I'm truly sorry fer yer hurt..."

"With your permission, then, Professor," Gareth motioned towards the door, a tiny smile twitching the corners of his mouth. Minerva's only response was a brusque nod as she concealed her wand within her robes and preceded him from the room.

At the bottom of the steps, she paused for a moment, shivering with exhaustion. Slipping his hand under her elbow, Gareth directed her to sit by the fire in his sitting room before he hurried into the adjacent kitchen. Returning momentarily with two mugs and a plate of bara brith, he handed one steaming cup to her, and sitting opposite, cradled the other in his gnarled hands.

"Drink that tea while it's hot. There's a healthy dose of whisky in it should lift your spirits some, and you must take a bite of food as well." Seeing her hesitation, he raised his own mug, urging with gentle insistence, "Go on then. You're no good to him if you fall ill yourself. Hagrid knows exactly what to do, and I'll go back up in a moment." Taking a deep swallow of his tea and a bite of the currant bread, he waited until she had done the same, a faint flush of color rising in her cheeks.

"Now, you must tell me, da ddewines, who is this man, and why have you brought him to me, for in truth I don't know that I can heal him. I may only be able to ease his death."

Warming her hands on the comforting mug, Minerva paused, choosing her words carefully before she answered.

"Certainly you recognize us for what we are. Perhaps you already know... those without inherent magic, we refer to as Muggle. Our Ministry has always kept an accounting of unique Muggles such as you... those with deeper understanding... Healers and Knowing Ones who recognize and honor the Old Magick and are willing to shelter one of us should there be the need. Your perceptions... your empathy... I made note of you long ago for those abilities, although I fear I placed you in peril by allowing you to join with this particular wizard. I confess, he was not the one I expected I might need to bring to you."

Gareth folded his arms and leaned back, absorbing her words in silence before responding.

"Our... encounter... was indeed... unnerving... far more than I expected. I'll be better prepared before making another attempt... for both our sakes. As weak as he is, there's a rage, a great ferocity of will, in him. Perhaps that's keeping him alive. But I question your reasoning in not taking him to your own Healers. Their knowledge is surely greater than mine, and they'd have far better success in treating such a wound."

Setting her cup down carefully, Minerva picked up a small wooden box with intricate knots carved on all its surfaces. "Your work?" she asked, and Gareth nodded. Thoughtfully, she traced the carvings with her slender fingers as she continued.

"His story is like these knots, twisting and turning, doubling back on itself. Most of it I'm not prepared to reveal just yet, but I will tell you he is a brilliant Potions master, a powerful wizard with exceptional skills of mind. He was struck down in a terrible battle which ended only hours ago. It is not safe for him in our world... he must be hidden in yours."

Hearing a disturbance behind her, she turned as Hagrid, bending low to clear the doorway, entered the room, shaking his head in dismay. Gareth stood at once, clearly expecting an immediate report on his patient.

"There's no wakin' 'im. I near smothered 'im in blankets an' all, but e's so wretched cold 'e don' even shiver. He sighed once when I was washin' the blood an' that foul muck from 'is neck... an ugly thing that wound is... but so faint I 'ardly 'eard 'im. I thought it were 'is last breath. I was hopin' ter have 'im snarlin' at me in that way of 'is... I'd 'ave far rather 'eard that..."

"And the bleeding?" Gareth asked over his shoulder as he maneuvered past Hagrid towards the stairway.

"Thas' mostly stopped, but maybe 'cause there's 'ardly any blood left in 'im."

Tight-lipped, Gareth nodded and with no further comment disappeared back up the stone stairway.

Hagrid bowed his head, and having no task to occupy him, began to wander around the room aimlessly, knocking the table askew, tangling his shaggy head in the bundles of drying herbs overhead, startling the dogs dozing by the fire, and causing general havoc. Hurrying to his side before his great bulk could destroy Gareth's tidy dwelling, Minerva steered him towards the door that opened onto the yard.

"Hagrid, stop this blundering about, please. We've been away too long... We must return before we're missed, and I need to concoct a reason for the absence of his body. Wait for me on the hill. I have one other matter to resolve with Healer Islwyn before we may leave."

His face set with grim determination, Hagrid nodded in agreement and negotiated his way outside, as Minerva hurriedly climbed the stone steps to the tower infirmary.

Entering the room, she breathed in the fresh sweetness of hyssop and the rich bite of clove that permeated the air. Having removed his work-stained shirt, Gareth had filled a large earthen bowl with the steaming herb-infused water from the stone basin and was scrubbing his face, hands, and arms vigorously. Without a word, Minerva crossed the room and sank to her knees beside the bed. Having finished his ablutions, Gareth was pulling on a clean linen shirt when he glanced up and saw that she had dropped her head onto her clenched hands and that she was trembling. He stepped quickly to her side, gravely concerned, and was shaken by the raw emotion on her face when she lifted her head.

"I cursed him, Healer Islwyn. I cursed him as a coward and a murderer. I raised my wand against him, and he fled from me."

"Was it you, then, who summoned the serpent? Is this your doing?" he exclaimed in horror, motioning to the unconscious man.

"No, not this, never this... but I would gladly have seen him dead at my feet," she answered.

"But why, how is that even possible when now you bring him to me for protection and healing?" Gareth demanded.

Her response was barely audible.

"He killed someone I loved."

Gareth's eyes clouded, recalling the moments of Unoliaeth.

"I've seen terrible curses placed by certain of your folk and some of mine as well. When I touched him... there was an emptiness of mind approaching madness... yet I felt as though he was searching... desperately searching... Do you know what he seeks?"

Minerva could only shake her head and whisper, "It could be many things."

Gareth hesitated, hoping for something more.

"I will do all that I can to heal his body," he sighed, "but a shattered mind is another matter. He may remain a Wanderer Between for days, months... years. If I overcome this wound and he lives, he may wake... if he chooses... and if he's able. But if he's held there by some dark magic, you'll have to reveal far more than you have, or we cannot call him back."

Her face pinched with weariness, Minerva reminded him, "I did caution you, Healer. But be assured, we will abandon neither of you."

Silence followed this pronouncement until the Healer asked, "What do you ask of me, Minerva McGonagall?"

She answered without hesitation.

"I ask that you protect him, whether he lives or passes through the Veil. His true name will be kept from you, at least for a time. Many of us are able to trace even the echo of a name, and those in Darkness will be seeking revenge in his death. Many who serve the Light would condemn him to a horrible imprisonment because they're unwilling or unable to comprehend the price he's already paid. Only a few truly know how much is owed him."

"This War of yours is not ended, then?" Gareth asked.

"A dark wizard has been defeated, but such wars are never ended." Minerva sighed. "They're only postponed for a while. One evil ends, but there is always another close behind, and the darkness rises again. It's no different in your world, after all."

Her demeanor changing, Minerva suddenly stood, hurling a challenge into the brightening morning air.

"Gareth Islwyn, do you understand the obligation of a Life Debt, or the severity of an Unbreakable Vow? These things hold the most powerful magic and they are not to be considered lightly."

The Healer responded with equal fervor, his eyes locked on hers.

"If you believed that only those with magic might accept such a Debt or swear such a Vow, you'd not have brought him here, and you'd not be seeking my help."

A ghost of a smile flitted across the witch's face.

"My apologies, Healer Islwyn, for my harshness. I would not require such a Vow from you, but I would ask you to honor the intent. This man accepted his own Life Debt, bitter as it was to him, and he fulfilled an Unbreakable Vow... with great courage. His need is honorable, but if you cannot trust this, we will take him and go."

Gareth's response was somber and resolute.

"You have acknowledged me as Knowing One and Healer. No one in my care leaves this place unless they wish to, and I'll not permit any one to be dragged from my home by force to suffer and die alone. I must do as you ask or betray my own nature. You have my word."

Their eyes remained fastened, an unprecedented Vow now bridging the gap between Magical and Muggle, until Gareth broke the silence.

"He must have a name, though for a time he'll not understand. As he starts to associate my voice with relief from pain, the sound of this name will be soothing. Something in the old tongue would do well. This man is valuable to you." A strange expression flickered in the witch's eyes before she nodded. "And you've spoken of his courage. In the old language, the name Neirin means 'treasured' and Maldwyn is 'courageous friend'. Let him be called Neirin Maldwyn while he remains with me."

Minerva gave a sadly wry smile, looking down at the bloodless face of the wizard.

"Neirin Maldwyn... it's a good name. I would say it suits you. Hecate knows how livid you'd be about it though. No doubt you'd declare us all loathsomely sentimental, but you must accept this name for a little while. It has no resemblance to your own, and it may help to keep you hidden."

She knelt again beside the bed, gently touching the man's empty countenance, her own face etched with misery, speaking to him as though he might respond to the anguished appeal in her voice.

"In spite of yourself, you should have trusted me enough... This is not what he intended... surely you knew that..." She took one icy hand in hers. "What must we do to help you? If this had happened to any one of us... we would have come to you for advice... even he would have come to you..."

Gareth had been moving quietly about the room, opening cupboards and drawers, gathering sundry items, but now he moved to stand behind her, troubled and bemused. Indeed, as she had said, this man's story was epic in its complexity. He stepped back as Minerva rose stiffly to her feet, watching as she reached into a pocket hidden in the lining of her robes. From it, she produced an ebony wand, without adornment, stark in its simplicity. Balancing it carefully on the palm of her left hand, she extended it towards him.

"His?" he inquired quietly, already knowing the answer.

"Yes," she responded, her voice heavy with regret.

In all his years, Gareth had never touched the wand of a true wizard. He made no attempt to do so now, though the wand was easily within his grasp.

"Da ddewines, why would you tempt me so? I am no wizard. I may not raise a wizard's wand, or even receive it into my hand, you know that..."

With an authority as encompassing as her robes, she replied, "Forgive me. A final test for you, Gareth Islwyn. If you had reached to take his wand from my hand, we could not have left him here with you, no matter how great your skills as a Healer."

He bowed his head, understanding that this temptation had been offered in challenge to his humility and acceptance of his place in the greater scheme.

"But 'r lath chan brudiwr who has fallen in battle should remain close to him," he asserted, the gravity of being entrusted with the guardianship of such magic prompting him to speak in the old tongue.

Minerva nodded. "That is true. His wand's heart may call to him and give him strength, and perhaps it may even help him find his way. A wand serves its wizard, but the wizard also serves the wand. There are times when the bond between them is so great that when one is lost, the other grieves, and each refuses the use of any other. It may well be his wand that he seeks so desperately."

Gareth moved across the room to kneel in front of a beautifully carved chest of white birch. From its depths, he brought forth a slender box of moss-green Connemara marble, veined with silver and white. Every surface was carved with exquisite knotting, ogham and runes, so intricate and delicate that they seemed to shift like a shadow of smoke across its face.

Handing it to Minerva, he said, "I've worked on this piece for nearly twenty years and have only recently finished it. I suspected it might someday have some great purpose, but had no idea what that might be. That seems evident now."

Smiling fondly, she gently placed the ebony wand inside, a perfect fit.

"The colors would please him."

She began to put the beautiful lid in place and suddenly sank onto the edge of the bed, her hands trembling. Centered there, hidden among the other carvings, following

the veining and shading of the marble, was the tiny figure of a snake, coiled around the base of a slender lily. Tracing the image with her thumb, she looked up at Gareth, her face white with shock, and whispered, "You could not have known..."

He answered quietly, "I carve only what the stone shows me. I do not question the meaning."

Minerva took a deep breath, gathering her composure, and rose to return the box into his hands. "Knowing One, protect this wand and its wizard. We will return soon and try to do more."

Standing by the bed, she studied the harshly graven face of the man who lay there. Her lips moved silently, and Gareth knew she spoke neither incantation nor spell, but rather the simplest and oldest of all prayers--an entreaty to the Divine to show mercy. In an instant she turned to leave, only to be halted by Gareth's hand, laid gently on her arm.

"Professor McGonagall... Minerva... before you go, one question please... his eyes... what color are his eyes?"

The witch smiled sadly.

"Black... the most profound black I have ever seen. Is it important?"

Remembering his visions of days past, Gareth shook his head, "I don't know... perhaps it's nothing... just dreams I had before you arrived..."

Suddenly, to his amazement, Minerva stepped nearer and for the briefest instant embraced him, whispering, "Thank you, Gareth Islwyn."

Breaking away, she hurried from the room, not looking back as she sped to the twisting steps. Remaining near the bed where he could watch from the window, Gareth soon saw her join Hagrid on the hillside and in an instant heard the sharp crack as the two vanished, leaving the third behind.

"Ffarwel, da ddewines, da brudiwr. Ymwloli. We will be here."

Chapter Two: Blessed Angels Come

Chapter 2 of 14

The tale continues as Gareth begins to learn more about the man hidden with him, and the seriousness of the challenge which lies ahead.

Author's Notes: Again, we re-visit a chapter EXPANDED and REVISED from its original posting. Only Gareth is mine (at the moment). Thanks to those who have persevered with the revisions and welcome to those who are new to the tale. Special thanks to the Headmistress for her kindness and diligence.

Chapter Two: Blessed Angels Come

With the echo of magical departure still hovering in the air, Gareth turned from the window to cross the sun-spattered floor to the birch chest. Trusting that the Guardian Spirits of his home would keep watch, he concealed the wand box deep within before turning to an adjacent altar draped in white lambs' wool, bearing three beeswax candles flaming softly amidst objects of ritual and offerings of devotion--a soapstone bowl of saltwater, a silver bell, grains of corn and wheat, sprigs of lavender and yarrow, chunks of quartz and garnet, a mirror and spindle, an athame, and vessels of fragrant oil. Bowing his head, he offered a hasty prayer for intervention.

"Blessed Brighid, Source of Healers' gifts, stand with me this day. Guide my hands and grant me wisdom in treating this man, for surely one such as he is a treasure to Your heart."

Moving deliberately about the room, gathering his medicines, he began offering reassurance, his voice swelling and ebbing like ocean waves, rhythmic and calming.

"My name is Gareth Islwyn. I am a Healer, and you are in my home. Perhaps you can hear me, perhaps not, but you'll come to recognize my voice soon enough. Be at peace. This is a solitary place, and you are safe. Know that I hold no power over you, and I am not your enemy."

He was pleased to see that Hagrid had followed his instructions perfectly. The ruined clothing and robes had vanished, all traces of blood, venom, and sweat had been carefully bathed from the wizard's lank hair and rigid body, and a cocoon of woolen blankets and soft quilts had been wrapped around him in an effort to bring warmth. Gareth smiled when he noticed black leather boots, minute traces of mud and grass still clinging to the sturdy soles, tucked under the bed. No doubt Hagrid had decided it would be easy enough to replace wizards' robes, but a man's familiar pair of boots should be kept.

Various bottles and boxes, along with an unassuming pouch of black worsted and an oblong leather case, had been arranged on the bedside table. Assuming these had been taken from the pockets of the wizard's robes, Gareth resolved to examine each item closely as soon as possible, for surely a Potions master would always carry on his person the elements and tools most necessary to his craft, just as any experienced Healer would do with his minerals and herbs, his medicines and balms.

Chuckling to himself at the thought of any similarity, however slight, between himself and a wizard, Gareth dropped into his cupped hand five perfectly matched pairs of stones from the soft deerskin pouch tied at his belt. Polished and shaped into wafer-thin ellipses, they were "Blue Stones" of Carn Menyn, source of the mystical monoliths that had been carried--some said by the great Merlin himself--to the first circle of Stonehenge. Washed for millennia in the waters of healing springs, each pair was marked with the symbol of a deity of the Otherworld. Such stones had been handed down through countless generations of Knowing Ones, cherished as one of the most useful Healers' tools, treasured for their ability to summon and sustain the flow of life.

Closing his eyes, Gareth envisioned a fountain of flame cascading from Brighid's hands to his own as he cradled the stones within the warmth of his calloused palms, pressing each pair against his heart for the space of three beats, blessing all with the gift of his own life's breath. As he often did when treating a dangerously ill patient, he began singing softly--an old lullaby of blessed angels gathered around a sleeping child.

"Angels watching ever round thee...

They will of all fears disarm thee.

No forebodings should alarm thee,

They will let no peril harm thee,

All through the night... "

How odd, he thought, to sing a boyhood lullaby to a dying wizard--yet somehow the poignant sweet song seemed fitting. Who other than a Healer and the Angels might protect such a man, whose need was so great?

Pulling away the blankets to place the stones, Gareth was appalled when he saw how painfully thin the wizard was, his body so close to emaciation that lifting him would take little effort. Knowing his voice must become familiar in order to forge any degree of trust, he began speaking companionably to the wounded man, as though in conversation with an old friend.

"Well, then, Neirin Maldwyn, whatever sins you may have on your soul, gluttony certainly isn't one of them, is it? Neirin Maldwyn... treasured and courageous friend. Means nothing to you, I know. It's all right; I'll tell you more once we've brought you closer to life than to the grave."

What he saw as he shifted the man's wasted body onto one side dismayed him further.

"N Celi, whose work was this then, lad? You've been ill-used more than once, have you not?"

His eyes swept over the web of scars and wounds that covered much of the gaunt body, some the faint silvery threads and shadows of traumas long past, others much more recently acquired.

"How many of these were dealt you when you were just a boy, then? So many scars for such a young man... not even reached your middle age yet, have you? I've more than a few myself, but then I'm considerably older. I expect you learned to protect yourself early on. Probably grew to give as good as you got, didn't you? Hagrid calls you an old dragon... says you're a bitter and lonely man. I don't doubt it. Sorry to say, you'll carry yet another scar soon, but what a tale we'll have to tell if we manage to pull you through, now won't we?"

Turning the left arm gently to wrap two stones with soft muslin bandages at the pulse of wrist and elbow, Gareth drew a sharp breath. Seared cruelly into the forearm, faded but still distinct against the parchment skin, was the grotesque image of a twisting serpent slithering from the leering mouth of a Death's Head. Grimacing in aversion, he instinctively signed against evil, as though the malevolent eyes of the snake might seek him out and hold him fast.

"That's a dark and ugly mark you carry there, Neirin. I've seen such things before, and they're usually meant to bind a man to his master... What caused you to accept such a vicious brand, I wonder. Not something you'd care to speak about too readily, I'd think."

Examining the wizard's slender hands, the fingers dotted with tiny scars, yet strangely delicate in their long and tapering grace, Gareth continued his soothing soliloquy.

"You've the hands of an artist or a Healer, don't you, lad. Most likely, the only thing about you anyone ever thought was beautiful. You're truly not blessed with a fine face, Neirin, but I'm told you're brilliant and powerful, and what was it Minerva said... a master of Potions? You've the look of someone who'd have a skill for fencing, what with your height and those hands...that's if we could manage to put a bit of weight back on you. Something of a lost art these days, you know, fencing... I used to have some skill in the phrasing of an epee myself when I was young, although my teacher always said I was a bit too reckless to show any true elegance... I imagine you handle that ebony wand of yours beautifully. Perhaps I'll see that for myself one day... under better circumstances, I'd hope."

Weaving his tapestry of lulling speech and quiet song, Gareth continued to work with a sure and practiced hand, until all the stones were bandaged at the pulses along the length of the wizard's body. One final stone, slightly larger than the rest and marked with the triskele of Brigid the Mother, he took from a pouch worn around his neck to be placed over the wizard's faltering heart to open the Wellspring of Life. Taking both icy hands in his own, the Healer again offered a prayer for intervention.

"Blessed Lady, this man is lost in suffering. Send Your flame to light his way, guide him safely back to us if that is Your wish. Yet, I would ask you to take him swiftly and kindly if it is Your intention that he join You in the Otherworld."

Gently opening the wizard's eyes, seeking signs of life, he saw they were fixed, as black and empty as the coal pits of Rhondda, and when he passed a candle in front of them, the light of the tiny flame was swallowed by their depths. A ghost of dread visited him in that moment and he shivered, believing now that these were the same tormented eyes he had seen in his recent dreams.

Bending to examine the man's bruised and swollen throat where the ghastly wound punctured deep into the flesh, he carefully avoided the rust-dark blood that was beginning to seep once more from the area around the grazed artery.

"How is it you didn't bleed to death, Neirin, or die from the venom of such a snake?" the Healer pondered.

With deft hands, he cleaned away the blood with calendula and dressed the wound with linen bandages, smeared with a salve of honey, sophora, and yarrow to slow the bleeding. Slipping his arm behind the wizard's bony shoulders and supporting the man's lolling head against his chest, he coaxed two medicines, drop by drop, with infinite patience, down the ravaged throat--infusion of burdock and linden to renew blood and anodyne of wine, turmeric, and monkshood to ease pain. He would have preferred tincture of mawseed to induce dreamless sleep, and decoction of adderwood root against the venom, but was hesitant to use either until he knew better what he was facing.

Finally, pulling a soft linen sleep shirt over the wizard's icy body and gently pushing back the heavy strands of hair clinging to his clammy brow, Gareth wrapped him closely in the blankets and quilts before settling him onto the mound of pillows positioned to ease his breathing. The faintest moan crept from Neirin's spectral lips, and a fleeting vision of an unloved child flickered through the Healer's thoughts. He suspected that the simple kindness of a compassionate touch had rarely been offered to this man, even as a boy.

Dropping into the chair beside the bed, Gareth studied the haggard features of this man whose survival, or soul's release, had been placed in his keeping--an intelligent face with deep gashes of anger bracketing the hawkish nose, harrowing the brow in testament to a fierce and bitter nature--yet almost piteous in the loneliness etched into its sunken hollows and bony plateaus, a landscape of desolation in the lines around the eyes and mouth. A hard and mirthless face, yet there was not true cruelty in it--only the absence of any joy of the heart or peace of the spirit.

"What am I to do with you, Wizard?" Gareth wondered aloud. "We must battle this wound and whatever else ails you, but I'm not certain you've the strength, or even the inclination for it. I must try to pull you back from your wandering or at least help you find a peaceful death, but I know precious little about what's afflicting you. I don't suppose you might have a few words of advice on the matter? Some little trick of the wand?"

He paused with his eyes fixed on the graven face, hoping for another sound, a twinge of muscle. There was nothing.

"All well and good, then." Gareth shook his head at the futility of his own question. "Since you've nothing to share, let's both take a moment before we proceed. Bwysowron, brudiwr. Rest for a breath or two, and I'll do the same."

Placing his hand to ride the crest and fall of Neirin's sunken chest, thumbing the faint pulse at his neck, noting that both breath and beat were to the slightest degree less labored, Gareth silently thanked his Brigid for Her kindness. He would need this time to take stock of the situation. In order to focus his thoughts, he chose to seek his own calm in the familiar patterns of studied observation. Pulling paper and pen from the drawer of the bed table, he pulled his chair closer and began to examine the items taken from the wizard's vanished robes, jotting notes and commenting aloud, as though in consultation with a learned colleague.

Picking up one of several small objects, smooth and misshapen, he cocked his head to one side, a slight smile playing across his face.

"Now then, are these bezoars we have here? I've used these as well--very helpful in most cases of poisoning. I learned about them in Crete, many years ago. Stands to reason they're so fond of them there, what with all the goats running about. Lumps of charcoal, and terra sigillata, too... the Healers of Egypt and North Africa prefer those, don't they? Effective under certain conditions, that's true... but trifles against anything as potent as what's attacking you."

There were over a dozen small bottles and boxes, some of shimmering glass or glazed porcelain, others of carved stone or matte silver. Gareth perused each one, noting the precise labeling and the meticulous care with which all were stoppered. He recognized the names of several of the tinctures and unguents, others he could surmise, but more than a few were mysteries, their apparent components and purpose surpassing even his extensive knowledge of traditional medicines, potions, and alchemy.

The rolled leather case, supple and soft from years of use, revealed a compact onyx-handled silver knife, its gleaming blade honed to a precise and deadly edge, along with varied measuring implements and other tools bearing curious symbols. The worsted pouch, which was roughly the size of a man's clenched fists, appeared too small and light to contain much, but he carefully loosened the drawstring and peered inside, stunned to discover it actually contained a great many objects, each in seeming miniature. He faltered for a moment before reaching in to extract them and was greatly relieved when his hand came out holding each item in actual size--and with all his fingers unharmed. He did, however, feel pain in his fingertips for several minutes that reminded him of a bee sting, and his temples throbbed, as though he'd held his breath underwater a bit too long.

Not only did this seemingly bottomless receptacle contain a flawless milk-quartz mortar and pestle, a diminutive set of gleaming copper scales, a small iron cauldron, and numerous empty crystal vials, thin as tissue, but also a compact case of reddish leather, yielding a myriad of labeled bottles arrayed in tidy rows, containing all manner of things, some exotic, others quite mundane.

There were dried leaves and petals, both fragrant and pungent herbs and barks, whole and crushed minerals and gems, translucent shells, the wings and carapaces of insects, feathers and scales of birds and reptiles, bits of bone and horn, assorted teeth and claws, hardened globules of what appeared to be secretions and blood, sticky saps and stringy roots, velvety mushrooms and spongy fungi, slimy scums and glistening molds, fetid flakes of dung and spittle, packets of damp soil, shimmering dusts and ashen powders--a veritable pharmacopeia of colors and scents, textures and densities--in short, the traveling kit of a Potions master.

Gareth could scarcely contain his exhilaration upon seeing these things. He knew so many of these plants and minerals, these elements of earth and sky. They were the familiar stuff from which he composed his own medicines. He'd used such things for years, his shelves and cupboards were crammed with them, yet retrieving them from the personal effects of a wizard made them seem the rarest treasures.

"Neirin, this is a grand thing you've got here! All of this in one tiny pouch, and no heavier than a loaf of bread? You must show me how to make one for myself, though I could do without the stinging and the headache! How practical to have everything fit so neatly into such a small space... I wonder just how much you could carry in such a bag... Wonderful, truly wonderful! When I'm collecting for my medicines and the like, this would be such a fine thing to have along!"

Ignoring the momentary discomfort, he reached again into the pouch and was delighted to discover several texts, apparent writings on potions, brews, and medicines, with spidery-handed notations scribbled in the margins. Again, there was a fleeting sense of kindred with Neirin when he realized a well-worn copy of one of the books, the "Herborum" of Otto Brunfels, was in his own library. Two other volumes, however, were certainly not to be found on his shelves. Their titles and the letters on the pages swam in a shifting fog before his eyes, leaving him dizzy and disoriented by the attempt to read them.

"Not for the untrained eyes of a lowly Muggle, eh? Odd name, that... Muggle... not very flattering, really. That's what the Professor called me, you know, though she did soften the blow a bit with kind words about 'Knowing Ones' and 'Healers with deep understanding'." He chuckled softly. "All well and good then, Wizard, I'll leave these books to you. Perhaps someday you'll be so kind as to lift the charm so I could read a page or two? We might call it payment for services rendered?"

The last book was a slim one, bound in vellum with near-translucent pages, Dante's "Inferno" in Italian, a braided cord of green and silver serving as the bookmark. Several passages had been underlined, translated onto sheets of paper slipped between the pages, and one drew Gareth's attention, reminding him of Minerva's words about this man's shrouded and convoluted life.

"To tell us in what way the soul is bound within these knots; and tell us, if thou canst, if any from such members e'er is freed."

Gareth held the translation in his hand, trying to read the man through the tightly constrained shapes of his handwriting. Clearly, this Potions master respected, perhaps even cherished, the tools and elements of his craft, and was a man of keen intellect who apparently was not adverse to pursuing knowledge in both realms of study, Magical and Muggle.

Finally only two items remained to be investigated, one a small bottle of yellowed ivory. Reading the label, "Cruor Recidivus," before removing the stopper, he inhaled the scent of the remaining drops.

"Now, here's something useful... yarrow and nettle, certainly... Alchemilla and Bach flower, perhaps... something else I don't recognize. You must have kept this handy always, what with this war of yours going on. Was this what slowed your bleeding long enough for someone to find you? That was your intention, I expect." He put the bottle carefully back on the table. "I was able to get a drop or two of something similar into you a moment ago. If you don't respond well to my medicine, I could wish for another bottle of this in that wondrous pouch of yours."

Gareth hesitated for a moment before picking up the final item from the table. A box of aged bronze with a deep patina, oblong and flat, small enough to be concealed within a man's palm, adorned with the classical Greek symbols of the Alpha and the Omega--the Beginning and the End--the label, "Virus Eternus," written in the same precise spiked hand as all the others. The Healer translated the words aloud with dread, an icy premonition wrapping around his heart.

"The Venom of Eternity."

Opening the box gingerly, he noted a layer of thick, odiferous paste, a harsh melding of sweet and bitter scents, marred by fingerprints where countless small amounts had been pinched away. Snapping the lid closed, Gareth flung the box back onto the table and in great agitation bolted from his seat to pace the room, torn between amazement and anger.

"Blessed Mother, what have you done, Wizard? Theriac? The Beginning and the End, indeed! I've read of this potion in the old texts, but I didn't believe it actually still existed, or that anyone now had the knowledge to make it."

His voice shook with scorn.

"King Mithridatus, and his unholy quest for the absolute antidote to any poison... Thousands of his slaves sacrificed to its perfection, so that he could live. All of that innocent blood shed for his ambitions... enough to curse his potion for all eternity... and those that brew it. Over two hundred rare ingredients, isn't it... and only the most skillful of you Potions masters who can achieve the making of it?"

Gareth's compassionate eyes were darkened with disgust as he turned back to stand at the foot of the bed, his hands clenched tightly against his emotion, his voice drained of gentleness, an arid waste of rage.

"Vipers flesh, swine's bile, powdered scorpion... terrible things... and opiates so strong they're said to drive men mad with the craving of them. Did you brew what's in that box... and worse yet, who have you been dosing with it? Is it yourself? And for how bloody long? Five years, it's said, just to make it, five more for it to ripen and be ready. Are you truly that arrogant, Potions master? You'd have done better to leave me something I might use against the damn snake that's bitten you. This muck may be what's keeping you alive, but you'll soon wish it hadn't, given the toll it's said to demand. From the look of you, I'd say that's already begun, hasn't it? I didn't take you for the fool... You're supposedly a brilliant man... Did you think yourself more powerful than this devilish stuff... or did you just not care? I'll not touch it... no Healer of conscience will."

His angry outburst subsiding, Gareth fell into the chair, fixing on the empty face of his unconscious patient.

"May Brigid have mercy on you, Neirin Maldwyn. The scar of darkness on your arm, and this cursed brew in your pocket? And yet, good people care for you... They grieve for you... ask me to protect and heal you. I hope I don't come to regret my vow..."

If anyone had questioned Gareth in that moment, he would have been inclined to admit that he was torn between exhilaration and dread at the prospect of knowing this man. His small illusion of some faint kinship between them was tinged with doubt. He sensed his skills and beliefs were about to be tested almost beyond endurance, and

he was not eager to initiate the struggle.

Gareth's innate empathy had guided him for years, enabling him to save many who might otherwise have been lost. His encounters as a young Healer were so devastating he had prayed for his gifts to be taken, had fled from the responsibility they imposed, but as he had grown older, he had achieved a careful balance. He could enter and share the suffering of a patient, offering comfort and compassion, yet maintain a separation from their affliction. He had the will to fight tirelessly for any still clinging to life, but was prepared to guide and cherish the final breath of the dying. Both life and death were honored in his work, and in his faith.

Yet now, he hesitated. The first foray into the mind of this enigma of darkness and light had been excruciating, far more than he had permitted Minerva or Hagrid to realize. In all his years, through all the traumas and sorrow he had experienced as an empathic Healer, there had been nothing to approach what he had felt in those brief moments joined with this wizard's body and mind. The man's physical torment and pillaged consciousness had been almost too much to bear. To join with him without preparation had been reckless. Even though Minerva had expressed regret for allowing him to proceed without prior warning, he knew much of the blame was his own. He must not make the same mistake again.

Pools of saffron sunlight, heather scented air, and lyric birdsong filled his infirmary now, countering the shadow of desperate pain and malignant magic that hovered near, waiting for its moment. As the sun began to move across the sky, leaf shadow blurred the harsh lines of Neirin's face as he drew breath... in, out... in, out... For the space of nineteen of those precious breaths, Gareth sat in silence beside him, receptive to this simple blessing of life affirmed, centering himself into a place of serenity until, with the exhalation of the wizard's twentieth breath, he rose and crossed to Brighid's altar.

"Bright and Blessed One, it is time. Protect us both and give us courage for this fight."

Anointing his hands with oil of myrrh, he picked up the rowan-wood athame and dipped the point into the bowl of saltwater. Calling upon the Guardians of the Four Directions to aid him, he drew a circle of protection around the perimeter of the room, offering the petitions of a Knowing One about to enter into battle with the darkness. When he had finished his casting, he took a drop of the oil and blessing the tip of the wooden knife, gently traced Neirin's forehead with the runic eolh.

"There is protection for us both now within this circle, and we are in the Lady's keeping. I have given you the mark of the blessing hand to show you are in my care. Even though there is no one to grant permission, I must try again to touch your thoughts. I hope you will allow it. My first attempt was clumsy, and for that I do ask your forgiveness."

Steeling himself against what he knew he would encounter, he repeated the ritual of Accord and stepped across, along an envisioned bridge of glass, into their joined reality. He emerged into clouds of cloying blackness, swirling in vortex on every side, engulfing him in oily suffocation. He was assaulted by an icy blast made terrible by its absolute silence, draining away all warmth in the span of a single heartbeat. The cold pierced his lungs, snatching the breath from his mouth, and he gasped as he felt his heart pounding, the layers of reason beginning to tear away, leaving only panting mindless terror. Gareth shuddered, biting back a groan of fear. He forced himself to remember Brighid, Her flame, Her guidance and protection, and holding Her image in his mind, he summoned a vision of a sphere of light, holding it high against the clutching darkness. Its brightness comforted him, but the glow penetrated only the distance of one step as he inched forward, with the impenetrable miasma closing in behind him.

Always before, no matter how withdrawn into sickness or anguish his patient might be, he could extend himself far enough to seize at least some thread of connection, some faint fragment of their essence. Perhaps their face, their eyes, a memory of a long forgotten place of safety and peace... enough to give him footing, to steady his advance into their desperate need. But here there was only the silent, punishing wind, foul with the stink of decay, bitter as ash and blood in his mouth. The tide of suffering that swept over him was staggering. Focusing his will, Gareth pushed back against the nauseating pain and wrenching panic the cloud evoked, shouting into the void.

"Wizard, know that I am here. If you are able, help me to find you. If you are near, show me your face... Reach out your hand and touch me. If you are somehow bound and cannot come to me, call out... let me hear your voice."

Though in his mind, he called full-throated into the darkness, his shout was absorbed and deadened by the smothering cloud into little more than a hoarse croak. He stood motionless upon his bridge of thought, senses keen for any image, straining to hear an answer. He no longer felt the raging, desperate force of will he'd touched in the first joining. The emptiness around him seemed absolute, final. Gathering his resolve, Gareth cried again into the void, his throat raw with the effort.

"Wizard, do not fear me. I am Gareth Islwyn. I have said that I am not your enemy and that I hold no power over you. Your wand is guarded, and your true name is kept from me. I know you only as Neirin Maldwyn. Will you answer?"

He waited, straining into the void. Had he been heard? The silent tempest swelled, pressing against him in protest of his intrusion. Pain as violent as hammer blows slammed against him and he fell to his knees, clawing and clutching for the edge of his fragile bridge. Though his sphere of light was failing, he struggled to rise and began advancing again across his tenuous expanse, halting suddenly as a ragged shard of whisper brushed past him, surfacing out of the abyss, slicing across his senses on another surging wave of agony.

"There is no one..."

The cruel wave swept inexorably forward and the whisper died.

"Wizard... Neirin Maldwyn, where are you? Call out again... show me where you are. I am here..."

If even the faintest echo had sounded, the slightest image appeared, he would have fought to remain, but there was nothing more, and the sickness of body and spirit that enveloped him was devastating. He dared not continue, knowing he risked plunging into the same chasm of mind that imprisoned Neirin. If he fell, he knew he would not rise. Exhausted, Gareth backed away, the bridge beneath him brittle, cracking, falling away into the abyss, his light guttering ever weaker, until at last he plunged through his portal of union, heartsick and shaken, tottering into his chair, shuddering with the memory of pitiless cold and pain. Soaked in a clammy sweat, he fought to keep the gorge from rising in his throat.

"This is not venom or wounds, or even the Theriac... this is the Unknowable..." he whispered. "You are profoundly cursed, past all measure of reason. Who hated you so much, Wizard, that they would condemn you into such darkness? This is an old and dark Magick, powerful beyond my understanding."

His mind was spinning with unresolved questions. Minerva had said the snake was the tool of an evil master, that Dark Arts had fortified its venom. The trauma to this man's body from such a poison, that could be challenged and overcome, but the curse that bound him? Gareth felt ill prepared to combat magic of such magnitude without guidance.

The immediate need was to strengthen the body. If Neirin should die, there would be no hope of ever freeing him, for a curse of such power would not relent, but would follow its victim always, even into death. Whatever this man's sins might be, Gareth was a Healer, sworn to do no harm, to shelter and sustain life. He had seen the best and the worst in many a man, had seen them fall from grace, and rise again. It was not his place to pass judgment, and he had made a vow.

Allowing his thoughts to drift back in memory, Gareth remembered another man, with guilt-stained eyes and battered laborer's hands, who had knocked at his door years ago seeking shelter in the night on his way to find work in the mines. Though Gareth had offered food and whiskey, he had refused, desiring neither solace nor conversation, seeking only a place to exist upon the earth until the morning. Leaving at first light, he had flung a bitter challenge over his shoulder.

"Consider this, if you want so much to help me. I've left my child behind, to fend for himself. Most likely, I'd have somehow killed him, given half a chance, and now I know I'm damned for it. Pray for me... if you can. There's no one else... Heaven surely won't have me, and even Hell won't take me."

He had said nothing more, and was not seen again in the Valley, but Gareth had never forgotten him.

This man in front of him now was no different, caught between Heaven and Hell. In this moment, there was no brilliant master of Potions, no powerful wielder of magic, but only a man in pain and torment, as human as any other. Gareth took one of the beautiful scarred hands in his own, recalling the echo of the ragged whisper that had

struggled from the depths of suffering to reach him.

"There is no one..."

The Healer bowed his head, mourning all the broken souls that roamed the Worlds, and then he spoke, affirming aloud his nature and his vow.

"There is someone."

Chapter Three: Requiem of Revelation

Chapter 3 of 14

Minerva becomes Albus' confessor and in the process learns truths she would have far rather never have heard.

Chapter Three: Requiem of Revelation

Seven days... the time allotted by Creation to fill the Void with stars, to set the Earth spinning, to kindle the spark of Life. Seven days... a breath, an eternity... all dependent upon the perspective of those living within... or through... that span of time. For Minerva, the past seven days had been both--a dizzying flash, an endless odyssey.

Upon returning from Gwaun, she had immediately dispatched Adare, one of her personal owls, to the Healer, bearing the cryptic message, "Send word." She knew this faithful Tawny, long trusted to deliver communiqués between members of the Order, would wait patiently for Gareth's reply. Remembering the familiar Muggle adage, "No news is good news," she tried to find solace in that old saying, for no message came.

Hagrid had approached her several times each day, eyes full of his unspoken question, and she had shaken her head. "No, there is no message." It saddened her to see the changes which the war had made to her friend's face, the deep furrows and lines etched around his eyes, across his brow--tracks of worry and introspection she had not seen there before. He seemed far less inclined to pause for a chat, to ramble on about some inconsequential event of the day. She knew he carried his losses, and his newly-acquired burden of secrecy, with an altered heart.

The first several days after the Battle had been devastating and exhausting. So many wounded to be cared for and far too many memorials to be arranged. The chambers, halls, and grounds of Hogwarts Castle echoed with the sounds of weeping, words of comfort and remembrance, the mournful music of requiem. Each grieving family had received Minerva's strength as she held them sorrowing in her arms. She was the rock against which those left bereft could hurl their anger and denial, their wrenching ache. As acceptance began, she became a foundation upon which they struggled to build their first hopes for renewal, for a life no longer pillaged by terror and deceit.

In the dead of night, hours before the dawning of the second day, the decimated corpse of Tom Riddle was removed from the anteroom of Hogwarts by a delegation of veteran Aurors, accompanied by Minerva and senior members of the Wizengard. More than one Ministry official was conveniently absent, called away on 'urgent business,' shunning any association with Riddle's body. She had debated whether Harry should be present, but when the house-elves advised that he was soundly sleeping in his old room in Gryffindor Tower, she chose not to wake him. The blessing of peaceful sleep would serve him better than participating in this rite of banishment.

Once outside the school grounds, the somber group had Apparated to a clearing deep within the remote reaches of the Forbidden Forest, met there by Hagrid and a bristling Swedish Short-Snout, moon-glow reflecting from its cerulean scales. Gathered around the Dark Lord's remains, none uttered any word of eulogy, save one command spoken to the dragon in solemn unison.

"Flamma."

The dragon's fire exploded in a brilliant arc of light and heat, the most intense of all magical flame, consuming in an instant the body of He Who Must Not Be Named, leaving only a handful of black ash on the Forest floor. One Auror, a trusted veteran of his Order, stepped forward to encase the ash in a heavily-warded urn of iron. Concealing the urn within his cloak, he turned to face the others, his right hand extended to receive the touch of the wands of Minerva, his fellow Aurors, and the Wizengard, each weaving a Circle of Commitment and Protection around him. Hagrid stood apart, his great hand on the dragon's neck, his wand hidden from long habit. He would not participate openly, but his attention was no less keen when the senior Auror spoke.

"It is my Pledge, my Trust, my Vow, to carry this Vessel to the farthest regions of the Earth, to consign it to the Flames of the Core so that it should never again be opened, and its contents never again unleashed upon the Worlds."

All present nodded in silent acknowledgement, even the dragon standing quiet. Henceforth, this Auror's sacred obligation would be his Pledge. The remains of Tom Riddle's body must mirror his shattered soul--never again to be resurrected, never again to personify death and havoc, never again to be whole.

At eventide of the second day, Harry came alone to find her and together they climbed to the top of the Astronomy Tower, recalling the day when the Wizarding World had shifted, changing forever. They sat together through the long fragrant night, Minerva allowing Harry to grieve, to understand he was no longer the lamb of sacrifice, to realize that he could finally take a direction of his own choosing. She shared her memories of his parents and her reminiscences of Albus Dumbledore, the fallen members of the Order, the lost children of the Army.

There was only one she would not speak about at length... Severus Snape. She withdrew from Harry's questions about the absence of the Potions master's body, the failure of his portrait to appear, the nature of his character and true intent.

"He was my student, and my colleague. He was my..." She thought to speak of him as her friend, but found the words would not come.

"I mourn him, Harry, finding that I did not truly know him."

He respected her wishes, but she knew her reticence troubled him. There seemed a compelling need in the young wizard to learn as much as possible about the man to whom he owed so much, but she dared not look in his eyes and speak to him of Severus... or she would surely relent and reveal her secret.

By sunset of the fourth day, Hogwarts was closed, awaiting the onset of repairs. The last of the students, including the Three, had gone home to the harbor of family and friends. Each day Minerva had stood at the gates as the groups departed, acknowledging all, embracing many, encouraging them to rest over the summer, urging them to keep up with their studies, but also to revel in the simple wonder of being alive. Some seventh-years had reluctantly inquired about NEWTs, and she had reassured them there would be the opportunity, before the new term began, to return and complete the process of examinations. She was heartened to witness nods of farewell, however hesitant, between students of every House, and here and there, the wordless exchange among former adversaries of a helping hand with bags and trunks.

The dead honored, the wounded transferred, her students safe, Minerva had spent the following two days walking every inch of castle and grounds with Hagrid or Filch--

assessing damages, overseeing the inventory and storage of artifacts, books and equipment, insuring that wards were in place and any remaining staff and faculty comfortably settled. Only two places in the castle had not yet echoed her firm step or received her personal attention--the sanctums of the two wizards whose memory was a wound she bore silently.

As dawn colored the horizon on the morning of the seventh day, she walked alone to the staircase leading to the Headmaster's office, no longer avoiding the inevitable. Though the Ministry had begun to make carefully-worded inquiries, she had chosen not to enter either the office or Severus' personal quarters, but today she would do so. Standing before the gargoyle, she quietly spoke the name "Dumbledore" and watched the guardian statue swivel away to grant her access. Knowing who had placed that ward only a week ago was a knife in her heart.

Hesitating on the threshold, Minerva felt strangely reluctant to enter the long-familiar office from which she had been absent for almost a year. Casting her eyes about the silent room, she noted all portrait frames, save one, were empty, the occupants gone elsewhere in the castle to gossip and recover from the tumult of recent events. As the light of sunrise dispelled the shadows, her heart clenched with the realization that whenever he chose, the resident of that one frame could survey his most valued possessions, his favorite armchair, his papers and books, his trinkets and treasures. With few exceptions, all these things remained precisely as he had left them.

In the dark months past, all house-elves had been harshly denied permission to enter the Headmaster's office for any reason, upon threatened pain of torture or death. Minerva's throat closed around her sorrow. She understood now why that order had forbidden the house-elves to perform their duties, and whose hands had meticulously cared for each item, his actions no doubt cunningly concealed within some dark contrivance. She pictured him sneering with contempt if questioned for his motive, demanding to know why he should not retain these paltry trophies of his greatest kill, mere tokens of the immense victory he offered his Dark Lord.

She had been summoned only once to the Headmaster's office at the beginning of term, to be tersely given the new rules and regulations with which she, all staff, and students must comply. There had been no greetings or offers of hospitality, no discussion--only orders, delivered with cold authority. The room had been shrouded within an impenetrable veil of shadow, lit only by guttering candles. She had not lingered for pointless argument, nor had she chosen to look into the eyes of the man seated behind the great oaken desk. She had held her rage in check, but the acid of his curt dismissal had goaded her to respond in kind.

"Do not deceive yourself, Severus, that I will ever address you as 'Headmaster'. The word would be poison on my tongue."

She had dared to turn her back on him... had crossed the room and reached for the handle of the massive door before she heard his voice, as soft and biting as sand sifting across barren rock. Would she die in that moment, she had wondered, and leave her students without defense, simply because she could not curb her hatred?

"Ever the lioness, Minerva, ready to die bravely for the greater good? You would do better to guard your cubs, I think. Circumstances will not change, whatever name you... or any other... should choose to call me."

Had she observed without prejudice, she would perhaps have realized--this summons to his office had been a calculated warning. The room had been skillfully staged to elicit obedience and fear, but behind that ominous facade, Hogwarts' most beloved headmaster was enshrined... honored and mourned by the man who had killed him.

The surface of the desk was devoid of books or papers, an empty altar to the authority of the Headmasters of Hogwarts. The only evidence of Severus was a worn volume of Muggle philosophy--"The Ethical Writings of Cicero"--and a single glass, bearing the smoky residue of firewhisky, set on the wide window seat. Minerva envisioned him sitting in the twilight stillness, reading and drinking--communing with his demons. To all appearances, he had laid the book aside carefully, perhaps only moments before descending the staircase, moving into the shadowed corridors--to look for Harry, to look for her--to prepare for the final confrontation with the Dark Lord. No marker held his place in the book, as though he had not expected to return. The finality of these meager fragments was another wound to her heart.

She hesitated before approaching the Pensieve, standing like a Grail, bearing the memories of two powerful wizards. Harry had shared the Potions master's secrets with her, offering each like a gift of penance, seeking some understanding of the enemy he had so long despised. The Pensieve seemed so small, to hold so much. She wondered if the memories of the man hidden in Gwaun rested peacefully within, or were they a mirror of his fate, adrift in torment, never to be recovered.

As Minerva stood tracing the pattern of the runes edging the great stone basin, she heard the whisper of robes behind her and turned to see her dearest friend, his eyes beaming, and his hand, no longer blighted by curses and pain, beckoning her to come near. A restrained smile softened her face as she approached his portrait.

"Dearest Minerva, are you well? I have heard you are officially named as Headmistress of Hogwarts."

She nodded in confirmation.

"Why have you taken so long to come to your office?" Albus Dumbledore gently chided. "You should be seated in your chair, Headmistress."

She shook her head in denial.

"I'm not quite ready to take up residence here, Albus, or sit in that chair just yet."

"I do understand, Minerva," he replied. "He usually refused to sit there, as well, unless he needed to demonstrate his authority. I believe you may recall just such an encounter. Naturally, it was pointless to argue with him. Always the same sarcasm about my murderer having no right to occupy my chair... Delivered in his usual fashion, of course... Generally, he would pace, incessantly... It was exhausting to watch..."

Minerva remained silent, for there was no question who they were discussing.

"Where have you hidden him?" The question was posed without preamble.

Because deception between them was inconceivable, she whispered without hesitation, "Within a name... Safe for the moment with a Muggle Healer."

"The one we thought to hide Harry with if there was a need?" he asked.

Minerva nodded as she motioned a wingback chair away from the fireplace to settle in front of the portrait.

"Hagrid and I are the only ones who know. I created a very plausible lie, Albus. When his body could not be found, I began to openly speculate that perhaps the werewolves had carried him off. The great amount of blood on the floor of the Shack, and a few modifications on my part, made the story most believable. Given the uproar at the moment, it's almost impossible to disprove, and it's what people choose to accept as true. There's a certain irony in that, don't you agree?"

Dumbledore nodded, saying nothing, waiting for Minerva to continue.

"There was no memorial service. It was painfully easy to persuade almost everyone that he would not have wanted one. I have arranged for a discreet plaque to be placed, without ceremony, near the Restricted Section of the Library, since he was known to have a passion for books. It will state his name, the years he served here, and that he was lost in the Final Battle of Hogwarts... nothing more. You know, of course, that no portrait has appeared, but since he's commonly believed to have deserted this school, that was readily explained away. Harry will be my greatest problem there. He will certainly try to insist on a portrait. We must find a way to prevent that.

"Most people seem relieved to simply wash their hands of him. The Ministry is trying to sort itself, frantic to avoid any recriminations. No one there is truly concerned with the ugly killing of a Death Eater turned spy. Even Harry confronting Voldemort with the facts hasn't convinced the general Wizarding public." Minerva's mouth twisted in a grimace of disgust. "Quite a few Ministry officials are claiming that years as your spy do not negate his prior crimes, and that judgments against him should be meted out posthumously. So ready to place blame, even now... particularly if condemning him diverts attention from them.

"If any Death Eaters manage to evade the Aurors, they'll surely want vengeance and should they ever suspect, they'll not rest until they've found him. Of course, Rita Skeeter can scarcely contain herself; she's so eager to market one of her heinous fictions... my lie will certainly add grist to her mill. Albus, your spy was feared and mistrusted far too many years, and I'm sorry to say, often justifiably. I'm doubtful whether forgiveness and perspective where he's concerned will ever come."

Dumbledore nodded his understanding as she continued.

"After the Battle, when it was safe to leave the students, I asked Hagrid to come with me to recover his body before anything dreadful might happen to it. I actually was afraid the werewolves would drag him off, or the Ministry would want to take possession of his remains. It was only proper that we be the ones to bring him home for a respectful burial. From what Harry had said, we were prepared for an awful sight, but we did not expect to find him lying on that filthy floor... still alive." Her hands clenched into fists, her face a mask.

Dumbledore sat musing for a time before responding.

"I know how very angry you are, Minerva, and that you feel betrayed, but you must accept what was necessary. He and I were one another's Secret Keepers for so very long, with no Fidelius Charm required between us."

The witch stood abruptly, confronting the portrait, her eyes lit with a furious flame. "No, Albus! This was not necessary! One of you should have trusted me enough to reveal the truth!"

Her eyes welled with unshed, angry tears. She rarely allowed herself to cry in front of anyone, even this most trusted friend and confidant. Frustrated and anguished, she repeated the terrible confession she had made to Gareth.

"Albus, I cursed him as a coward and a murderer. I was prepared... eager... to destroy him, even to kill him if I had the chance! This entire dreadful year, I have battled him in every conceivable way, instigating rebellion, undermining his authority. I despised him! How could you allow it, Albus? Surely, if he refused to trust me, at least you might have done so..."

Dumbledore turned his head to gaze from the window painted into his portrait before shifting in his chair to face her, his voice gentle and reminiscent, a tiny smile flickering in his eyes.

"You know he missed your company a great deal, Minerva. Sometimes he would speak of you, remembering your old quarrels over the merits of the Houses. Make no mistake—he was well aware of your covert activities. He would complain bitterly about you and berate me that spying on Tom should have been your job... that you would have relished the task. If the opportunity had presented itself, he was quite certain that you intended to kill him without a second thought, and he swore you were more a wand at his throat than Riddle himself. But he always held profound respect for you, Minerva. He would have welcomed you as an ally, had the cost not been so great."

The witch looked away, remembering the soft and chilling resonance of the Potions master's voice, slicing through all resistance, a gleaming scalpel of logic and intellect, wielded with unerring accuracy. She recalled the few times she had seen him smile, or heard him laugh—the smile, a wasp's sting—the laugh, a punishing lash. Rarely had either reached his shadowed obsidian eyes. Yet, in the years they had been colleagues, she too had reveled in their verbal duels, their endless sparring. The knife in her heart twisted again, for she had missed his company as well.

Dumbledore remained silent, allowing her time with her thoughts, before he spoke again.

"The night I told him what Harry's fate must be, he was furious. I was deliberate and cruel, asking him quite off-handedly just how many men and women he had watched die. In that moment, I believe he truly hated me. His eyes were desolate, as if I had cast the Cruciatus on him, but he answered so quietly. 'Lately, only those whom I could not save.' He counted me among them, it would seem.

"He summoned his Patronus that night... I doubt he had done so in years. Still, I had already asked my terrible question. That was my clear and calculated intention, you see... to pierce his heart, to make him recall every terrible deed and force him to fulfill the Vow he had made. When I accepted his promise to cast the Killing Curse I would require, I positioned him as methodically as Tom Riddle had ever done."

"Tom Riddle!" the witch fairly spat. "How can you even bear to speak his name?"

The great wizard's eyes grew stormy, his face seared by anger.

"Because he is only Tom Riddle now. I hope that I will never hear him spoken of as 'Lord' again. He was lord of nothing."

Albus moved forward in his chair as though to be near her, as though he missed the comforting touch of a friend's hand. Sighing deeply, he continued.

"Imagine, Minerva, my Keeper's life after he honored that promise. To be so hated and feared—with no advocate or friend, other than me. He could confide in no one, unless he wished to condemn them, and himself, to Riddle's horrors. He secretly obtained another frame for my use and hung it himself in his personal quarters. That was the only place he felt assured we could speak more openly. In this office, he held himself in tight control, knowing he was constantly under scrutiny from Riddle and the Ministry, but when he was away from here and alone, he would sink into such rage and despondency that I feared for his sanity.

"In the night, if he had not been summoned by Riddle, he would prowl the grounds, unseen by the rest of you on your patrols. I pleaded with him to rest, but he rarely slept other than for an hour or so just before dawn. He ate almost nothing, relying on his firewhisky and potions to sustain himself."

There was grief, and a degree of anger, in Dumbledore's voice as he proceeded.

"Did none of you notice how pale and thin he had become, even for him? When he sent students to detention in the Forest with Hagrid, did none of you consider that odd, so unlike his usual behavior?"

Minerva's sharp response echoed the grief and anger of his tone.

"No, Albus, we considered his appearance nothing out of the ordinary, and we hated him too much to be concerned with unusual behavior. We believed perhaps he meant to direct the Carrows' attentions towards Hagrid, just for some vicious sport. And I would remind you that neither of you intended us to see clearly, did you?"

Dumbledore closed his eyes for a moment before speaking again, as if willing himself to continue with such awful revelations.

"Several months after he had returned as Headmaster, I came to the portrait in his quarters to hear his report. He was well into his firewhisky when I arrived, and I was shocked at how badly his hands were shaking, though he tried to conceal that from me. Apparently, Riddle had been especially adept in casting the Cruciatus that night, for some perceived failure on his part. When he had made his report, I wanted to give him some measure of comfort. I knew he was struggling not to collapse from pain... that he was fighting to keep his composure. He was always so proud. I tried to steady him by saying his perceptions were always as keen as the point of a dagger. He actually smiled when he answered... as weary and resigned as a prisoner bound for the gallows, knowing no reprieve will come..."

"How fitting..." he said, "... to be compared with the tool of assassins and spies. But I ask you, Headmaster, which blade has always come to your hand readily and served you faithfully?"

"He turned his back to me then, refusing to even look at me or accept any comfort other than his own. I had not intended it, but I had wounded him yet again, irreparably I think..."

"So many times, wanting him to sleep for even an hour, I would bring Fawkes to sing to him in his quarters. He tried to forbid it, but what could he do to prevent me?" Dumbledore shook his head, sadly recalling this small kindness he had attempted. "He would snarl at me to leave him in peace and take my 'bothersome bird' out of his sight, but when he had no will to fight with me, we would remain to watch over him if he fell asleep."

Minerva nodded, wishing she could take her friend's hand, knowing these revelations were torturous for him to share.

"Leave him in peace... I wanted so much to do just that. Peace has always been my greatest wish for him. There were times when he might sit reading, or even allow me to coax him into a game of Wizard's Chess. He would seem calm without his firewhisky or the potions. But then, his Mark would burn, and he would go to take his place beside Riddle. I grieved for him, and for you also, Minerva. Knowing what you believed about him, that your wands might someday be raised against one another, my heart broke for both of you. But there could be no stopping what had already begun..."

Dumbledore stood then, leaning on his portrait chair, his face stricken with grief and guilt.

"This entire desolate year, he was preparing himself for this final battle, in service to me. Seeing him grow ever thinner and paler, I knew he was attempting something terrible. I began to slip unannounced into the frame in his quarters. That was a cruel irony... to be spying on my spy. What I learned was devastating. He was turning his wand against himself... curses and hexes... Merlin forgive us both, even the Cruciatus... to ever-increasing degrees. He was using dangerous potions, things he had once crafted for Riddle, even though he knew they instilled vicious dependencies. It was all meant to reinforce his defenses against whatever would be leveled at him if his duplicity should be discovered.

"I confronted him... I fought with him bitterly, forbidding him to continue. I threatened to reveal everything to you, to the Order. He scorned my threats and demanded to know why I would presume to forbid him anything... He had chosen his own path and he would finish it in any way he saw fit.

"Of course it was true... He had chosen, so long ago. But I had always readied that path for him. Harry had the company of two trusted friends to give him courage, even when he was separated from all of you. My Secret Keeper had only me, and he knew I would not hinder whatever final preparations he chose to make. Insuring Harry would succeed was all that truly mattered." Overwhelmed by emotion, unable to speak, the ancient wizard bowed his head, his tears dropping unchecked onto his folded hands.

Minerva sat rigid and silent, waiting for this tide of grief to subside. What words could comfort her friend when she herself bore the same weight of sorrow and shame? Choices made, words spoken, terrible wounds left unhealed. She waited for his account to resume, and it soon did, spoken in an anguished voice.

"When he fled from you, I fought to stay connected with him, though he remained firmly Occluded. When Nagini struck, those barriers collapsed. I felt him fall, and I shared the memories he gave to Harry. When he was alone on the floor, I was able to hear Riddle's voice returning, saying his name, calling him. He was in pain and shock, slipping into unconsciousness, and he answered... he had been trained always to answer. Riddle's hiss came again.

"Ecce in Tenebrae, Severus Tobias Snape, Quidam Derelictus. Behold in Darkness, Severus Tobias Snape, the One Forsaken. I cast him from me into the Abandonment. His name is dust, scattered into the Void. Suffering shall be his only companion and despair his only shelter. He shall wander always and be forever lost."

Dumbledore shuddered at the memory, and Minerva turned pale as death, not wishing to hear, but knowing she must.

"All these years, he had been invaluable, but Riddle had hated him. Afraid that his intelligence and cunning might give him greater magic, even in death, Riddle cast the Abandonment, an ancient Unforgivable that had been long hidden."

Dumbledore sank back into his seat, shielding his face from Minerva.

"I could not reach him... could not prevent it. When he answered to his name, Riddle's curse fastened onto him as swiftly as Nagini had done. He tried to find me... tried to tell me... 'Albus... I am afraid'..."

Twisting her hands together in agitation, Minerva rose to pace the room, just as her predecessor had done.

"Albus... I don't recall him ever speaking to you except as Headmaster or Dumbledore, and he never would admit he was afraid of anything, not even after Remus..."

Dumbledore shook his head, remembering.

"He never thought it proper to call me Albus, not even privately... Always so rigid about such things. But, Minerva, I have always known that fear was there. It was his own duality that frightened him, and the shame of all that he had done for Riddle... even before Riddle... The Dark Arts came so easily to him. He asked me once, long ago, whether I thought he still had a soul that might survive. I told him that only he could say for certain, but that I believed he did. My poor dark boy... He did not agree with me. So he stayed apart, and hid his fear behind his rage..."

"Some months ago, I stopped to visit the Fat Lady, and she seemed very troubled. When I questioned her, she said 'that awful Headmaster' had been standing night after night, near the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, keeping to the shadows, and she was quite sure that she had seen tears on his face..."

"Naturally, I convinced the dear lady she was certainly mistaken, that such a thing was not possible, some trick of the light... But in that moment, I had discovered his Boggart... A simple doorway... the portrait hole where he stood alone and ashamed after Lily left him without even turning to look back. She was not the first, you see. Such a small thing. How deeply he buried that awful secret all these years, concealing it even from me."

Minerva scarcely dared speak, tears fogging her bright eyes.

"I am so sorry... for all of us. But, Albus, he is alive... I have had no message otherwise. How can this awful curse manifest itself, if he still lives, and Riddle is dead? Harry threw that in Riddle's face at the end... that he no longer held power, that his curses were weak. Surely, this curse will fail as well."

Dumbledore shook his head, his face still marred with the pain of all he had revealed.

"The Abandonment remains manifest because it was cast with Riddle still in the fullness of his power, before Harry fully understood what was needed. The curse was immense in its strength, powered by such consuming hatred. Because my Secret Keeper believed himself worthy of nothing more than to be forever forsaken, he has accepted it as his due.

"From within the confines of this portrait, I dared divert no one from the Battle. The tiny thread of even one person's absence might have been spun into a fabric of defeat. Beyond the Veil, I needed to stand ready to give Harry the final tools to defeat Riddle. In both Worlds, I was forced to do what had always been demanded of me... leave my Secret Keeper... alone but not in peace."

Minerva's voice trembled in response.

"Why do you call him only Secret Keeper...? You've not spoken his name, not even here where it would be safe... I've not said his name because I am the one who has hidden him, but you..."

She had returned to stand before the portrait, tears shimmering in her eyes. The ancient wizard bowed his head, pondering.

"Minerva, there are dire consequences to his actions, and they are devastating when coupled with Riddle's curse."

Minerva haltingly asked the question she would have given anything not to voice.

"Albus, if he lives... will he be forever broken? The Healer says his suffering is close to madness..."

The prospect of her colleague's brilliant mind torn to shreds was dreadful. She would wish him the peace of the Veil if recalling him to the living would condemn him to insanity.

Dumbledore raised his eyes to hers. "His disciplines have always been strong. The Healer must help him overcome Nagini's venom and his dependency on the potions he

has been using. It is a blessing that it was you and Hagrid who found him, and I am grateful you were so wise in choosing the place to conceal him. You and Hagrid must be his Secret Keepers now, and in time, I believe there will be one other.

"You must help him recover his past no matter how painful, for without it he is empty. Riddle's curse holds him obtunded--his mind is darkened. His true name has been taken from him, and you must not attempt to use it to call him back. At what should have been his last breath, Riddle bound the curse to his name. It was the intention that he would sink deeper into the Abandonment whenever his name was spoken. No doubt Riddle would have taken great pleasure in saying his name, over and over again.

"If he lives, I do not know the outcome. No one in recorded magical history has lived to return from the Abandonment. Tell the Healer, that until he wakes... and even after... he must never be left without someone nearby. Speak to him even if he seems not to know that you are there. Place familiar objects in his hands, but not his wand... That is far too dangerous for now. His memories may surface in powerful dreams and flashes of recognition, but those may be shattering. Once discovered, the third Keeper must agree to remain close, to help him understand. If his magic awakens, he may have little control of his ability, and it will seem foreign, as though someone is whispering to him in a language not his own. You must tell no one, not even Harry. He would offer to be the third, but our dear boy must have the chance to live without another heavy burden on his shoulders. He may have a role to play someday, but this is not the time."

Sitting in rapt attention, Minerva noted everything she was told before answering.

"Hagrid and I will go to him as soon as possible. The Castle is about to go into repairs, and the summer holidays will allow us to slip away unnoticed. Certainly, no one will question our need for rest and retreat. Albus, you must help us keep close watch to determine the Third Keeper, and I will need your knowledge to seek every possible way to overcome this horror."

Minerva felt strengthened by the opportunity to perform some meaningful atonement for her failure to see what should have been so apparent. Looking up at Dumbledore, she faltered at the sadness still swimming in his eyes, and her heart froze.

"Albus... What have you not told me?"

Rising again to gaze out his portrait window, Dumbledore remained silent, his head bowed. At last, he turned back to face her.

"Minerva, I have already said that there are terrible consequences to the preparations my Secret Keeper attempted when coupled with the Abandonment... with its manifestation of unending darkness... never again to know the light..."

At his hesitation, a terrible truth began shaping in her mind, and she pulled her robes close around her, shrinking into her chair like a child seeking shelter from unseen monsters.

"Albus? Oh... no, this must not be... This is cruelty for nothing but its own sake..."

His face etched in sorrow, Dumbledore answered.

"Cruelty was Tom Riddle's greatest delight... his legacy to us all."

The ancient wizard would not meet her eyes, dreading the final revelation he must make.

"Minerva, you and Hagrid must be ready. If he should survive and wake... my Secret Keeper... my dark and angry boy... will never see the light... He will be blind."

Chapter Four: In Sanctuary

Chapter 4 of 14

The time has come for Minerva to visit Severus' quarters and begin to gather both her thoughts and her resources.

Chapter Four: In Sanctuary

Minerva had not wept.

Holding death at bay on a blood-soaked floor... placing a faltering life into the Healer's keeping... she had not wept. Sitting in midnight vigil beside her wounded children... parting a curtain of distant memory for a young wizard-hero... she had not wept. Presiding over rain-blessed rites of somber passing... still, she had not wept. Through all the fragile questioning farewells, through a headlong and eternal seven days, no tears had come. Those had stayed well-hidden, a fiercely guarded treasure unlocked to none.

When war had flung its bloody cloak across the Castle grounds, she had summoned a cold fury, a sweeping tide of rage that drove her to offer her life, if so decreed, to the Dark Lord's defeat. She had kept nothing in reserve when she'd stood against him, driving him back with the strength of her heart and the force of her magic. There had been no hesitation when she'd raised her wand, the primal joy of righteous battle surging through her with every hex she'd cast.

When she had seen Riddle's husk devoured by dragon fire, the flame of her anger had been banked into lingering embers. She had allowed her heart to settle onto a fulcrum of purpose, resolving into a place of balance. She would do all that was necessary to move beyond the ruins of war... and she would remain faithful to her solemn secret, so long as there was need. Her world would heal, her heart would heal... and if mercy was more than a brief nod from whimsical gods, the wizard she'd brought to sanctuary... he would heal as well.

Yet even now, she had not wept.

This seventh dawn had centered on her need to know, her right to demand the explanations that had gone unspoken. She had posed her questions... and the answers had been given.

"If he survives... if he wakes... he will be blind."

Tom Riddle's specter had risen with malicious satisfaction to stand before her, framed in Albus' revelations. The brutal truth of war... crystallized into a handful of words, affirming that the Dark Lord's vicious mark would forever scar the Wizarding world.

Sinking to the floor beneath the portrait, her unbound hair the mourning veil which hid her face, she had at last released her cloistered tears in lamentation of her dead and wounded... a naked grief which pleaded for the return of all that had been taken from her.

It was Minerva, woman of compassionate and loving heart, who wept wrenching sobs of loss and exhaustion, but it was Minerva McGonagall, fierce and powerful witch, who rose to her feet, straightening her robes and twisting up her hair, crossing to the chair behind the great polished desk to take her rightful place as Headmistress of Hogwarts.

When she spoke again, no tremor edged her voice, and it was clear her mourning had given way to an armored intention that would tolerate no argument.

"Albus, the stewardship of this school and its inhabitants--all of them--are my responsibility, whether they're present within these walls or not. I refuse to lose even one more of our own to Tom Riddle, and I don't intend to allow him this last victory. It's time I went to see the other quarters now to make sure they are in order and safely guarded. That will give me time to think and begin to shape a plan of action. You will excuse me?"

Dumbledore simply nodded.

"Of course, Minerva. When you are ready, we will talk again."

As she was rising from her chair to leave, she heard Albus' voice once more, but only in the corridors of thought.

"Minerva, will you tell me the name you have given him? I would be comforted to know what you will call him."

Wordlessly she offered him the memory of Gareth and the naming he had made, and as she left the room, she was faintly comforted as well to see him smile.

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Anyone who had ever been the recipient of Minerva's ire would have maintained a most respectful distance, had they seen her striding with deliberate purpose through the halls of Hogwarts Castle, marching like a conquering army of one, ramrod straight, head high and proud, robes sweeping behind her like the wake of a great warship. Headmistress Minerva McGonagall, Highland witch of the ancient clans, was furious.

She paused in front of the battered suit of armor behind which Severus had taken cover when she had hurled a barrage of blades deep into its metal breast.

"Things might have gone very differently if you'd not been so skilled at dueling," she muttered. "Your secrets would have died with you... and I would have been your murderer..."

It was close to twenty minutes before she reached her destination--a remote tower at the end of a long and frigid corridor, culminating in narrow stone steps. Both corridor and steps were blanketed by a layer of dust marred only by the repeated passage of one man. The staircase ascended in a tight spiral, in stark contrast to that which led to the quarters deep below the lake, the abode of Slytherin House.

Upon his return as Headmaster, Severus had, of course, no longer taught. It was known that he had taken private quarters in the most secluded reaches of the castle, far from the Headmaster's Tower, farther still from the dungeons of his House. The staff knew the location, but none presumed or desired to approach, nor were they summoned there. The students whispered about the terrible chamber of the betrayer, the despised murderer. Even the most arrogant among the Slytherins spoke his name with hushed voices.

It was assumed that any who ventured near him unbidden would suffer a merciless punishment. His foreboding presence was pervasive, his edicts and decrees received in grim acceptance of his power. Though he was seen only rarely, and was never masked, most who glimpsed him agreed that his appearance was that of the true Death Eater. Cloaked in the billowing robes of an eternal night, he was the dreaded herald of the coming of his Lord.

Advancing cautiously up the long spiral, Minerva paused, several steps below the small landing, peering up at a ponderous door of thickset oak, bound with iron. How many times, she wondered, had he left his solitary footprints on these steps, exhausted from constant surveillance, body and spirit sundered by the fickle accolades and unrestrained cruelty of Riddle's madness, bearing the agony of his own self-inflicted torments.

She was furious that her own judgments had been so distorted, and she was furious with him--recognizing now with stark clarity the horrors to which he'd subjected himself. Furious he had chosen to bear this burden alone; that he held so little regard for his own life, furious that despite all his cunning, his brilliance and keen perceptions, he had refused to acknowledge a fundamental truth.

As much as he denied comradeship with them, he was one of Hogwarts' own. Student, Professor, Head of House, Order Member, Headmaster--in all these aspects, he had been theirs, not Riddle's. She would use that now to call him back, kicking and cursing if need be, or she would find the way to release him into a peaceful death if that was the will of the Fates--but she would not lose him to Tom Riddle. Not again.

"Merlin's Heart, Severus," she silently fumed, not daring to speak his name aloud, afraid to plunge him still deeper into his Abandonment, "all that misery and secrecy... never enough to satisfy you."

"ENOUGH!"

The word was her battle cry, rebounding from the looming walls, back along the echoing corridor.

It was her instinct that had kept her standing well below the landing. The massive door swung suddenly outward, smashing against the wall with a deafening crash, meant to strike terror into the heart of any would-be intruder. They would surely have lost their footing and hurtled backwards down the twisting steps, to land in a bloodied, broken heap at the bottom. A favored tactic of his--to viciously hurl the door of his classroom against the dungeon wall, terrifying the first-years, as he swept like some demon of Death into their midst, eyes cold as an adder's.

She had often accused him of petty cruelty, challenging him to address his reasoning for terrifying children. His acerbic response was generally the same.

"A dose of fear may shut them up long enough for them to hear what I attempt to teach them. Some of them may have the sense to use it... Most will not. So be it."

"And do you honestly believe your penchant for making them hate you will shield you somehow... that you will never be vulnerable to any of them?" she had once retaliated, soon after Albus had sent him back to Riddle's side. "For the love of heaven, Severus, this behavior is shameful... It's unworthy of you."

"ENOUGH!"

His eyes had flamed in a fever of rage, and he had seized a vial of potion, hurling it to the floor at her feet with such violence she had drawn her wand, preparing to defend herself. His face draining of the raw emotion that had flared so suddenly, he had apologized at once, claiming he was weary and unwell, but there had been tension between them for many days after.

"Enough."

Why had he chosen that single word as the ward to protect his quarters? Because this solitary retreat was the only refuge left to him?

"Enough."

Or had he finally given voice to his wretched hope to be released from his allegiances and promises?

"Enough."

Cautiously and respectfully, as if entering a sepulcher, Minerva crossed the threshold to stand in his sanctuary. Her first realization was that there were no windows.

coverings, none of the heavy black drapery he had always favored in his offices and classrooms. Instead the room was flooded with sunlight that poured in from the large windows opposite the doorway. Was this some harbinger of hope, that he had allowed the light to enter?

She understood his reason far too quickly when she saw what was clearly visible from those windows--always in his line of sight whenever he entered the rooms or moved anywhere within them. Standing as a constant sentinel, there rose the Astronomy Tower, the place where he had cast the most Unforgivable of curses... Avada Kedavra, the Killing Curse.

No matter that it was delivered as an act of mercy, the agreed-upon conclusion to an Unbreakable Vow. As clearly as though his shadow still fell across the floor, she knew. He had not allowed that wound to close, but had kept it bleeding. He had surely stood brooding at those windows, looking at that Tower, every cursed day, every haunted night... a reminder always that his hands... his wand... had ended the life of Albus Dumbledore.

"... those whom I could not save..."

Turning from the window, Minerva cast her eyes around the first large room. She was unsure what she had expected to find in these new quarters. Though their offices were open to one another, in all their years of service to the school, she could not recall that either had visited the other's personal apartments. There were certain time-honored rules of tradition to be followed and sufficient neutral spaces within the Castle where staff and Heads of House could meet comfortably for professional or private matters. Somehow, it had always been a forgone conclusion that neither would intrude upon the other's privacy.

She was struck by the subdued character of the space--sparingly furnished, with items that appeared to have been chosen with considerable appreciation for beauty and workmanship. A useful deception--to be surrounded with certain trappings of the luxury and power that service to Riddle could provide. Or were these careful acquisitions driven by a far deeper need--an effort to eradicate the ugliness of his life?

An enchanted Persian carpet covered the oiled plank floor, its exquisite design shifting in an ever-changing play of light and color, reminiscent of deep-flowing water dappled by the shadow of leaves. The pattern stirred a memory from the Pensieve that Harry had shared with her the night of their mourning vigil--a poignant remembrance of two children huddled close together on a riverbank, whispering of magic, dreaming of Hogwarts.

A leather Morris chair, its arms of aged ironwood, stood close to a blackened stone fireplace that was flanked by two wrought-iron candle stands rising from the floor in the guise of gnarled and barren trees. The house-elves must have been permitted here, as the hearth was clean and a fire made ready. A board and pieces for Wizard chess, carved from the blackest Kilkenny and the purest white Sivec marble, stood ready for a game. The mantle held a pair of antique porcelain apothecary urns; thin as eggshell, painted with images of Japanese dragons, heads erect in proud disdain, claws extended in rampant fighting posture.

Beside the well-worn chair stood a mahogany table piled with books, bearing a substantial pewter candlestick, the wick of the beeswax pillar precisely trimmed. A basket of woven papyrus containing rolls of blank parchment, an assortment of snowy-owl quills and bottles of crimson and ebony inks, were all close at hand, with even more books heaped on the floor, sheets of parchment filled with scrawled notations tucked haphazardly between the pages.

Against one wall loomed an enormous sideboard, also of mahogany, carved with crouching gargoyles, and other mythical and Magical creatures--foreboding, yet strangely beautiful--graced with a Slytherin-crested copper tray holding two cut-crystal decanters, one of dryad-made brandy, the other of firewhisky--the brandy scarcely touched, the firewhisky nearly finished. A single snifter sat beside the decanters--one glass only, for in the year past, he had welcomed no one to share the gentle warmth of the brandy or the searing flame of the firewhisky. This momentary comfort, this fleeting oblivion, he had kept for himself alone.

An inlaid ebony tea chest, containing the pungent smoky Lapsang Souchong he preferred, sat beside an antique Russian samovar, one plain teacup at the ready. Minerva remembered arguing with him about tea. She could never abide the dank tarry aroma of his, and he disdained her fragrant Scottish blend.

Their first discord over tea had been on a raw and rainy November afternoon. It was Severus' second term at Hogwarts as a professor, and he had only now begun to come into the staff room, other than for morning meetings or to check his box for notices, generally at times she knew he expected to find no one else there.

She had conjured a peat fire to warm her as she tackled the crossword of the *Sunday Prophet*, and her pot of tea was at her elbow. Knowing even a simple acknowledgment would likely send him out of the room, she'd kept her attention firmly on the puzzle, not looking up as he settled his thin frame into the adjacent armchair. The only sound was the slight thump of another teapot being placed on the table and the tiny chortle of tea being poured into a cup.

Silence had ensued--until the pine-smoke scent of his tea began to permeate the room. She had lowered her paper with a snap and wrinkled her nose in disgust, thinking to herself how vile the smell was, but saying nothing. It was not her business what he chose to drink.

A short while later, she'd finished the puzzle and was left feeling somewhat dozy. Since she had essays to mark, she'd decided to clear the cobwebs away with a bit more tea. Glancing over at Severus as she poured, she'd noticed he was deeply absorbed in his reading and his cup was empty. On impulse she had reached across to re-fill it with tea from her own pot, not wishing to disturb him.

Raising his eyes from the page with a glower of annoyance, he had vanished the tea immediately and made a surly comment that he'd sooner traipse through Diagon Alley dressed in Gryffindor crimson than drink such an insipid brew. Minerva usually ignored the bite of his temper, but she had only meant to be sociable and there was no excuse for being so ill-mannered to a colleague, particularly one who was considerably his senior, in both years and office.

"You might have simply said, 'No, thank you', Severus." She'd intentionally not called him Professor. "Not everything a Gryffindor does is meant as a direct attack on your Slytherin sensibilities." Her own temper was up now, and she'd half hoped he'd rise to the bait.

Without a word, he had deliberately filled his cup from his own teapot, adding a measure of brandy from the communal silver flask on the table between them. From behind her paper, she'd watched him over the rim of her spectacles, and had seen his hand hover over her cup as well, as if he were considering whether to add a drop there also... as a draught of peace for having left a sting... until he looked up and saw that he was being observed. Stony-faced, he'd set down the flask, replaced the stopper, and returned to his book. There had been no olive branch that day.

And yet, that Christmas, a small box had appeared in her quarters, wrapped in tissue of the deepest red, tied with gold cord and tagged with a single letter "S" in silver. Inside was a perfect bone-china teacup, delicate and translucent as a lotus flower, both cup and saucer fairy-painted with the crest of her House, charmed so that any tea poured into the cup would remain steaming, just the way she liked it. There was no card, but she knew at once who had sent it. When she had attempted to thank him at dinner in the Great Hall, he had nodded stiffly and abruptly left the room.

Over the years, their individual preferences over the matter of tea had evolved into an odd little ceremony. Whoever reached the staff room first would prepare both pots, to be ready and waiting when the other arrived.

"Vile," she would scowl, handing over his pot.

"Insipid," he would smirk, as he reciprocated with hers.

She had not touched the charmed cup since Albus' death, but it had seemed pointless for something so beautiful to be destroyed. It sat in its place in the staff room even now, filmed with dust.

Opening the doors at the front of the sideboard, she saw the collection of vials, flasks, bottles, and boxes--his rarest and most personal stores. Which of these shimmering vessels contained the terrible potions with which he had been dosing? For a moment, she considered smashing all of them, though she knew that would be foolish. He would have mocked her and demanded to know why a witch of her years and stature would behave like a petulant child.

Perhaps there were potions here that the Healer might use to ease him through his suffering. Still, she slammed the doors shut sharply, needing to release her anger. Had she known, she could have... she would have... done what? Albus had not prevented his spy's descent into the abyss of potion dependency, though in truth he had scarcely

made the attempt. But given Severus' grim determination to arm himself against the unforeseen, how might she have fared any better?

Every other space in the vast room was lined, floor to ceiling, with bookcases, laden with volumes of every conceivable type. The musky scent of leather bindings and ancient paper permeated the room--hanging in the air like an incense of knowledge. Glancing along the shelves, she saw that all subjects were covered--potions, spells, hexes, charms, curses, tomes on the Darkest Arts contrasting with those extolling the most transcendent of the White, all things Magical--but also numerous books of history, medicine, philosophy and logic, religion and art, poetry and literature... all from the Muggle world.

She had always considered that to be a saving grace for Severus--his constant yearning for information and knowledge. She respected that trait of his profoundly, but often feared where such a passionate quest might lead him. Had he been Ravenclaw, she would have been less concerned, but knowing how deeply Slytherin he was, she understood his temptations were great.

It had been books that forged the first trust between them.

When he was still a first-year in her Transfiguration class, she'd found herself puzzled by him. Although never one to wave his hand in anxious anticipation of being called upon, he always answered correctly when she posed a question directly to him. His assignments were submitted exactly on time, written in a hand that she found overly precise for an eleven-year-old boy. While others in class tended to break focus if distracted by a sound in the corridors or the siren song of Quidditch practice wafting in from the playing fields, he never seemed diverted by such things. When his classmates were frantically copying down every word she said, he would lean forward, hugging his elbows, watching her intently with eyes far too old for a child, and when he practiced his transfigurations, she was pleased with the grace and restraint of his wand work.

From what she'd observed, he had no friends to speak of, other than Lily Evans--an odd pairing--but after all they were from the same district of Manchester. His Slytherin housemates seemed to tolerate him, although perhaps they did so only because he was intelligent and they might gain some help with difficult homework. She'd determined within the first month that he already knew far more than he should about magical theory, but when she'd mentioned that to Albus, he'd simply smiled and said perhaps they'd best keep a closer eye on him. Horace was already boasting in the staff room that he might have a Potions genius on his hands.

It was quite by accident that she'd discovered him one evening in her classroom. On her way back to her quarters from the library, she'd remembered there was a supplementary essay one of her more advanced sixth-years had promised to leave on the corner of her teaching desk. Deciding she'd rather not leave marking a deserving student's work until the next day, she'd slipped into her classroom with the glow of a waxing moon allowing her to move across the flagstone floor without lighting her wand.

It was the whisper of a page turning that gave him away. Otherwise, she might have missed him, hunched cross-legged on the floor in the darkest corner with a large book cradled in his lap, the tiny light of his illuminated wand shrouded by the shabby robe he'd tented over his head and shoulders.

"Mr. Snape, explain yourself, if you please."

The average student, caught off-guard by a professor, much less a Head of House, would have scrambled to their feet, stammering excuses. But not this boy. He carefully closed the book, shrugged his robes back into their proper place, and slowly rose to his feet to face her, his wand extinguished. The flint of moonlight sparking in his black eyes, he stood silent, so pale she almost believed she could see straight through him.

"Your reason, Mr. Snape, for your presence here after curfew when you should be studying in the common room of your House?" Her stern demeanor was generally enough to make even older students lower their eyes, regretting the error of their ways. But not this boy.

Looking straight at her, he had squared his thin shoulders and extended his skinny arms, the book heavy in his hands.

"I was reading, Professor McGonagall."

Watching carefully, in case he decided to bolt after all, Minerva scanned the book's cover and saw it was the new publication she'd ordered earlier in the week from Flourish and Blotts and left on the bookcase behind her teaching desk.

"Transfiguration Within the Constraints of Time Manipulation: An Esoteric Analysis of Varied Applications", authored by Phillipa Mobilus.

"Mr. Snape," she had said, frowning, "this book is hardly of a level or topic appropriate to a first-year student. You've made two grave mistakes... sneaking into my classroom after hours and presuming to take my personal property without permission. You will serve detention with me for the next two Fridays, and I will be making a report to your Head of House. You are to go at once back where you belong."

Securing the book under her arm, she'd firmly motioned him to leave the room ahead of her, but he'd remained motionless, his boy's face set with a man's fierce determination.

"I'm not a sneak... I wasn't doing anything but reading..." Wounded pride, and a certain willful anger, could be heard in his voice.

"I'd advise you not to make matters worse, Severus Snape, with a show of temper. Just what is it that you think you've read in this book?"

She'd been amazed he'd actually be so bold as to challenge her. He had always been respectful of his professors and seemed to prefer structure and discipline, distancing himself from any of the childish antics of his fellows.

"Page eighty-seven, half way down... She says the dark wizards in Egypt could do it easily, whenever they wanted to... transfigure into hawks and jackals... and huge poisonous snakes... and they could bend time any way they wanted to curse the pharaohs' enemies. That's what the obelisks were really all about... to focus the magic. I know you think I don't understand it and I'm lying... but it's in your book... I read it."

Disturbed by the unrestrained awe and passion in his voice, she'd touched his shoulder to maneuver him to sit down and felt the muscles of his scrawny frame seize, ready for the blow. He'd already braced himself, feet apart, hands clenched, jaw set... prepared. The realization that he was anticipating physical punishment for his offense was dreadful to her.

"Child, I've no intention of hurting you. I do want you to sit down over there, however."

The easiest solution of course would have been to simply open the book to the page he'd cited and confirm his claim. He'd still be required to serve detention with her for breaking the after-hours rule and touching a professor's personal property, but at least she'd know the truth.

He'd sat unflinching under her scrutiny... hands open and wandless in his lap, with no schoolboy's tic of nervous energy. Quite still... except for those black eyes... appraising, watchful, guarded... Too deep... too intense... a world of shadows already living there. But somewhere in their deepest recesses, a boy still peeped out... remorseful for offending his teacher... hoping not to be labeled deceitful and sent away... Wanting her to trust him... Needing her to believe him.

For a moment, as she considered what to do, it was as if he'd somehow slipped inside her head and hidden there... It was a tiny sensation, like a mouse scurrying past her in the dark.

"I'm sorry... I wasn't going to steal it... I just wanted to read it."

She did not open the book.

"Mr. Snape... Severus... You do understand you've broken several important rules, and I will call you to detention. However, I believe we will restrict my report to your Head of House to simply say I found you roaming the corridors after curfew. Agreed?"

An almost imperceptible nod. "Yes, Professor McGonagall."

"It appears you have an interest beyond your years for subjects you're not yet versed in and are not ready to study."

A flush of anger had swept across his face, and she'd quelled that sharply.

"I remind you, Mr. Snape, that you are indeed a child... an exceptionally bright child, certainly... but still you are a boy, without the experiences of magic to appropriately study advanced theory. Nevertheless, I will speak with the Headmaster privately and make my recommendation that you have supervised access to various texts not generally available to first-years." She smiled in spite of herself. "In fact, there may be some of them not readily available to many of the seventh-years."

She could almost see the calculations going on behind his dark eyes.

"There will most assuredly not be books provided to you from the Restricted Section, and if I am ever led to believe you are attempting to access those, I will revoke this privilege immediately. Are we quite clear?"

Another nod, more eager this time. "Yes, Professor McGonagall."

"Until the Imbolc holidays, I will expect you to report to me here on Friday evenings after supper, and we will discuss what you've been reading. You will maintain your other studies with due diligence, and should your regular work fall below standards, we will re-address this consideration. If your housemates have questions, you can simply tell them I've given you detention and additional essay work as punishment for being out of bounds. I imagine that Mr. Malfoy as your Prefect will be most sympathetic that you're being forced to spend so much time with me."

Standing now in Severus' fortress of books, Minerva remembered the brief smile that had darted across his thin face. He'd been almost as pleased with the conspiracy as with her offer, and she'd come to look forward to those Friday evenings, which did not cease after the holidays.

For the next three years, she had provided him with books, and he had quietly sought her out, under the pretense of Transfiguration tutoring, to discuss the things he'd read--until he'd turned fourteen, and a new transfiguration began--from an intelligent and questing boy into an angry and sullen young man. By the time he was fifteen, he had stopped coming. By the time he was seventeen, they had lost him.

Sighing, Minerva shook her head. "You devoured books faster than I could approve them, didn't you? Something of a challenge, keeping Madam Pince in the dark... but we did manage always to give her the slip. I always suspected you were actually having a bit of fun in those days. Old Horace figured it out rather quickly, you know, but didn't care as long as you remained his prize pupil."

Other than the empty portrait frame positioned where Albus could survey the entire suite of rooms if so desired, there was no artwork on the walls--certainly none of the hideous images Severus had displayed so openly in his classroom, once he attained the post of Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts. She had confronted him about those horrible images, and he had replied, with that maddening irrefutable logic of his, that students should be shown in exacting detail what they would encounter... they must understand fully both the seduction and the repugnance within those Arts.

They had often sat late into the night in the staff room, debating magical beliefs and philosophies. Though she understood the premise, Minerva could not tolerate the argument that the Dark Arts might be used selectively in ways that would not lead to a soul's destruction. Severus compared them to an alluring narcotic, a potion that subtly coursed through the veins, softly calling and enticing... seeking the ones apart from friends and loved ones, feeding their desperate hungers, promising that if they used the power well, they would achieve great things... until too late the users learned... If they wished to be served by the Dark Arts, they must also serve.

Surely she realized he'd been exposed to the addiction when he was still a child? With eyes wide open, he had allowed the Dark Arts to shape him, and though he sought balance and control, they ensnared and bewitched him still--he was entranced by them. How else might the Dark Lord have drawn him to his side so readily?

She had threatened to go to Dumbledore, to demand that he forbid those awful images in any Hogwarts classroom and withdraw the offer of this dangerous teaching position, but Severus had simply observed her with a mirthless smile, his eyes glinting with the bitter irony of his circumstances.

"Minerva, the Headmaster knows full well what I am... That is what makes me so useful in this War. Who else might coil so comfortably at the Dark Lord's side? Not a lion of Gryffindor, certainly. I am the one he needs... a serpent from the nest of Slytherin."

Emotion surging through her like one of his simmering potions, Minerva crossed the room and opened the inner door, entering the bed chamber. There was the standard four-poster used by the students, covered with the simplest linens and one dense gray woolen blanket, one pillow, thin and hard. The heavy velvet bed curtains, meant to keep out the chill, had been removed--nothing must confine him should an enemy approach. He had never revealed whether he was celibate, but surely such a lonely bed had never been filled with the warm fragrance of a woman, nor seen him wake at first light, wrapped in a lover's sweet embrace.

The looming mahogany wardrobe opposite revealed the clothing of a Hogwarts professor, several pairs of leather boots lined up below coats, trousers, and cloaks in his accustomed dense black wool, contrasting with high necked shirts of stark white broadcloth. The solitary set of dress robes, threads of green and silver interwoven at the edges, stirred another memory.

The year she had been named Deputy Headmistress, Albus had been ill with a cold and had begged off at the last moment from attending the Yule Ball. She had resigned herself to beginning the first waltz with someone else--a difficult prospect since she loved to dance and most of the faculty and staff were not so accomplished. Still, she had donned her most festive tartan robes and proceeded to the Great Hall. The Hall was ablaze when she entered--truly wonderful. All eyes were turned to her, waiting expectantly. The musicians stood poised, ready to strike the first notes. Perhaps she should simply refrain and allow someone else to step off first.

He had appeared in front of her as silently as a conjured shadow, dressed in those somber dress robes--black as midnight, with the hint of verdant green and moonlit silver touching the edges--bowing slightly with elegant grace, as he would have done before a duel, extending his pale, slender hand.

"Madam, it would be my honor, and that of my House."

One waltz, gracefully and perfectly executed, swiftly ended. Another restrained bow, and then gone. There had been no pointless affectations or mundane pleasantries, simply a tradition honored, a courtesy observed, respect shown. His hooded eyes and unsmiling marble face clearly conveyed that this would never be spoken of again between them. But she had not forgotten.

Shaking her head at the memory, Minerva continued assessing the contents of the wardrobe. There were a few Muggle pieces--sweaters, trousers and such, always in black, gray, or starkest white. Though they were few, every garment, magical or Muggle, was impeccably tailored, of excellent fabric. A taste acquired through long years of association with Lucius Malfoy, or a small vanity to negate the memory of the hideous clothing forced upon him as a child? The rich scent of amber filled the wardrobe, perhaps to balance the acrid odor of potions that had always clung to him.

It felt somehow too personal, too intimate, to search his bureau, so she made only a brief inspection--sleeping robes, under garments, and socks--no color, no expensive quality here--except for one pair of socks in flaming chartreuse cashmere, a birthday gift from Albus years ago--certainly never worn, but respectfully kept, all the same.

Minerva glanced into the bath, noting the absence of any indulgence--coarse white towels and plain soaps. The entire school, students and faculty alike, had always scoffed behind his back at the deplorable condition of his hair and the wretched appearance of his skin--nothing seemed to lift the oily residue of potion fumes from those straggling raven locks and that spectral face. She did recall, however, how scrupulously he maintained his hands. There had been a deadly beauty to those hands--capable of soothing or torturing, healing or killing, with equal skill.

Neither bed chamber nor bath contained a mirror. His sweeping black cloak, his bloodless face and bottomless eyes, his stealthy nocturnal habits, had perpetuated the rumor that he carried the curse of vampire blood. This absence of mirrors would have lent credence to the myth of "the Bat of Hogwarts." Had he considered himself so ugly that the use of a mirror would be an absurd vanity, or was this something more profound? Had he shunned looking into his own eyes or scrutinizing his own face, dreading what they would reveal?

Adjacent to the austere bed stood a large well-worn trunk, which Minerva believed was the same one he had brought to Hogwarts as a scrawny, brittle child. Kneeling gingerly beside it, lest some dangerous hex protected it, she carefully raised the lid, amazed that no ward had been placed. Perhaps he simply surmised that no one who valued their life would dare venture this far into his domain.

Inside she found more books, mostly his student texts. Nothing out of the ordinary, except for one small box--a battered biscuit tin--the treasure box of a boy from the streets, a child of Spinner's End--buried beneath a stack of old potions essays, marked with glowing comments from Slughorn. Again, no wards. She removed the lid, and her heart sank as she investigated the contents.

A polished river rock, painted with two tiny red hearts, and a child's lopsided lettering.

"To Sev my best friend always. Happy Christmas from Lily."

A girl's red mitten, the red of Gryffindor House.

Strands of gold and silver ribbon, twisted into a forever knot, promising loyalty and devotion.

And a sheet of paper--bearing several lines from the last page of a letter--signed with Lily Potter's love, wrapped around a torn photograph of her beautiful, bright face--laughing, glowing with joy, full of love and life.

Minerva gently replaced the childhood tokens of eternal friendship, the letter and the photograph of the woman grown, and tucked the little tin into a pocket in her robes. Albus had said to place familiar objects into his hands. Perhaps these simple things, so treasured, would call to him in his forsaken wandering between the Worlds.

She saw no other evidence of Lily anywhere in the rooms. She had not expected to find a memorial to his heart's deepest regret. Nothing so blatant, Minerva knew, would have been permitted. Displays of emotion or affection left him naked to the eyes of those around him, a situation he refused to tolerate. His shrine to Lily had been internal--his memories serving as the acolyte--his tattered soul as the daily offering.

Seeing that the shadows on the floor were lengthening, Minerva centered her attentions. It would be several more days before her preparations were complete, and she'd best make a start.

Moving through the rooms again, she hesitated in front of the student trunk. A familiar object, she reasoned--one that could be easily filled with other familiar objects. Having made her decision, she emptied the trunk of most of the books and papers, placing those carefully in the wardrobe. She kept one first-year student text, and one fifth-year potions essay. Moving the trunk into the middle of the floor in the larger room, she began to direct her wand toward various objects, speaking the incantations "*Mobilibus*" and "*Accio*".

Begin to call him back, Albus had said, with sounds, textures, scents, and familiar objects.

Scents and tastes? A fragrant piece of amber from the wardrobe. The scent of one's own clothing was often the most familiar. A bar of soap from the bath. That dreadful tea, surely, along with his cup. And of course both the brandy and the firewhisky decanters must be placed in the trunk, after being sealed securely with a charm.

Textures? Several of the owl quills and pieces of pristine parchment went into the trunk, along with the inks. The Queens, both black and white, from the chessboard. The dense gray blanket was fetched, but not the unforgiving pillow. Various items of clothing, both Muggle and magical were added, including the traveling cloak she knew he favored most whenever the weather was chill and damp. She hesitated for an instant, before adding the atrocious green socks to the pile, with a wolfish little smile. It would serve him right, if she forced him to wear them every blessed day until he was well. A single tear sprang to her eye, as she silently prayed she might someday see him realize exactly what they were, and scowl at her in absolute disgust at being subjected to such an indignity.

Sounds? The rhythm and cadence of forgotten voices, reading from books long treasured, and committed to memory, could only help and could not harm. Minerva moved past each shelf, pulling volumes she had seen him reading often. She chose carefully, selecting only those which would fill his mind with logic and intelligence, beauty, wisdom, and hope--from both Worlds, magical and Muggle. It would require the strength and knowledge of both to bring him back. She would not permit the blight of Darkness to approach him, only the blessings of the Light.

Aversion etched into her face, she approached the sideboard, opening the doors to gather the potion stores within. Conjuring a small chest, she placed all inside, sealing the chest with the most profound charms of protection, reducing its size before placing it deep inside the trunk. No one but she would be able to open it, and she would do so only to ease his agonies, or enable him to return from the Abandonment.

The twilight was fast approaching by the time she had completed her task. Raising her voice, she spoke with the authority of her Office.

"House-elves are needed here."

Barely had she spoken than they appeared--the four trusted house-elves who had long attended the Heads of House.

The eldest bowed respectfully before stepping closer to the Morris chair where she now sat, his rheumy brown eyes full of concern.

"What is the Headmistress requiring? Mistress has spent too many hours in this sad place. It is not good for her to remain here. This Master is dead. He was always full of terrible pain. Mistress can never be happy here."

Minerva shook her head, wishing she could tell him this Master was not dead, that he still lived--or at least she prayed it was so. But she could only rise to her feet, and issue her instructions.

"This trunk contains personal items I wish kept. Please carry it carefully to Hagrid's home. He will store it for me until such time as I request it. I do not wish this discussed with anyone else, nor will you speak this Master's name aloud. This is of great importance to me. You understand?"

The elder elf nodded. It was his honor to serve the castle of Hogwarts. He had been treated with respect here and would always repay that kindness with devotion.

"The Headmistress is not to worry. We will do what is needed, and never speak about it. This Master always threatened terrible things, but he did no harm to any of us. The house-elves of Hogwarts will never speak badly of him. We will keep his name in silence if that is what Mistress is wishing of us."

Quick as thought, the house-elves hoisted the trunk and moved to the doorway, disappearing in an instant.

The moon was rising now, its radiance flooding the room like a benediction. Minerva crossed once more to the window, to watch the shadow of the Astronomy Tower creep across the silent grounds below.

'You are not to leave us, Severus,' she silently ordered, summoning his face in her mind, wishing she could shout his name aloud, challenging him to live. "You are not forsaken. Wait for us."

Having swung the massive door closed, Minerva turned on the staircase, her wand raised. What ward should be placed to seal and protect this lonely place of sanctuary? The voice of the Healer sounded in her heart, and she spoke her ward aloud...

"Maldwyn."

Chapter Five: In Company With Beasts and Men

Chapter 5 of 14

"The ol' dragon was a broken thing since he were a child... and we all 'ad somethin' of a hand in it, whether we meant to or not." The groundskeeper of Hogwarts has his own memories of Severus and a very serious request to make of Minerva.

Chapter Five: In Company with Beasts and Men

As far as Rubeus Hagrid was concerned, there were only three certainties in life--the honest nature of beasts and creatures, the baffling complexity of humankind whether they be wizard or Muggle, and the unbridling effect that alcoholic spirits had upon his tongue. The first had never failed him in its constancy. The second had often left him either delighted or miserable... and the third? More than any other, the third had been the one to lead him astray.

Though his thirst for something potent was mighty at the moment, the languid sweetness of twilight soothed his senses as he settled, dusty and weary, onto the bent-willow bench in front of his tumbledown hut. This had always been his favorite time of day--the long fingers of the pending darkness stretching from the forest to grasp the castle walls, the grounds, the loch--blurring all the sharp edges into softness and draining the colors into pools of gray as the fire of the setting sun was banked. The creatures of the sunlit day, still warm from their basking, would soon settle into sleep, even as those that thrived under star-flung skies awoke to slip among the shadows and call forth the night. These fleeting moments of between had always been the ones to give him peace if he were troubled. He loved this whispering time of softly-ticking, eternal rhythms.

It was the simplicity of honest labor that had steadied him the most over the last several days as he marshaled a diminutive army of grounds-gnomes and house-elves. Together they had turned the dark sweet loam of Hogwarts for the graves of those whose families wished them buried in the shadow of the White Tomb. In recognition that none had escaped its losses, they had erected four memorial cairns with mingled stones taken from each of the damaged Houses. And they had planted... a living henge of trees encircling the hill of the White Tomb, an embracing ring of remembrance for the wounded and the fallen... Rowans of protection, alders of endurance, birches of renewal... saplings carried by the centaurs from deep within the forest to bless this place of honored rest.

A little ways apart, on a hillock that faced the gates, he had planted one other tree, asking for no help from the gnomes and elves. The trunk was gaunt and twisted with bark black and rough, the branches guarded by threatening thorns. Still in the flower of Spring, the tree's blossoms were starkest white with red-tipped stamen, sorrowing Hagrid with the memory of a pale throat pierced by bloody wounds.

Minerva had spread her cloak on the ground nearby, settling there to silently watch his work as the sun sank in flames beneath the waves of the coming dusk. When he'd finished, she'd come to stand beside him.

"To preserve thy going out, and thy coming in."

She'd said she remembered the words from a psalm she'd once read long ago and that she thought them fitting.

"You've made the right choice, Hagrid. A blackthorn for suffering and sacrifice... and trials still to come... He'd appreciate the thorns, I imagine. The berries, though, will need to bide their time."

Leaning on his shovel, Hagrid had struggled with his thoughts as he watched the waning light tangle in the branches of the solitary tree.

"It seemed right fer it to be 'is. There woulda' been some as questioned if there was no tree planted fer 'im... but there's plenty more would not 'av wanted 'is to be with the others. Couldn' put 'is there anyway, seein' as how 'e's not... really with 'em, yeh see... Not sure just where that tree come from, though... It was jus' there amongst the ones the centaurs brought, but none 'o them remember carryin' it 'ere."

The source of the blackthorn remained unknown, and unlike the other trees, most passersby chose not to linger beside it in meditation, as though unsure how best to acknowledge the loss it represented.

The Dark Lord was gone, no argument there... Hagrid had seen him fall and had stood beside the dragon that had reduced his body to ash. All was well now, with no more terrors to stalk the night, or so everyone seemed ready to convince themselves. Still, his twilight place was changed, not so familiar and comforting. Though a trace of serenity was beginning to nudge at him like a gryphon hatchling, he felt out of kilter and uneasy. In the midst of his labors, or even while he rested, his thoughts drifted into a troubled place where he searched his memories with questions about the man he had carried in his arms to be hidden in the Valley of Gwaun.

Drowsy in the deepening darkness, he thought about Minerva, too, hoping she would walk down soon from the castle. During the past year he'd begun to think of her as Minerva, the way he had when they were House mates, so long ago. They hadn't been in House that long together, what with his expulsion and all. She'd gone off after Hogwarts to continue her studies, and when she'd returned, she was a full-fledged professor of Transfiguration. At that point it hadn't seemed proper for him to call her Minerva anymore, and such was even more the case when she became a Head of House. He'd not presumed to speak to her with such familiarity or make assumptions about the nature of their friendship. The fact that they now shared an unforeseen secret affirmed the bond of trust between them, and that was enough.

This day had been very difficult for her... That was surely fact. In the worn comfort of the staff room, as they shared a simple breakfast of tea and porridge before dawn, she had told him she intended to speak with Dumbledore's portrait before going on to the Potions master's tower. He had offered to accompany her, but as she briefly squeezed his heavy, calloused hand, she had refused.

"No, Hagrid, but I do thank you for offering. You know I depend on you, given all we've been through, but I need to go alone. I'll join you for supper later and we'll talk. It will be a great help to me knowing you're nearby, as much as if you were with me. Don't worry so. Whatever I learn, I'll tell you, and we'll decide together what we must do."

And so he sat patiently awaiting her arrival, belly rumbling for want of supper, taking great gulps from an enormous pewter tankard of scalding Darjeeling from the vast copper kettle above his fire. Hanging alongside the kettle was a simmering cauldron of one of Minerva's favorite meals...finnan haddie stew, rich with cream and butter, fragrant with leeks, potatoes, and fairy-ring mushrooms. Remembering how she often asked the house-elves to prepare this savory dish and how she always wanted at least two generous helpings, he'd asked the kitchen-elves earlier in the day for help in making it. They had shoosed him out of his own house and set to work, allowing him back in only after their task was done.

He hoped she would enjoy her supper tonight and that her mood would be lifted by a good meal, some rest and conversation, although he knew their talk would soon move from a comfortable chat into far more serious matters. There seemed, at times, so few ways he could help those he treasured and respected most. Yet, he'd noticed how often when people were feeling low, they came to sit with him to share their troubles and accept a mug of whatever spirits were available, although most tended to beg off from the meals he offered.

Taking another deep swallow from his battered tankard, he scowled in consternation. While it was true he took pleasure in the comfort of strong tea at breakfast, or even mid-day, a steaming cuppa was not at all what he was accustomed to enjoying after a spate of strenuous husbandry. A substantial portion of something far more potent

was much more to his liking, but since returning from the Valley, he had tried to avoid the practice of ending the day in his usual fashion.

There must be no such behavior, at least not for quite some time. Given his tendency to freely ramble on about whatever came to mind whenever he partook of a stout mug of mead, an overflowing flagon of elfin wine, or a brimming tumbler of firewhisky, he feared he would endanger the life of the wizard he could never have imagined he would seek to protect. Snape--Professor Snape--Severus--Neirin Maldwyn... Hagrid had taken Minerva's cautions to heart, and he was unsure how even to address the man in his thoughts. The important thing, though, was to be very careful to keep those thoughts to himself.

With his massive stature and unsavory heritage, his impetuous nature and volatile temper, his indulgences and robust habits, he knew many people considered him an oafish lout. It was no secret that his inclination to nurture creatures that anyone of half a wit would avoid at all costs made him something of an embarrassment to the Wizarding world. What he also knew was that he would never knowingly cause injury or death to any living thing for the mere want of a drink. When he had placed the broken body of the Potions master into the care of the Healer, he had made himself a solemn promise. He'd not bring harm to the man if that could be prevented by a willing abstinence.

A profound determination for Hagrid, since he'd always been slow to trust any man or woman, witch or wizard, with whom he'd not shared a drop. It was simply foolish, and generally bad manners, not to sit beside the hearth or under the glittering stars, enjoying the pleasure of good company while delighting in the glow of some excellent libation or another.

Those who refused such an invitation were usually not to his liking. He far preferred the acquaintance of amiable and forthright people, relishing the hearing and telling of the epic tales or the singing of rousing songs. To his thinking, there was no better way to pass a span of hours, and the flavor of the drink made any such occurrence so much the better.

Happily, most of the Hogwarts staff shared his appreciation for the blessings of grape and grain. He was proud that Dumbledore had always invited him to share a convivial glass of the saffron-scented Strega gifted at Midsummer by the Witches of Benevento. Certainly Minerva enjoyed sitting by the fire now and again with a wee drop of her native Scotch, the burr in her speech becoming more pronounced as good cheer filled the room. Filius had a surprising capacity for one so small, and Trelawney, Merlin bless her, was known to partake liberally, which no doubt accounted for some of her more intriguing prophecies.

One Solstice night, the moonlight shrouded behind the clouds of an approaching blizzard, he had welcomed Remus Lupin to his hearth. They'd shared a stout keg of spruce beer, one of many delivered to Hogwarts by Uppsala's Wizards in thanks for Hagrid's intercession, at Dumbledore's request, into a dispute between the Jaette and the Vitterfolk. Since giants shared ancestral roots with trolls, his counsel had been willingly acknowledged, helping to avert a conflict that the Dark Lord could easily have turned to an advantage. The keg had been Dumbledore's personal Yule gift to him, and he'd been glad to have someone willing to share it.

The long Midwinter night had resounded with their boisterous laughter and rowdy off-key singing, with old tales spun and reminiscences embellished until nearly dawn. How Lupin had enjoyed that beer, particularly since he said it countered the vile taste of Snape's Wolfsbane potion.

Years before, long before the unthinkable incident of the Shrieking Shack, Dumbledore had shared the secret of Lupin's curse with Hagrid, asking him to keep an eye on the young Gryffindor. Years later, when the werewolf had returned to teach at Hogwarts, he'd seemed relieved that at least one colleague could know his truth and still welcome his company. Hagrid had managed to keep that particular secret, perhaps because he understood both of Lupin's natures--the beast and the man--and sat in judgment of neither.

He'd asked about Snape's potion, wondering why the Potions master was willing to brew it, having almost met an awful death within the slaving jaws that transfigured from Lupin's gentle smile. Why would the Slytherin show kindness to the Gryffindor?

"I doubt compassion for me has anything to do with it. No doubt it's mainly pride that prompts his actions. He is, after all, the only Potions master in the Isles able to brew the bane so perfectly. Of course, there's the fact that Dumbledore asks it of him... There's always that... Perhaps he simply doesn't despise me quite so much anymore. He knows I had no control of my actions that night... James and Sirius did, though... Peter, as well. We handed Severus his need for vengeance on a silver platter... and then we despised him for seeking it. He holds the upper hand now... We both know it... We just don't speak of it."

Lupin had sat staring into the flames for quite some time after that, and the beer had seemed a touch more bitter when they toasted the dawn's coming.

Many a night, the Houses settled until morning, the grounds and gates well-secured under their protective wards, the staff had shared a late-night toddy, chatting about the day's events, reading whatever suited them, sometimes slipping into a comfortable doze by the fire before wandering off to bed. Dumbledore often joined them and was frequently the first to pull out the wizard chess board or the necromancer noddies cards, and lay a wager, the glass of spirits at his elbow enhancing the twinkle of his eyes.

Certainly the Great Hall reverberated throughout the seasons with feasts and celebrations, ceremonies and gatherings. In times of joy and victory, in times of sorrow and loss, the cup shared in fellowship was always given its due. How he'd missed the way things had been in the years between the wars. Spending his days roaming the forest, tending his beasts and gardens, teaching the more willing students the habits and haunts of the creatures, meandering up to the castle for a fine meal seasoned with lively talk and laughter... Those had been happy times.

The year past had seen little joy at Hogwarts, and the only comfort had been found in enclaves of family and friends gathering to reassure themselves that they still at least had one another. Perhaps now, with Minerva as Headmistress, familiar patterns and habits would return to the school.

Over the years, the Order had fallen into the habit of ending strategy sessions with a toast, the members sharing a moment of comradeship. Each knew that every meeting could be their last and that some might not be present for the next. The specter of the Dark Lord was always an unwelcome guest at their table. The raised glasses had become their solemn ritual, the symbol of a shared destiny and sacred trust.

There were members of the Order who considered Severus Snape to be the other unwelcome guest at the table. They were thrown unwillingly into his company, but nonetheless he was grudgingly acknowledged as a brother-in-arms and therefore had the right to participate in the ritual of the parting toast. His refusal to do so never sat well with most, except for Sirius Black. He never concealed his contempt whenever Dumbledore's spy took his leave, openly declaring that the Potions master was the one Order member that Death could claim with none of them the worse for the loss of him.

There was such bitterness between those two men that even a shared drink would have fueled the fire of their mutual hatred. Had Snape joined the toasting circle, Sirius would, no doubt, have hurled his whisky into that pale and sneering face, claiming no Death Eater would ever have the right to drink with them. Hagrid had often wondered why Snape never accepted, if only for the satisfaction of goading Sirius' temper into an impotent rage.

The greater puzzle for Hagrid had been Snape's tendency to also distance himself from joining any Hogwarts toasting, even as a sullen show of good will at the Yule. The Potions master was not in the least adverse to his ample portion of firewhisky, that much was known. Yet, he would frequently depart before the glasses were even filled, robes swirling behind him, footsteps scarcely audible on the stone floor, stealthy and silent as any basilisk.

Often when he noticed such an abrupt departure, the hackles on the back of Hagrid's neck would rise in warning. He did not fear Snape, any more than he feared any creature that by its nature kept itself concealed within the shadows, but he was wary of him. Deadly and dangerous creatures were not to be abused or despised, but they were certainly to be respected and regarded with great caution.

It had always been easiest for him to associate people with the creatures whose traits they shared. He knew that many, based on appearances alone, referred to Snape as "The Bat of Hogwarts," but that comparison never seemed quite accurate. Bats, hanging in tight clusters among the rafters and eaves of the castle, were sociable creatures, launching into the night sky in the cacophony of a thousand wings, swooping and darting in perfect community--behaviors that did not match the Potions master's solitary habits. In Hagrid's thinking, Snape was comparable to far different creatures.

When he'd first come to Hogwarts as a child, he'd been most like one of the feral cats that roamed Knockturn Alley, keeping to the darker corners where his back would be protected--matted and underfed, sharp little claws at the ready, lips pulled back in a warning hiss, darting away from anyone's approach. In the boy's wary eyes, Hagrid had recognized the look of a creature already scarred. He'd kept a sharp eye on him, knowing all too well that those who'd been abused often became the abusers. Snape's

aversion to company was not Hagrid's primary concern, unfortunate though it might be, but any cruelty towards beast or creature... As groundskeeper, he would deal personally and immediately with any such offense.

It was quickly apparent the child was no threat on that account. Rumor had it that he was already versed in certain of the Dark Arts, but he directed no abuse to any of the creatures that inhabited the castle grounds. Snape's interest seemed to center on flapping about at dusk in his over-large robes, scooping up samples of every shedding, molting, secretion or dropping he could find, tucking each one safely away in his pockets. Hagrid had heard he showed an affinity for potions and could only imagine the disgust his more aristocratic House mates felt at sharing rooms with him and his many unsavory acquisitions.

He was certainly an unappealing child, but Hagrid had a fondness for ugly and unlovable creatures. Out of sympathy, he would sometimes look the other way when he saw the scrawny figure after curfew, huddled among the rocks by the loch, scribbling in a tattered textbook. The boy was shrewd and self-reliant and always managed to slip back into the castle undetected. Occasionally, Hagrid had left some choice bit of something elemental tucked among the rocks where he knew it could be found. The next day, the little treasure would always be gone.

Snape's peculiar interests and his innate skill for potions became personal for Hagrid near the end of the boy's first year. A nesting of young Allghoi Kharkhoi from the Gobi had been delivered to the castle at first light, the misconception being that the damp morning air would keep them torpid and docile. An infernal mess they'd been, spewing their yellow venom everywhere, but the Ministry had wanted them looked after until studies could begin at St. Mungo's on the medical benefits of their venom.

As much as Hagrid delighted in having new creatures in his care, this squirming mass of three-foot-long worms had been a feat to handle alone, and no one else was inclined to help. As he was about to wrestle the last one into its warded enclosure, the flit of a shadow had caught the corner of his eye, and he'd looked up to see Snape darting along the perimeter of the pen, flask in hand, headed straight for a puddle of smoking Allghoi poison.

"Watch yerself there, little one! Keep back from that before it burns the skin right off yeh!"

For the moment it took to shout his warning, he'd taken his eyes off the squirming crimson worm and had his hand doused with a vicious spray of venom for his troubles. Rarely did he lose his temper with a student, but his hand hurt like blazes, and the boy should never have been there in the first place.

"Damn and blast yeh, Snape... What in Merlin's name are yeh doin' 'ere anyway... See what's done ter my hand tryin' ter keep yeh from bein' hurt... It burns like bloody feckin' Hades..." He remembered he'd fairly howled from the pain of it.

For once in his life, the boy had run... had run like all the demons of the night were on his heels, and even before Hagrid had reached the castle steps, Pomfrey had been racing to meet him. He'd heard later that Snape had indeed gone straight to her, demanding her immediate attention, shouting at her to move her arse, and that he'd been given two week's detention with his Head of House.

Wounds and such were the usual for Hagrid, and soon enough he'd put the matter out of his mind, except for the one Galleon-sized spot on his hand that wasn't healing quite right. He'd not seen Snape hiding by the loch even after the detention should have been over, but suspected the boy might be embarrassed or even a little afraid to come near him. Perhaps he'd noticed that Hagrid was still favoring his hand a bit.

Right before the end of term under cover of night, a small jar, filled with a salve that smelled like cayenne, was left at his doorstep. The carefully lettered label read only, "For your hand." He'd taken it to Pomfrey, and when she'd examined it, she'd looked surprised.

"Black blood-root salve? Where did you get this, Hagrid? It's an old cure, excellent for ulcerations and wounds. I should have thought of it myself."

"I'm not certain, but I think that odd little Slytherin, Snape, might 'ave left it. Do yeh suppose maybe 'e made it? He's supposed to be good with that sort 'a thing..."

Pomfrey had taken a pinch of the salve and rubbed it between her fingers.

"Well, if he did, he knows just what he's doing. Someone should consider speaking to the Headmaster next year about training that boy as a Healer."

Perhaps someone should have, but caught up in the daily life of Hogwarts, no one quite found the time, and soon enough, by the second year, the feral cat had become a pet for Lucius Malfoy. No doubt it amused that sleek young predator to bring the unkempt laboring-class boy into his privileged home as a diversion.

Gradually, Hagrid noticed the awkward child beginning to grow into an oddly compelling youth. There was something about him, though, that triggered an intense hatred in the proud young lions of Gryffindor, the ones who fancied themselves Marauders. The assumption was that they despised him for being so enamored of the Dark Arts, but Hagrid often wondered if there was something more primal at the heart of the matter... some need for the pride to pull down any who would not yield to them.

He'd seen it happen often enough in the forest. Certain creatures were born enemies. It was no reflection on their nature, but simply was the way of things. With humans it was different, though. It wasn't instinct... It was deliberate choice. House loyalties didn't help matters, either. And, if the truth of it were told, none of it was one-sided. The Gryffindor pride stalked the Slytherin with singular intent, and he retaliated with a cobra's unerring accuracy.

By the fifth year, Malfoy had taken Snape in hand more deliberately, teaching him to erase all Spinner's End inflections from his deepening voice, to conduct himself properly in the presence of powerful Wizarding families, and to duel flawlessly. Standing beside Professor Kettleburn one perfect autumn day, Hagrid had watched the young man's first introduction to a hippogriff. Bowing with the elegance of a prince of the realm, Snape never took his eyes off those of the great beast, and he had received an acknowledgment of equal respect. It was then that Hagrid knew a powerful wizard was beginning to emerge.

He had heard of an incident that had caused the young Slytherin deep humiliation, something about an especially shameful taunting by the Gryffindors, the intercession of the young witch Lily Evans, and Snape's use of the foul slur "mudblood." He'd not been present, but could well imagine both the effect and the outcome. Natural enemies were becoming mortal ones.

The calculated ambush at the Shrieking Shack had been the final catalyst of Snape's unforgiving transformation into an ever-circling hawk. At only seventeen, he'd become very dangerous indeed, coveting power and purpose, seething with pride and resentment. Lucius had done his work well, mentoring his House brother into a perfect prize with which to curry favor with the ascending Lord Voldemort. Keeping his aerie apart from the ambitious murder of crows around him, the hawk had sought and found his killing ground within the ranks of the Dark Lord's disciples, and soon after, Hagrid was sure, his talons had been bloodied.

Four years later, on the night of Samhain, when the Veil had been torn by vicious slaughter and a mother's sacrifice, the howl of a creature in mortal agony had pierced the night, and Hagrid knew. For whatever reason, the hawk had plummeted to earth from its proud and vengeful flight. Rising in its place, like the tortured aspect of some darkened phoenix, had come the fearsome dragon Snape... Keeping to his lair in the Sytherin dungeons, stealthy in the hunt, fierce when provoked, jealous of his secrets... and alone.

Even though he believed he understood Snape's temperament to some degree, Hagrid still found himself disturbed by the Potions master's dark and secretive nature. What reason could there be, even for a dragon, to constantly shun the company of others except for what was required of a Head of House?

While it was true that Snape was never what might be considered pleasant, his keen intellect and biting sarcasms often made for lively conversation, and most of the staff were at least amenable to his presence at their nightly gatherings. Certainly on the brief occasions he chose to join them, when he and Minerva sparred with one another in some spirited duel of wit and words, things were far from dull. Though neither would ever admit to such a thing, Hagrid had long suspected a mutual acceptance between the two. After all, Minerva had a certain dragon quality as well.

And Merlin help anyone who ventured to challenge Snape in wizard chess. He almost always won, using strategies that were Slytherin to the core. Hagrid had no dexterity for the game, but he greatly enjoyed watching from his seat by the fire, and he admired Snape's ability to conclude a match so swiftly that his opponent scarcely knew the battle had even begun.

Only Dumbledore ever managed to defeat him. Hagrid remembered now how the Headmaster would sit during a game with Snape, quietly studying his Potions master's

face. Snape always remained unreadable, but there had often been a certain tenderness in Dumbledore's eyes, and something else less evident... A flicker of regret... and shame. Hagrid questioned that perception, for what could Albus Dumbledore have ever done to Severus Snape that he would regret or be ashamed of? Dumbledore had said their bond was absolute and undeniable. He trusted Snape, and Hagrid trusted Dumbledore. It was enough to put his anxieties at rest, this simple and unshakeable belief he held because his Headmaster said it was so.

There had been one evening, though, lumbering from the Great Hall full of an excellent brisket and an excessive amount of mead, Hagrid had grumbled to Dumbledore that it was just not right for Snape to refuse the Order's toasting ritual. The Headmaster had quietly hushed him with a knowing smile and a pat on the arm.

"Don't be too put off, Hagrid. Severus has his reasons for keeping himself apart and we will respect them. Now, if you will indulge me, I have some excellent centaurian ale I'd be pleased to share with you, and I believe Minerva still owes me a game of witches whist? I suspect she may have cheated last time..."

Reasons, Dumbledore had assured him. What reasons could there be?

The night of the Unforgivable's casting, Snape was finally revealed as the incarnation of every creature with which Hagrid had ever compared him. The feral cat had lurked in shadow, the coiled serpent had waited to strike, the ravaging hawk had seized its prey... and the deadly dragon had emerged triumphant from its brooding. A vile and cunning deceiver, a vicious and heartless assassin, the paragon of a Death Eater... Those were the realities and reasons of Snape.

For weeks, lost in a haze of mourning and uncertainty, Hagrid blamed himself. He should have sensed this treachery... should have prevented it... should have followed his instincts about dangerous, dark creatures. He had fixed on his failure, pondering little else other than ways to gain some measure of vengeance. For the first time in his life, Hagrid experienced the powerful surge of hatred--consuming his thoughts, leaving him sickened with its poison.

Of course, once the first shock of grief had passed and clearer heads in the Order had prevailed, he'd understood the futility of any attempt on his part to overcome such a powerful dark wizard as Snape. Having only recently been permitted to even practice magic openly, Hagrid had no choice but to accept his place in the greater scheme of matters concerning the war.

In the months after Dumbledore's murder, he had settled himself to wait and watch, finding ways to be useful to the Order, performing the tasks and completing the missions that only one with his unique lineage could safely undertake. But then came another shattering blow.

Severus Snape returned to take control of Hogwarts, became its Headmaster, sat in the chair of Albus Dumbledore. The injustice of such a thing was overwhelming for Hagrid. Nothing could be trusted anymore. Deceit and darkness were everywhere now, even in the halls of the castle, with the murderer in charge of the school, students huddling in abject terror, staff gathering in secret, Death Eaters openly prowling the grounds, and the Dark Lord at the gates.

The violence of his giant's nature fought to surface, and he was plagued with thoughts of wresting the last breath from Snape and hurling him lifeless from the parapets. But he did not possess the skills to even pass the wards the coward had placed to shield himself from any such attack.

And so he stayed quiet, keeping the Keys, tending the grounds, protecting his creatures, giving the students what support he could, wondering why the cursed Death Eater was sending certain ones to him for detention in the Forbidden Forest. The feckin' bastard... What was he up to?

Drowning his rage and sorrow in the fleeting oblivion of drink, he would awaken at dawn with the pain renewed, the loss unfilled, the anger not lessened. His pattern of misery remained constant until the night of the Yule Lighting when the Great Hall had always been filled with an exuberant feast before the students left on holiday, a riotous celebration filled with the sheer ecstasy of magic flowing through the ether.

But on this night, there was to be no joyful abandon. Snape had denied the students their feast, had issued an edict that no celebration would take place. None would be permitted to leave the castle or go home. All were to remain in their quarters, students attending to their studies, staff to their lesson plans or other duties. Any caught outside their Houses without express permission from the Headmaster would face the most severe punishment.

Hagrid recalled that night with painful clarity now. He had downed his firewhisky with particular vengeance before throwing open the door of his hut to plunge through the deadening drifts of snow to patrol the moonlight-silvered grounds, blood in his eye. He'd not be told by that bastard Headmaster where he might go, or what he might do... Damn the bloody murderer. Let him do his worst, see if it mattered. He could crush the life from that scrawny, greasy son of a whore, Death Eater or not. He answered only to the true Headmaster of Hogwarts--Albus Dumbledore--never to Snape, the coward, the betrayer.

How he had raged that Yule night. He sorely missed his friend, his guardian, his Headmaster--the wizard he loved above all others, the one who had given him a true home, a place to do useful work, to be sheltered and respected, surrounded by the creatures and people he loved and honored. Yet even in his ravings, driven as he was by the fervor for revenge, he could hear Dumbledore's words, sounding faintly, as if the ancient wizard stood close beside him in the echoing winter chill.

"Hagrid, he has his reasons. We will respect them."

His drunken, restless wanderings had led him finally to the hill of the White Tomb where Dumbledore slumbered in eternal rest. It had been the most profound moment in Hagrid's life to carry the great wizard there in his arms, to lay him gently in his tomb, to hear him blessed with phoenix song. For the groundskeeper of Hogwarts, this hill had become the most sanctified place in the Wizarding world, a shrine never to be sullied.

As he approached the tomb, he had seen a herd of Thestrals gathered in a pool of moonlight reflected off the pristine marble across the glittering expanse of snow. As he stood there swaying, a shadow had broken loose from the surrounding darkness, moving through the herd to stand like Death personified before the White Tomb, one hand outstretched to touch its icy facade.

Snape... the defiler of all things beautiful and sacred.

Hagrid's huge hands had clenched, and he had fought to steady himself, the haze of the firewhisky dissipating into the frigid night. Hatred and grief, stronger than any drink, ignited him with a flame of power such as he'd never experienced. In that moment, he believed he could take Snape's life with no second thought for the ghastly wound that would forever mar his own soul. This was the chance he had sought. He had the will to seize this single instant and fulfill his fervent, dark desire to kill this wizard who had destroyed everything he loved, who had committed the unforgivable sin of cowardly betrayal and vicious murder.

He moved closer, silent as a great beast of prey, to stand behind Snape. Some force of will stayed his hands in that moment, but not his voice, which bellowed with all the strength of his giant's blood.

"Seein' the Thestrals plain, are yeh, Snape, now yeh've done yer master's bidding? Look sharp, then... Be sure yeh see Dumbledore's tomb as well. It was yeh put 'im there, yeh feckin' bastard. Did yer master want to be sure yeh could see it clear? Yer sittin' in the chair of the true Headmaster 'o Hogwarts... Did yeh think yeh'd foul 'is tomb as well with yer filthy hands?"

Snape had not startled or drawn his wand as Hagrid's voice sounded behind him, nor even turned his head to look at him. His hands hanging empty at his sides, billowing black cloak snapping in the icy wind like the sail of a ship of the damned, his eyes had not left the tomb. When he answered, his voice was more chilling than the bite of the winter blast.

"You would have failed, Hagrid, in your attempt to kill me. As for your mindless rant... In that, you are correct. My master has always insisted that I see... clearly."

"He's not been disappointed in yeh, then, 'as 'e? Did as yeh were told jus' perfect, didn't yeh? Yer a damned coward, Snape... Yeh don' even have the stones to look a man in the eye," Hagrid had raged in answer to the threatening resonance of the shadowed voice.

Snape's response could have issued from the mouth of a corpse, it was so empty of passion.

"Again, you are correct... I have indeed done as I was told... And no, he is not disappointed. Who would have expected you, Hagrid, to be so astute?"

Swift and silent as a scorpion, Snape had pivoted, casting '*Immobulus*', '*Petrificus Totalus*' and '*Impedimento*' conjoined in a spell of three-fold strength, rendering Hagrid defenseless on the ground before the tomb. Looming and terrible with power, Snape had gazed down at him, face devoid of expression, fixing him with eyes as hard as the black ice of the loch.

"Your illicit gatherings in support of Potter have not gone un-noticed. They are to cease. Service to this school does not protect you, and I doubt you'd enjoy a place as the Dark Lord's dancing bear for the amusement of Greyback and his pack."

Turning on his heel, the Death Eater had again reached out his hand, laying it against the marble of the tomb, flesh and stone so alike that Hagrid was barely able to distinguish one from the other. Unable to move, he had struggled desperately to cry out against this atrocity, but found he had been silenced by yet another unspoken spell. He could only watch, powerless, as Snape stepped away from the tomb to pass among the Thestrals, pausing at the edge of the herd to place his hand against the bony face of one standing apart from the rest.

Hagrid was stunned to see the Thestral lower its head in quiet acceptance of Snape's touch, billowing cloak and leathery wings lifted in solemn accord by the arctic wind. Death Eater and Death's symbol stood thus for several moments in silent communion, eyes fixed on one another, before Snape lowered his hand and moved into the shadows, a swirl of cloak and snow marking his departure.

Within moments the Binding Spells had lifted, and Hagrid had hoisted himself, dazed and shaken, from the snow. His head ached from the aftermath of the firewhisky, and his mind was spinning. Snape had held him within easy reach of a Killing Curse and could have dispatched him as readily as breaking a brittle twig. Yet, he had left him there, wet and shivering in the cold, but alive and unharmed.

Bereft and depleted, oddly drained of the poisonous hatred that had possessed him, Hagrid had wished Dumbledore was there to help him sort his thoughts and reach some reasonable determination. He had no clearer grasp of Snape's intentions, that much was certain. Trudging home through the snow, he had thought long and hard and had concluded that the mind of such a dark wizard was beyond his comprehension. The only thing that was clear was that he must focus his thoughts, put away his desires for vengeance, and become an asset once more to the Order.

"There is important business to be done. Master is not too sleepy to pay attention?"

Lost in his reverie, Hagrid had not noticed the arrival of the four house-elves weighted with their heavy burden, and he was a bit perturbed at the thought they might think he'd been dosing unawares.

"A man's allowed to close 'is eyes when 'e's thinkin' 'a serious matters. I've things to sort in my mind before the Headmistress comes fer 'er supper. What's that yeh've brought there with yeh?"

"Mistress is sending this trunk from the tower of the One We Are Not to Speak Of," the eldest of the elves replied. Seeing Hagrid's face twist with sudden alarm, he bent low with a solemn bow. "Not the Dark Wizard killed by Harry Potter. The house-elves spit on that one's name and tread on it with muddy feet. Headmistress said we are not to say the other's name aloud, the Headmaster who is dead by the great snake. Mistress has taken his life things, the ones his hands could always find without looking. She has put them in this trunk, and says you are keeping it safe until she asks for it."

'So that's what she's done,' Hagrid thought. 'She's packed the things might make it easier fer 'im there with the Healer. Clever witch, she knows no one would think to look with me fer anythin' of 'is.'

Rising from his bench and nodding to the elves, he hoisted the worn trunk onto his shoulder.

"If that's what's been asked, then that's what'll be done. Did the Headmistress say she'd be comin' down from the castle anytime soon?"

Hagrid found he spoke to empty space, for the elves had departed as silently as they'd arrived, having delivered the trunk into his charge. He really was quite hungry and weary from his labors, and though he'd hoped to be patient, he longed for food and rest... and more than tea, if he were to be honest about his wants. Where was Minerva, and what had she learned?

With a sigh, he carried the trunk inside, thinking to stow it high in the eaves amongst the myriad of useful objects he stored there. It would seem just another piece of clutter, nothing important, but if necessary, he could cast a concealment charm to keep it safe.

Shaking his head as he considered just the proper spot, he muttered, "Wonder what she's put in 'ere, that it took four 'a the little fellas to carry it 'ere... Hope she's not tried to bring all 'is books..."

"Only some I thought might help him to remember, if he heard them read aloud."

Minerva's voice behind him sounded as exhausted as he felt, but he was so relieved to hear it. With an unceremonious thump, he deposited the trunk on the floor and for a moment stood hesitant as to just what he should do, or offer, next... until the realization that he was keeping the Headmistress of Hogwarts waiting on the doorstep prompted him to hastily usher her in and direct her exactly where to sit.

"Professor, yeh look about as spent as a beggar's last penny. There's supper there fer yeh, and I'll not say I'm not pleased yer finally 'ere. I was beginnin' to wonder if I shouldn't come to find yeh."

It struck him odd that Minerva gave no resistance but simply dropped without a reply into the chair nearest the fire. As he pulled a table closer and began to ladle food, he focused on what she'd said.

"What'd yeh mean... 'e might remember? What's 'e forgotten then, except maybe to open 'is eyes and keep 'is breathin' steady..."

Minerva leaned her head back to rest against the weathered chair back, and seeing the strain on her face, Hagrid immediately regretted his cheek.

"Sorry, Professor... I meant no 'arm... It was only a poor way to pull a smile from yeh... Yeh've learned things, then... Are yeh ready to speak about 'em, or would yeh rather have a bit of supper first and gather yerself?"

Leaning her elbows on the work-scarred table, Minerva sat kneading her temples with the tips of her slender fingers, and he could see she'd need some time before she'd want to say much.

"Ogden's Old, if you have it, Hagrid... and the food. I need to eat something. I quite forgot to do that since this morning..."

Pulling the bottle from his cupboard, he poured a good three fingers into a mug for her, and considering the three fingers were measured by his own, the amount was substantial. He paused for a moment, thinking to pour for himself as well, but did not. Minerva had raised her head from her hands and saw his hesitation but made no comment when he set the mug next to her bowl of finnan haddie. For the next few minutes, the only sound was the snapping of the fire, and the clatter of spoons against crockery. Hunger was the bond between them at that moment.

Settling back at last with a sigh, Minerva sat in silence with her mug tightly encircled by her hands, as though its presence there was an anchor to keep her from drifting. When she began to speak, there was the timbre of a distant bell about her voice, clear and constant.

"Hagrid, I must ask you to listen to me now with great attention, and I will want you to remain still. There are things I will tell you that you will doubt, things that will be very hard to hear. I know that... And I know you will have a great many questions. I will give you whatever answers I can, but you must please not interrupt me. This is a story I may have to tell again to those who need to hear it, but for tonight, I'd prefer to do so as quickly as I can."

The time that passed in the telling could have been measured in minutes... or in hours... It could have been measured in heartbeats... or in breaths. For Hagrid, it was measured in the number of times he lifted the bottle to refill Minerva's mug... and she did not refuse.

"Albus... I am afraid..."

Those were the words that caused him to take his own cup, fill it to the brim with Ogden's, and drain it dry. Minerva never faltered, but plunged ahead, as if to stop would be to lose her way. When she had finished, the only sound was the wind sighing the words of summoning at the window...

"Ecce... ecce... Behold... behold..."

Anyone in the room at that moment might have thought Hagrid was dosing, his head sunk low on his chest... until they would have noticed his hand, the one with the scar the size of a Galleon, tapping softly against the worn trunk, as if it were a crouching beast needing to be soothed.

"It's true, what yeh said, Minerva." And in that moment he could not have said what prompted him to say her name, except that formalities seemed to make little sense within the scope of all she'd told him. "I've more questions than I can even sort..."

When she did not answer, he looked up and saw she had closed her eyes, lulled by the fire, the food, and no doubt by the whisky as well. He was about to continue when he realized she'd fallen asleep, and he was glad of it. But she wouldn't rest properly sitting up in his old chair, so as gently as though he were gathering the flowers of the field into his arms, he lifted her, and crossing to his sprawling, threadbare settee, settled her there, covering her with a blanket that smelled of cedar-wood and hay.

Taking up her vacant place beside the fire, he thought of pouring another portion of the Ogden's but decided against it. As tired as he was, he wanted to be clear-headed. Methodically, he began to recall and consider every detail of what Minerva had told him. It was a bit like removing the barbed quills of a hedgehog from the palm of an overly eager Grawp... Painful but necessary, requiring great patience, and a steady hand...

When he woke with a start at dawn, it was to find himself still in the chair, but now he was the one covered by the blanket, and it was Minerva sliding a plate laden with eggs, kippers, and oatcakes across the table towards him.

"Tuck in, Hagrid, and then let's see if we can begin to find a way to sort this mess."

He gave her no argument and having quickly finished up, stood and nodded his head in the direction of the door.

"Would yeh maybe walk with me around the grounds, Professor? I'd find it easier to say what's on my mind if I'm on my feet and outside, yeh see."

Minerva smiled as she pulled on her over-robe to follow him.

"I seem to recall last night, you calling me by my first name, but today we're back to formal terms? That hardly seems necessary, Hagrid. I rather liked being spoken to as a friend you trusted. Perhaps we could meet in the middle... Minerva, as private friends... Professor, as public colleagues?"

Tears spilled over the dam of Hagrid's cheeks.

"That'd make me very happy... Minerva."

It was Minerva's turn to listen as they walked, and she did so with the same respectful attention he'd given her the night before.

"I've been thinkin' about all yeh said, yeh see... about 'im bein' cursed and all... and maybe bein' lost forever. That seems to me somethin' like the Dementors' Kiss takin' away all hope and such. Doubt he's 'ad much hope of anythin', what with all he's done. Dumbledore sayin' we should try to bring 'im back, help 'im to remember it all... That occurred to me at first as a cruel thing to do, and that keepin' the worst of 'is memories from 'im would be the kinder thing. But seein' as how he were an honorable man, he'd not want what he's done kept from 'im. If he's lived with nothin' but lies all these years, he'd not want anyone tellin' 'im any more. Seems to me 'e should 'ave the chance to hear all of it. Might help to mend 'im some, to know he's done the last bit right.

"The things yeh packed in that trunk... maybe those are the Portkeys fer 'im, the ways to find 'is way back. If e's blind... well, he's not the first creature I've seen that's learned to move in darkness without its eyes. We can teach 'im that. He always was easier about 'imself in the shadows. If he's sick with the potions, I expect you'll fight with 'im enough to sweat that muck out of 'im. Healer Gareth's an ol' battler too, no doubt, with a few notions of 'is own."

Minerva smiled a little at that, remembering the quarrels she'd always had with Severus. Hagrid was right; She'd goad him into a fight every blessed day, if that was what it took to restore his ravaged body and unlock his darkened mind.

"This business 'a Riddle fixin' this curse to the professor's name... It's not really about what yeh call a man but what's done in 'is name that's more important. Still, 'is name's been an ugly dark thing to a lot of people for a long time, and it'd be right for 'im to see some honor in it, without it causin' 'im to suffer.

"Hidin' 'im like we have, that's all right for now, but he'd want 'is own name back someday. There's plenty of magic in the world that's stronger than Tom Riddle's... and plenty 'a wizards too. If there's to be three Keepers, one of us can always be lookin' for the way out.

Stopping for a moment to look up at the Astronomy Tower, he paused, wanting to say the rest in a way that would leave no doubt of his meaning.

"Harry's done what was asked of 'im, done a great thing. Dumbledore's right on that account. That lad needs to be free of all 'a this, as much as 'e can be. He'll carry some of it always, but not so the scars will show so much. The rest 'a these children need to be free of it as well, or they'll never be over it. We're the old ones should clean up the unfinished business that's been left behind.

"The point bein'... the ol' dragon was a broken thing since he were a child... and we all 'ad somethin' of a hand in it, whether we meant to or not. Especially Dumbledore... I understand about the greater good and such, but I wonder if there was a better way 'a doin' it. Maybe not... I'm not the one to ask. Yeh know I loved him as dear as my own heart... Still do... But if he and the professor ever lay eyes on each other on one side of the Veil or the other, I hope Dumbledore makes it right with 'im.

"There's a good deal of what he's sufferin' that's his own doin', that's true, but we had our share in it. 'Ardly seem of much importance now, who did what... Or didn't do what... He's lost, and I'd not leave any creature lost. Even in the Forest, I'd go lookin'. If he's afraid, there's no shame in it... Bein' afraid's no measure of yer courage..."

Hagrid had been striding purposely forward as he spoke, as though intent on his destination, but now he stopped and faced Minerva with grave attention.

"There's somethin' else... I've never been a true and proper Wizard... Never 'ad the way of it... I'd like to do this right, yeh see. If I'm to be one of 'is Secret Keepers, I'd want to do it correct... I'd want us both to make the Fidelius Charm... Not just a promise like what Dumbledore and 'im had between 'em, but to make the charm the way it's supposed to be done. It's deep magic, but I'd want to make it honest and full and 'ave you there with me. The professor deserves that from us. I'd want 'im to be able to trust we did that fer 'im."

Seeing they'd come to stand where they could look from the hill of the blackthorn tree across to the White Tomb, Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, found herself dumbfounded. In all her years of knowing him, she'd never heard such a lengthy outpouring from Hagrid. There could be only one response.

Reaching up to gently urge his shaggy head down to where she could softly kiss him on the forehead, she answered.

"Rubeus Hagrid, you are an extraordinary man. We will fight the good fight to bring our lost one home, and I will be honored to stand beside you to make the Fidelius Charm. We will make it tomorrow, with Albus as our Witness, as the moon reaches her fullest ascension. This promise I give you now, before all these who have fallen. We

will stand together, you and I, as witch... and most true and proper wizard."

Chapter Six: The Vigils of Small Words

Chapter 6 of 14

With the Moon keeping watch, secrets begin to find a place to be hidden, and a vigil of healing is kept.

Chapter Six: The Vigils of Small Words

"Only for Magick of high purpose should any witch of our clan wear robes such as these. When you put them on, child, remember that you are clothed in moonlight, and the Lady is watching. She sees your heart and knows the aspects of your soul."

Great-Aunt Forbia would probably still think it necessary to offer instruction on the correct manner and proper intent for wearing the robes that lay across Minerva's bed. Still damp and scented from the ritual bath and juniper smudging she had performed at moonrise, she gently passed the haedde-fragrant cloth between her fingers, marveling as always at the softness of the Shetland wool, as white as any cirrus cloud, the runes of Orkney woven throughout the draping folds in blue and silver thread. She'd always felt that wearing them was truly to wrap the blessed sky, the moon and stars, around her shoulders.

She could remember the stories and recitations of every McGonagall witch who had worn such robes and for what purpose. Forbia had taught her each one, a litany of Magical family history and pride, and had always questioned her carefully to be certain she would recall them all correctly. Every generation was expected to learn the stories and pass them to the next. There was no debate over whether a child wished to hear and remember, for who would even consider allowing such history to be lost? Leaning on the knees of the elder witch, gazing up into that weathered face, drinking in every detail of the telling, was when Minerva first knew that it was learning that made her happiest.

Even before the letter came that summoned Minerva to Hogwarts, her great-aunt had been her wand-mother, schooling her in the Naming charms, the rites of the Sacred Seasons, the women's spells of Bestowal and Attainment, Transition and Ascension. She'd been taught to face challenges with courage, to accept praise only where deserved, and to deal with adversity with a clear head. Not all her instruction came from the witches, either. Her rowdy wizard cousins allowed no quarter simply because she was a girl, and in contests of stamina and bravery, her uncles expected her to give and receive with as much ferocity as any male. Yet, in all the tales and teachings of her elders, Minerva could recall none that spoke of any McGonagall witch donning moon-blessed robes to make the Fidelius Charm. She would be the first.

Long past, at her Menarche Blessing, she'd been permitted the honor of white robes for the first time. Forbia had gifted them to her swathed in silk, and she could still recall the whisper as the wrappings fell away. She'd been terrified of tearing them or getting them dirty, and so relieved when her great-aunt's wrinkled hands, so full of magic, reached to help her fasten the silver clasps at neck and waist.

"I feel as if I'm made of light, Auntie. Does it always feel like this?" she'd asked, so eager and full of anticipation.

Forbia had held her hands tightly in that moment as she answered.

"I wish I could say that was so, child, and that you'll always feel this way. But that would be a lie and I've never lied to you, nor will I now. You are witch and woman born, and while you'll know great joy, you'll also know great sorrow. You'll wear these robes in both. One thing I do ask you always to remember, Minerva. Never neglect or forsake the light that lives inside you. It is your deepest magic, but do not forget your darkness, either. The two together are your strength."

As she'd grown a bit older, she'd held a fleeting hope of someday wearing the beautiful robes for her hand-fasting to a brave and brilliant wizard. By circumstance, or choice, that day had never come, and years ago she'd moved beyond regret. Of course, she'd known her share of sweet and passionate surrenders of the heart and flesh, but it had become evident early on that study and teaching would always be her most ardent and jealous loves. She'd shaped her life around them, and then of course, there was the matter of the wars. During the first, she'd learned to keep her heart well-hidden. By the second, she'd no longer been concerned whether it mattered when it showed. At the third, she suspected there were few who would take notice either way.

What mattered now was that the moon was well above the trees, and time was passing far too quickly while she stood musing. Slipping the under-shift of azure silk over her lean body, she allowed herself a moment of appraisal before her mirror. Her black hair still fell long and heavy down her back, scarcely touched by threads of silver. With eyes dark and keen, and skin traced by only the faintest net of lines, her face did not reflect unkindly that she was a witch in her middle years. A handsome woman, she'd often been called, not a beauty certainly, but with a proud bearing that drew the eye to her. McGonagall women always tended to resemble their Highland crags, hard and sharp, in contrast to their lowland sisters with their swelling hills of breast and hip. As a girl when she'd lamented her tall and angular body, bemoaning how she towered over every boy in her House, Forbia had only smiled.

"Observe the Moon Herself, child. She's not always full and soft... Sometimes She's only a sliver in the sky, as thin as you. All women carry Her within them, you already know that. We witches even more so... Some of us are meant to be Her weapons, rather than Her wombs. If She means you to be her bow, accept the honor. Be a strong and willing bow, and deliver Her arrows justly."

Minerva sighed as she wove her hair into a loose braid, forgoing the severity of her usual bun. As she fastened the knotted chaplet, adorned with moonstones and pearls, around her waist and pulled on boots of palest dragon-belly leather, she remembered the last time she'd worn these things. It had been seven days after Albus' death, three days after his entombment, in keeping with the older ways of mourning.

The Ministry had, of course, staged a magnificent funeral, full of solemn ceremony and pompous airs of sanctioned grief. Minerva had proceeded through each prescribed ritual with the appropriate degree of dignity, clothed in the acceptable black. All had been accomplished in a manner befitting a Wizarding world that prided itself on having moved into more modern ways of thinking. Of course certain customs would always be observed, the Ministry officials had assured her, but the ancient rites of mourning? Perhaps those were no longer quite correct, given the needs of the times? Surely they could depend on her to refrain from publically observing the more arcane rituals of grieving? After all, such things weren't really done any more and might be a bit of an embarrassment, didn't she think so? Upsetting to the general Wizarding populace, especially the students?

Preferring to choose her battles, she'd agreed. But on the third night, with the waning moon scarcely visible, when it was certain that Albus' body rested quietly in his White Tomb, she'd draped the heavy robes about her shoulders and climbed to the place of his death to keep the Ritual of Cointeach. Had she been at home in the Shetlands, the Elder-Sisters of her clan would have brought the wooden dish of earth and salt and stood beside her in the shrouded night, but those crone witches were far away and of an age where they were not so able to Apparate anymore. Not really wanting any other company but theirs, she'd made her vigil alone, keening the tale of Albus' life and making her plea to the Guardians, asking Them to watch for her departed as he traveled the road to the Otherworld.

She had cast the Charm of Anam Cara, declaring herself a Friend of the Soul to Albus, seeking to purify the place of his death, to erase the stain of murder and betrayal that lingered there. Yet, when her spell trembled hesitant and incomplete in the air, she'd questioned what would cause such a powerful invocation to waver, other than the

blight of pitiless cruelty being so strong upon the place. When she recalled the moment now, it all made perfect sense. Of course the Charm would not hold fast when cast for such a reason. Murder had not been done, and no betrayal made. Albus had already had a Friend of the Soul with him that night at the top of the tower, one who had not failed him.

She must not fail, either, and it was time to proceed. For a moment, she stood gazing around her at what would now be her private space for as long as she remained Headmistress. She'd been in this inner chamber many times throughout her years as Albus' Deputy. As he'd gotten older, he'd often liked to meet with her here rather than his office. He loved to prop against the pillows of the massive four-poster, and a time or two, she'd even joined him there, to share the comfort of the warmth and spend long hours talking of what had been and pondering what was soon to come.

Now, everywhere she looked, there were pieces of her life positioned around the room to make her feel at home. The house-elves had worked like fiends to bring all her personal things and arrange them in a way they thought would please her. She'd asked that Albus' bed be removed and her own brought from her old apartments. Being in this room, even though it was familiar, was too much like slipping her feet into someone else's shoes. They might fit, but would never feel quite comfortable. At least she could still put her head down on her own pillows, lay her weary body in her own bed, and keep her own secrets where she chose.

Secrets... A significant portion of her life was about to center around them, and her very soul was about to acquire their weight.

Albus and Severus... A hex on both of them for their damned secrets. What a pair, plotting and contriving, both of them complicit and neither of them honest with her. She could fairly throttle the two of them for what they'd done, and yet, she loved them both. Two sides of the same coin... the darkness and the light, and neither of them so much of either as they each thought. Albus had carried far more darkness than he'd ever admitted, and Severus far more light than he'd ever acknowledged.

Feeling a little cold, though the breeze from the window was soft and sweet, she wrapped the comforting weight of the outer robes around her, gathering strength from the memory of all those who'd worn the like before her. Tonight, the moon that watched her would be in full ascension, and she would not have to make her vigil alone. Hagrid would be with her, and Albus would stand as Witness in this gathering of three old warriors healing their hearts with the Charm of Secret Keeping.

'Hecate,' she thought as she straightened her spectacles on her nose, 'I've tried to be Your worthy bow, though at times perhaps I should have bent a little more. In these last months, I'm sorry not to have seen the truer target for my arrows. I never expected things to come to this. What turn of fate marks this path for me, I don't know, but I've always done what's needed, and I'll not shirk this task. Whether it's my blessing or my curse to be named Keeper is to be seen, but these secrets need a place to dwell.' She thought of Hagrid, with his fierce determination to take the proper course. 'They'll dwell with us, and amends will be made. There's nothing less I can do...'

In that brief moment, she hesitated. There they were, then, waiting... the words that had eluded her when she'd sat with Harry, but which she now could say with certainty.

'... for my friend.'

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"A man could ask for an easier word to move past this gargoyle, Minerva. You'll change your mind if it always takes me this long to come up." Standing in front of the great stone carving, Hagrid shook his head in frustration. "What was it, then, yeh said, somethin' about dwellin' in a gray fortress... Sherbet lemons was easier to remember... Wait, now, it was a Scots word... Lioslaith... That's the one."

With stone grinding on stone, the massive statue swung away, granting access to the ascending staircase, and in a moment he stood outside the double doors at the summit, hesitant to lift the griffin knocker. He needn't have bothered, for even as his hand was raised, the doors were abruptly opened inward by the senior house-elf called Pinkham.

"Master is keeping his eyes open and not thinking such heavy thoughts this time?" he inquired, ushering Hagrid into the office with a deep bow--and a poorly hidden look of shock.

House-elves are rarely taken off guard, but Pinkham could hardly be blamed for his momentary lapse in manners as he took in the sight of the usually disheveled Hagrid. It would have been impossible not to notice that Hogwarts' Groundskeeper had given attention to his appearance and that the result was startling. The scent of woodland pastures and windswept moors still surrounded him, but none of the pungent odors of his creatures, in testament to a thorough scrubbing in the loch, an activity which had been most amusing to the mer-folk who witnessed it. His face shone with a ruddiness that was not an effect of firewhisky, and his mane of unruly hair had been combed, or more likely raked, into an actual semblance of order. Even his beard was neatly groomed. A tidied Hagrid would have been quite enough to make those who knew him stare in amazement, but the changes to his attire would have left them speechless.

Rather than his customary beleaguered clothing, he wore a linen tunic, as white and soft as sea foam, over loose breeks of turf-brown wool tucked into stout cordovan boots. His battered moleskin greatcoat had been replaced by a heavy waistcoat of emerald pincord that reached almost to his knees, and over all a ground-sweeping cloak of tawny Donegal tweed, woven with the faintest tartan of hunter green, stitched along the edges with a subtle pattern of acorns and oak leaves in wheaten gold, fastened at the throat by a bronze clasp of Pictish design.

When the over-sized robe box had been delivered to Hagrid's hut right after supper by a highly disgruntled eagle owl, he'd not been able to keep from puddling up a bit upon opening it, especially after reading the note which was tucked between the layers of tissue and cloth.

"To be worn in good health and long life, by a wizard who is most deserving."

Minerva had seen personally to the matter, sending a hasty request to the tailor shop long patronized by all McGonagall men for their wizardly robes, kilts, and haberdashery. The men of her family being as burly and hulking as the women were spare and tall, the venerable Aberdeen clothiers of Farquhar & Skene had scarcely raised an eyebrow when asked to produce garments of a size large enough for Benandonner himself. The galleons she'd sent along, and the letter written over the seal of the Headmistress of Hogwarts confirming that the robes were her personal gift to a Hero of the Final Battle, had assured delivery within the span of twelve hours, with no questions asked.

Hastily recovering some aplomb after another furtive peek, Pinkham directed Hagrid to a heavily-carved armchair of ample proportion, seemingly positioned near the easterly window specifically for his comfort. Resisting an inclination to give the elder house-elf a good-natured tap on the head for the cheekiness of his comment, he settled himself and, still holding to his personal promise, declined the offer of a pint of bitters, requesting a tankard of butter beer instead.

"Headmistress will not be long for her joining you. She is asking that the Groundskeeper Hagrid be contented with the view and is wanting you to wait for speaking with the Old Master's portrait until she is present, also."

Having delivered his message with an attitude of absolute authority, Pinkham positioned himself in the exact center of the office where he stood drawn up to his full height, arms folded across his meager chest, as though quite prepared to insure his mistress' wishes were respected.

Peering about the room with a trace of uncertainty, Hagrid was not quite comfortable knowing that all the portraits were having a good look at him, but, upon meeting the eye of several, was more than pleased to receive a cordial nod or two. He was disappointed, though, that Dumbledore's frame showed only a vacant chair and no occupant. Maybe that was best, since in all honesty, he wasn't certain what he should say to the "old master" when he did see him after all this time. He'd learned so many things over the last few days, and he was still mulling over the up-ending of many of the perceptions he'd held as truths for such a long time. The fact that no empty frame hung in the spot that should have belonged to the school's most recent Headmaster did make him smile a bit behind his beard. No portrait perhaps meant the Potions master was still on this side of the Veil, with no one the wiser.

"Thank you, Pinkham, and good night. Nothing further will be needed until morning."

Having bowed to his mistress with great dignity and given Hagrid one last puzzled glance, the wizened retainer needed no further urging to take his leave. Truth be told, he could hardly contain himself, what with all the news there was to share with his fellows. And besides, there was that rejected pint of bitters to be enjoyed.

Lumbering to his feet at the sound of Minerva's voice, Hagrid turned to see her standing in the doorway that opened from the inner rooms into the office. After assuring himself with a quick survey that Pinkham had indeed left the room, he studied her with a frank and open admiration. She appeared to be as calm and steadfast as ever, but somehow with the candlelight flickering off the threading of her robes, there was an air of ghostliness about her, as though she were a little detached from herself.

"Minerva, yeh could truly pass fer the Moon 'erself."

Smiling fondly, she took in his appearance with a satisfied nod.

"And you, Hagrid, could be taken for the Green Man. Does everything suit you?"

"It does, better than I coulda' ever expected, and I'm wonderin' how ter thank yeh. I'm happy fer all the pockets yeh had 'em put into the coat and inside the cloak, as well." Looking a bit sheepish, he glanced at her sideways from under the tangle of his brows. "There's a pocket fer a wand, did yeh know? Not quite the size fer my umbrella ter fit, but still, it's nice ter have it..."

"I imagine that before long, Hagrid, you can do away with carrying your wand inside an umbrella."

With a start of joy, Hagrid recognized the voice he'd not heard in nearly a year and, turning, found himself looking straight into the beaming face of Albus Dumbledore. Without thinking, he crossed the room in two great strides before remembering it was only a portrait that greeted him, not the living, breathing man he'd loved and served with such proud devotion. The realization brought him to an abrupt halt, and he dropped his head to conceal his embarrassment at his mistake.

"Forgive me, my old friend, for not giving you better warning before popping up so suddenly. I did not intend to startle you, but I have missed you dearly. You've no idea how very glad I am to see you looking so well. I see that a few changes have taken place."

Hagrid's face turned even redder as he glanced down at himself, and Dumbledore chuckled.

"You do look quite splendid, Hagrid. I believe a fine new set of robes is the least that we could provide for a lion of Gryffindor. Minerva insisted on having those ready for you, given the importance of tonight's events."

Not wanting all the portraits to see him so overcome, Hagrid answered with a gruff edge in his voice, struggling valiantly not to let a tear meander down his cheek.

"It's my honor ter wear 'em, and it's good ter see you, too, Dumbledore, in whatever way there might be 'a doin' it. I didn't know if I'd ever set eyes on yeh again, at least not 'ere. I was hopin' fer it, though, all the time."

At that moment, Hagrid felt that was as much a speech as he could safely manage without disgracing himself.

"As was I, old friend, as was I. Would you both come and sit with me for a moment?" The old wizard's voice was earnest as he motioned them towards the chairs that flanked the great oaken desk. Noticing Minerva's glance towards the window where the moon could be seen rising still higher, he reassured them, "Not to worry, we have enough time."

With a small grunt for the half-remembered stiffness of his old bones, Dumbledore settled into his own chair.

"You are in accord, then, concerning this Charm of Fidelius. Little doubt of that, was there? You know, the Muggles say that three people can keep a secret, but only if two of them are dead. What a terrible lack of trust that shows, but I can hardly fault them. It was a grievous error on my part, to lay the burden of so many secrets on the shoulders of just one man. A tangled knot, indeed, all my secrets and mistakes woven together with his own... I would hope for no more knots to be woven on my account."

"Your knots have always been tangled, Albus, but you've managed to make them useful." Minerva's tone carried a note of sharpness. "There's none of us won't live with our mistakes, including him, although he's cherished his for far too long. This Making must happen, it will happen, and who other than Hagrid and I would do this on *his* account? Someone from his House, do you think, or perhaps a penitent Death Eater? I hardly think so. There was only one of those other than... other than he... and that one long dead."

Tucking his hands into the sleeves of his robes, as though he felt a chill, Dumbledore stood and began to slowly pace within the boundaries of his portrait.

"Point to you, Minerva... Well-placed."

There was a twinge of pain in his voice.

By now, the room was awash in the milky glow of the ever-climbing moon, and Minerva could no longer restrain her impatience.

"Albus, I'm sorry, I don't mean to hurt you, but there's no need for these second thoughts. Put your fears at rest. After all, you were the one who first presented this to us. Hagrid and I hold no illusions, and yes, we're in agreement. Now, if you'll please make a start? We'll not have another chance for a month, if we delay, and all of us know very well that will be too late."

Extending his hands as if ready to grasp theirs, Dumbledore looked from one to the other.

"Tradition decrees that I ask you once more before we proceed. Your intentions are clear, and you are willing?"

Both nodded.

"Come stand here with me, then, and take hold of this frame, one on either side."

As Minerva and Hagrid moved to take their places, a quiet smile passed between them.

"Are you ready, Hagrid?"

"That I am, Minerva, though I'll say I'm a little nervous. Is it allowed, ter take yer hand as we go?"

Her answer was clear as she reached out to him.

"I'd be glad if you would, da brudiwr."

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Keep a close watch, da ddewines. At the cut of dawn, I intend to send your owl with news. If I had the strength for it, I'd put all I've to tell you on paper, but I'm bone weary, and I fear I'd fall asleep over the pages. So, rather than write anything now, I'll simply sit and have a small conversation with you as though you were here and keep myself awake a while longer.

Here... or there... Small words, aren't they? You're off somewhere... there... in your world of wars and magic... We're here... Waiting... Holding on...

Tonight, I'll hope to rest. If my medicines take their full effect and our lad sleeps deeply, I'll try to do the same. I've a cot alongside his bed so that when he stirs, even a little, I hear him. My Tess will wake me if not. Dear old pup... She's sat many a vigil with me, faithful as any attending nurse could ever be, and she's not deserted me in this one, either, only slipping away as needed. She's been a touch uneasy, though. I expect it's the magic that hovers in this room that makes her nervous.

I've not left his side, Minerva, not since you brought him, other than for my necessities. When there's black smoke seen rising from my chimney, it's known here that I've a patient I must stay close to and I'll be wanting help. There's been no worry with my animals or gardens; they've all been tended for me. Twice each day there's been a soft knock at this door to let me know that the things I need...food, clean linens, and such--are right outside. The debris of sickness that I've left there in exchange has all been quietly removed. I've not seen or spoken with anyone, but I've written out instructions for the careful handling of the things which leave this room and made my prayers and such to keep those who help me safe from harm. Delyth's been here the most, I'd imagine, being the closest. A strong and steady girl, our Delyth.

It's good no one's about right now... They'd likely think me daft to hear me conversing with shadows. Tess likes the sound of my voice, though, and I think your Maldwyn hears me a little, too. That's really all he knows of me... my hands and voice, my scent, maybe, and the taste of the medicines I've coaxed down his poor throat. I've been talking to him quite a bit, and sometimes I'll be singing to him as well, especially when there's the need to touch him. There's an old lullaby from when I was a boy that seems to quiet him, so I've sung that a good deal. When he finally wakes, he'll know a bit of the Welsh maybe from having heard it so much.

Tell me, Minerva, did you ever read of the poet and his raven that sat above the chamber door, speaking only "nevermore?" I would think you had. It's your owl that's perched on the windowsill above the bed, watching us all with his umber eyes, never speaking, only waiting. I'd rather he flew off to hunt a bit more often and didn't watch us quite so close. I believe your little messenger has grown impatient for my answer. From time to time, he's offered his leg, in expectation, no doubt, of being sent back to you. He'll have his chance tomorrow, if we come through this night as well as I would hope.

"Send word," you said.

That was your wish, wasn't it? To receive some reassurance?

What word should I send so you'll know the battle that's raged within this room these recent days... what we've been through together, your lad and I? No single word would let you understand, but torrents of them wouldn't, either.

We've stayed within this circle of protection that I cast days ago, and the few times I've stepped outside it, I've made sure to close it behind me to keep him safe. I made a second Joining, but with no more success than the first, except for one whisper of thought when I believe he tried to answer. I'll not deceive you... I've not made another attempt. Did you know, da ddewines, that he'd been cursed... and did you know how deeply? I have to trust that you'd have warned me if you knew.

Death had its hands on him that first day and would have taken him, but I called on my dear Brighid and asked Her to show us a small kindness. The blood began to pulse again beneath his skin, like the water that moves under the skim of ice on spring-melt ponds. It was a blessing when the warmth came back to him, but it didn't stay gentle very long.

Fever's been sweeping over him like fire through parched grass, cresting and fading, cresting again. When it's high, you'd do as well to lay your hand on a smithy's anvil as to touch him. When the chills come, they've had him shuddering like a beaten animal. This room has stunk of the rank sweat that's been pouring off him and the bloody bile he's been retching, but for a Healer, those are useful things, signs the body's ridding itself of poison. Still, I'm glad you've not been here. It would have grieved you to see him.

He doesn't know it, but he's fought me... hard. It's fever strength that's in him, that and his Theriac... He kept that secret from you, did he, his devilish stash of potion? With all his thrashing and twisting, and his jaws clenched tight as a vise, I've almost believed the serpent was meant to change him into something kin to itself. You might tell Hagrid, I could have used his strong arms and that now I know what it means to wrestle with a dragon.

His hands have scarcely been still, scratching at the blankets. The sound's like dead leaves skittering on winter ground. It's an ugly thing to hear, knowing the cause of it. His mind may be clouded, but his poor body knows what it wants. That damn box. On my immortal soul, I'll not put that into his hand.

Nor his wand, either. I've enough of the magic to understand the power in this room. There's something of him seeks to find his wand, to make some spell, but it's madness without focus. I woke from a doze yesterday to Tess's whining. There was an arc of red light whipping about the room, and his right hand was clawing at his left arm where that brand marks him. I gripped his shoulders tight to stop him, and for a moment I felt something pass through me like a knife. The sense of Joining was there for just an instant, and it was all I could do to restrain him. Still, I was glad for it. A few days ago, I'd feared he'd lost his will. I don't know why, but that red light, whatever it was, simply vanished, and he lay still again. I've wrapped and bound his hands so he'll not try to tear at his arm again, or pull away the bandages at his throat. He's done that several times, as though his body remembers the weight of that bloody snake. Even without a wand, if his magic surfaces that way again, I doubt I could prevent whatever he'd attempt.

His eyes have opened a time or two, da ddewines, but other than a spark of life, there's nothing in them, no response to movement or light. In my dreams, his eyes were powerful, and when I asked you about their color, you said nothing of blindness. Is that another secret you chose to keep from me, Minerva, or another thing you didn't know?

Through all of this, he's remained nearly silent, other than his gasping when the fever's high. There was the one small moan when I was first settling him, and the whisper from our Joining, though that's not really a sound, is it? The wounds at his throat have begun to close, but there's no way yet to tell what damage has been done to his voice. I'll not lie, his silence is troubling. I've heard men shriek, and weep, and beg when pain is on them. Despite all I've done to ease him, I know that he still suffers some. It makes me wonder how and why he's taught himself not to show it.

Men can lose all reason in battle, and he's at war with his own death. A harder tone sometimes quiets him when a gentler one fails. He reminds me of soldiers I've known, so scarred and bitter they'll not accept kindness. I could pass for some old sergeant, with my ordering him to keep still and let me do my work to help him. I've told him that I'm stronger in this fight and he'll not win... that I'll be the one to prevail. If he's heard this and accepted it, I don't know, but today he fought me less when I touched him, and this latest peak of fever was not so great. I'm watching him closely now, in hopes my medicines will send him into a truer sleep and let his body rest. Brighid willing, we both may have a little peace tonight. It'd be hard to prove which of us needs it more right now.

Your Maldwyn is a fighter, surely. If ever the tables are turned, and I'm the one lost in hellish battle, I'd want him at my shoulder, though I'm not sure I'd want to know the weapons he'd bring. Forgive me, Minerva, for telling you all of this as if it was some epic tale. I am descended from poets and warriors, after all, and I'm so weary I've begun to blether. Maybe it's this feeling of the Moon watching us that makes me ramble on so. She's beautiful tonight, as bright as the Lady's Flame.

In the end, there's little to say. He is alive, and he is blinded. He is cursed, and I am wanting help. You have promised to return, and you have secrets of your own... Some to share, some to learn as well, I think.

So, da ddewines, when the sun rises in the morning and I fasten my message to your owl and send him home to you, this will be the only word he carries...

"Come."

Chapter Seven: An Offering of Sand

"If you are willing to be his Secret Keepers, then follow on and let us be about this Making."

Chapter Seven: An Offering of Sand

The towering cliffs of Da Kame take little notice of the doings of men and have only a passing interest in the business of wizards. They have guarded the edge of the world far too long for such concerns to be of consequence. Eons before fierce warriors in their proud ships braved the endless heaving seas, long before robed magi cast their enchantments in shadowed echoing caverns, the cliffs had marked the place where time drops away, and dreams are the greater reality. Men have trembled there in awe-struck wonder while the fey called forth the blessings, and the curses, to bring them to their knees, but Da Kame has long since ceased to care who kneels or who conjures. It matters little, since in the end, all things, even they, will fall as dust into the eternal seething waters below.

Even so, the presence of magic still summons a sigh of recognition from deep within the earth, and when the portent of a powerful casting is whispered by this wind, attention is paid, even by Da Kame. The waves, flinging themselves in constant challenge before the cliffs' indifferent feet, will curb their fury for a time while the raucous skuas and kittiwakes fall silent in anticipation and the great sea beasts venture from their depthless haunts to draw nearer to the shore. Even the stars seem to slow their wheeling through the reaches of heaven.

On this night, coins of moonlight are strewn as payment on the pathway of a calmed sea, and the moors beyond the cliffs stand yearning for a breath of sharp salt air. At the far side of Foula, those few crofters dwelling there are fallen heavily into their beds, foundering in a dreamless mist of sleep. No harm is meant to them, but the eyes of even those most eager must be closed to what they would not understand. While they drift in their sweet oblivion, there will be Magick... a promise... a bonding of secret to soul... a Making.

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"... intentions are clear... to take your hand... if you would..."

Something shifting silently, grainy, yielding under her feet... dirt... sand? The uneasiness of a great void stretching away on all sides, the air heavy and damp, smelling of the sea rather than the loch... No stars overhead and no visible sky... Departed from Hogwarts, certainly, but arrived elsewhere or still caught in the currents of passage? Difficult to be sure...

Portkeys had never been Minerva's particular choice as a means of transport, being too much like Side-Along travel to suit her. Not burdened with a delicate constitution, she'd always preferred the sharp clarity of any singular Apparation she initiated herself, or at least the surety of a stout broom. It wasn't a question of landing cleanly on her feet - she'd mastered that skill ages ago, but there was always the gut-wrenching speed and the daze of confusion when first coming round, with distant echoes still adrift in your head and the acrid taste of copper, like a residue of blood, harsh and cloying on your tongue. It was a touch easier if you knew at least where you were headed before you journeyed, but Albus hadn't seen fit to share their destination when he'd requested she and Hagrid take hold of his ponderous portrait frame.

Hagrid... sweet Circe... Where was Hagrid? Peering about in the darkness, she was highly relieved when her upraised wand, lit by a hasty "*Lumos*", revealed him close beside her, swaying slightly, but with his feet well-planted. He was thumping his chest soundly with his fists, gulping in great draughts of air, and even in the half-light, Minerva could see that much of the ruddy glow had drained from his face. It was a matter for considerable concern, having someone of his size so decidedly short of breath. 'Gods above,' she thought, 'don't let him faint.'

"Bloody bones," Hagrid scowled, snorting and huffing like a winded Ironbelly. "Always takes some gettin' used to, that does... Not a thing I've ever liked doin', jumpin' from one place ter the other all sudden like that... Makes it 'ard ter get yerself straight again."

Leaning down, he braced his hands against his knees and appeared not at all inclined to move from the spot where he'd landed, but his only concern, as he looked up, seemed to be for her.

"What about yerself, Minerva? Are yeh feelin' up ter snuff with all this bein' yanked through the keyholes?"

"None the worse for wear, all in all, thank you," she replied, settling her robes squarely on her shoulders while keeping her wand hand high to push the light deeper into the gloom. "But I would agree with you. Not a great favorite of mine, either."

Whatever commiseration Hagrid was about to make was cut short as Dumbledore's voice, laced with an indulgent mirth, interjected from somewhere in the shadowed expanse in front of them.

"Ah, there you are, and both looking well enough, I see. That was indeed an interesting change of pace for me - being part of the conveyance instead of being the passenger - much less of an assault on the stomach, certainly. A distinct advantage, I suppose, to no longer being mortal. Forgive me for going off without you. I have been re-acquainting myself with our surroundings, getting the lay of the land, if you will. It has been more than a few years since I visited here."

Moving by wand-light in the direction of his voice, Minerva saw the old wizard's portrait only a dozen or so paces away, hovering several inches off the ground. Twining a small strand of his beard between his fingers, Dumbledore stood peering at them over his spectacles, beaming with obvious satisfaction.

"I find it most reassuring that all the wards appear to have stayed firmly affixed. The place does seem as undisturbed as always, however long it may have been since that last..."

"And the place would be, Albus?" Minerva interrupted, halting what she feared might erode into a long and sentimental meander through his memories. Normally that could be quite useful, and often entertaining, but now that he literally had all the time in the world at his disposal, keeping Dumbledore on track might well become an issue she didn't care to address in these fleeting hours before midnight. There simply was no time to humor him, and she was desperate to know where they'd ended up, given that the moon was not even visible.

All she could surmise from her hasty appraisal of their destination was what she'd already suspected. They were in a vaulting cavern, an arching chamber of rock gouging deep into the earth. The walls were frescoed in striations of carmine and yellow, the floor carpeted by shell-sand and pebbles, with massive boulders crouching like misshapen beasts just outside the enclave of her light and gnarled fingers of rock beckoning from above and beneath. From the bite of the air and the rhythmic chant of water, advancing and retreating far below, it would seem they were elevated somewhere well above the sea.

Dumbledore's jovial smile faded into a sterner guise as he gestured for her to turn and look again more closely.

"As an owl would fly, Minerva, we have come not all that far from Hogwarts. This is Foula, high on Da Kame in your own dear Shetlands. Recall the summoning-stories that Forbia would have told when you were just a girl... Do you remember her telling tales of the Elfame and their Island of Birds with its sea-caves sheltering the old magic?"

The Island of Birds... In an instant, it was as though the years had fallen away, and Minerva was still an eager child, sitting among the standing stones on Rousay. She could see her wand-mother's shining dark eyes, full of secrets, and hear her voice, softened with the Orcadian burr. How patiently Forbia had instructed her on the importance of holding the Light and the Darkness in respectful balance, urging an understanding and acceptance of the natural tides of life and death, and instilling reverence for the elements which bind all things together.

'If you are invoking the power of the sea, count the waves carefully, child, and always seek the ninth, the one which swells higher and stronger than all others. You have no reason to dread Clìodna Faire, and if you are granted an opportunity to hear her birds singing, pay close attention and receive that gift willingly. Should you ever have need, Minerva, She and the blessed moon will always stand waiting, even at the very Edge of the World.'

"Dumbledore, I'll ask yeh, what's this place an' what's it to do with Minerva an' our makin' the Fidelius?"

Hagrid's anxious voice pulled her back from her memories to the fact that she was trembling, not from cold or fear, but from a thrill of eager recognition.

"Clidna's Circle, where the Cup of Essence is offered by the Sea's white hands..."

The words came to her lips as familiar as if she were still a child, curled within the shelter of Forbia's arms, gazing up into that beloved face, listening to the poetry of age-old faery wisdoms.

"The Place of Blessed Salt, from whence all life is sprung, and to which it will return..." Dumbledore's eyes were pensieve as he intoned more of the epic tale.

"An' Earth, 'er brother Sun in slumber, awaits the kiss of Moon, 'er sister."

Minerva turned in astonishment, hearing the words of ancient lore spoken by Hagrid as readily as though they were a daily greeting.

"Me dad would tell the old stories of the Far Away Folk, is all," he shrugged, "whenever I was feelin' lonely fer my mother an' couldn't sleep. I hadn't remembered until yeh said that first part."

"I see you both hold some memory of this place. That may perhaps make our task a bit easier. You must put away your wand, Minerva, and Hagrid, do not regret that you lack one that is worthy of you," Dumbledore advised as he motioned them closer to his frame. "Here, our meager tools are not so important. The magic of Foulfa is far older and has no need of such things to draw upon its power.

"It has become tradition," he continued, "for only one person to be the Keeper of a Giver's secrets, but that belief came out of fear in the Dark Times when so many of us practiced our magic alone, so as not to be discovered by zealous Muggles. While I have found no evidence of any wizarding law forbidding an alliance of Secret Keepers, I am determined to keep your actions, and my inquiries into the Abandonment, hidden from the over-eager ears of the Ministry. No sense piquing their interest over something that need no longer concern them. I fear they would not all have our Giver's well-being at heart."

A frown darkened Dumbledore's eyes, and the lines of his face drooped into deeper furrows. With a great sigh, he sank into his portrait chair, as though suddenly overcome with the weight of what lay ahead.

"Riddle's curse was pulled from whatever primal pit birthed the Dark Arts, and this Charm of Fidelius is only a first step against it. To summon the power of these caves, you must cast in the old manner, in tandem, with only your hands to serve you, employing the elements and the strength of your common purpose. Once the Third Keeper is located, you must agree to unite in triad against the curse. Understand, we are moving forward largely on instinct rather than prescribed practice. I believe we will be guided, but we must remain willing to demonstrate both trust and patience."

With a firm "Nox", Minerva immediately extinguished her light. The darkness enveloped them, and there was the whisper of cloth as she tucked her wand away. For a moment, the only sound was the water far below, advancing and retreating, calling... calling... calling...

"Yes, I shall come to you... No, I must leave you... Yes... No...", the lament of the waves, bereft of the shore.

A needle of moonlight, piercing the dark from some unseen fissure far above their heads, began to move across the floor, and in the wake of its fragile illumination came a breeze, spiced with the heady scent of gorse and thyme. Gathered by the wind, the sand in the space between Minerva, Hagrid, and the portrait frame began to swirl and rise, shaping itself into a slender, translucent column enclosing something not quite visible. Compelled by its fragile beauty, Minerva reached out, but was reluctant to touch the glowing pillar, lest it shatter. The bright clear notes of birdsong began to ascend as the breeze shivered the grains of sand apart, revealing a living agate of russet brown... one tiny wren. Lifted on the fragrant air, the bird began to dart and weave, spiraling her dance around the shaft of moonlight, her song filling the cavern in a lyric rejoicing. So light and quick they were almost unaware of it, she perched on Minerva's shoulder and again on Hagrid's, kissing the face of each with a brush of her wing before coming to rest atop Dumbledore's frame.

"I believe we are now welcome and are being invited to proceed. Perhaps it would be best for you to hold on to me again." Dumbledore chuckled. Shaking his head at their hesitation, he reassured them, "I can promise you, we will remain close to one another, now, until all has been accomplished. No more squeezing through the keyholes, Hagrid. Shall we do what is asked and follow where we are led?"

Taking their places, as before, on either side of the frame, Minerva and Hagrid both looked to the wren, expecting that, taking flight again, she would be their guide, but she remained perched, still singing softly. Instead it was the shaft of moon-glow which they followed as it began to inch slowly across the floor of the cavern, halting at last to brighten a looming wall of stone. Glancing at Dumbledore for instruction, Minerva was gently advised. "You already know what to do. You have always known, even before you were born into this world. Forbia simply helped you to remember."

Feeling somewhat out of place without the familiar anchor of her wand, she stood for a moment, questioning what was expected, searching her past for the answer. Albus had said the only tools at their disposal would be their hands and hearts. Forbia had taught her to speak openly, with humility but without fear. As though moving of their own accord, her hands lifted into the same shape she had offered to Gareth days ago in the Valley, the right cupped within the left in entreaty, as she spoke clearly, "All those who wish to hear, I am Minerva, woman of the Clan McGonagall, witch of the Orcadian blood. The needs of our hands and hearts are open to your sight, but there's a Making required, and we must be the ones to cast it. Blessed Moon, if you accept this as a worthy purpose, I ask that we be granted passage into Clidna's Circle."

Keeping her hands lifted, she looked to Hagrid, and a memory of long-neglected ritual stirred within her as she saw him offer his own great hands to the wren, speaking so gently, he could scarcely be heard.

"Little one, will yeh show us how ter pass through ter the Circle? It's Rubeus Hagrid that's askin'. All sorts o' creatures... the birds, too... they know me, an' I know them. There's a man in a terrible way, and I'd ask yeh to help us if yeh would, so 'e's not left ter wander with none ter fight fer 'im. I'm hopin' fer a bit of kindness fer all of us, if yeh can see yer way to it."

One note from the wren, long and sweet and pure, began to tremble in the air, and as it grew ever louder, stronger, the wall of stone before them began to shiver and grow ever thinner until only a rippling curtain of sand stood suspended between them and the faintly-visible chamber beyond.

"Together, then, Hagrid?" Minerva asked without the slightest hesitation, and he nodded his willing. "Yes."

"Together, Albu..." And here she froze, her heart drumming with apprehension. The portrait still hovered behind them, as before, but the wren was vanished... and so was Dumbledore.

Circling the empty frame in a search she already knew was futile, Minerva wanted nothing in that moment quite so much as to draw her wand against whatever might be waiting one step through the rainy, moon-struck veil before them. What had separated Albus from them, when he'd said they would remain close until the Charm was completed, and where was their tiny harbinger of consent, the wren? Her hand strayed closer to her wand-pocket, but it was Hagrid's which gripped her arm with gentle restraint.

"I know it's a hard thing fer yeh, Minerva, not ter have yer wand in yer hand, but Dumbledore said we're ter show trust an' patience... so maybe that's what the magic o' this place is waitin' ter see from us..."

"Well reasoned and wisely spoken, brave Guardian of all that Terra loves," a woman's voice, rich with music, issued from the chamber just beyond, "and Hecate's Bow, you may be assured that all is well with our Bright Wizard, Dumbledore. If you doubt me, come and see."

An invitation or a challenge? Either way, no debate was necessary.

"Well, Terra's Guardian, shall we follow Albus through the looking glass, as Wizard Carroll used to say?" Minerva motioned with a wry tilt of her head, and Hagrid nodded yet again, chuckling deep in his chest.

"It's what's needed, so that we will, good Bow... an' back again, soon enough, we'll hope."

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Hagrid had, of course, expected to venture alone through the curtain of sand, to be the first to fall under attack if all was not as it seemed. Minerva would have none of it and insisted they cross together, side by side, with their eyes narrowed against the stinging of the tiny grains that swirled around them, hissing softly in a faint whisper, evoking voices not quite heard. For a moment, anticipation of some slyly-summoned "*Ecce*," haunted their hearts, but opening their eyes in the muted light on the other side, they were assured at once that all was indeed as it should be, since there before them stood Albus, awash in his usual benevolence.

The frame that housed him was no longer the massive oaken one, laden with gilded carving, which had graced the walls of Hogwarts, but something far different. Dumbledore's image was encircled now by the North Sea's treasures - an abundance of polished shells - whelks, mussels, cowries and seastars - frosted jewels of sea glass - driftwood bleached and smooth as ivory - all twined together into an intricate design by leathery strands of kelp - and rather than the high-backed chair of a Headmaster, he was seated on a massive boulder, weathered by the winds of time into a wide and comfortable seat that offered a view of verdant pastures sloping down to a wide beach of pristine sand and arching waves.

"Dear friends," he said, smiling in melancholy, when he saw that their expressions spoke clearly of relief mingled with an uneasy doubt, "did you think I was taken, or that I had left you here alone?" He rose from his seat to stand in silent contemplation for a moment, looking towards the portrait sea, his snowy beard and hair tumbled by the wind. As though having come to a decision, he turned to face them. "Apparently, my assurances carry far less weight with you these days. You have good reason for suspicions. There are losses between us I must try to reconcile, but the Fidelius is of greater concern now. The time is lessening and we should begin."

"Indeed you should, Bright Wizard. The hour of the wave approaches."

The musical voice that spoke was the same they had heard moments before. The woman who appeared before them was the glory and wonder of the sea, taken shape to stand upon dry land. Her fair hair, floating about her shoulders like a mist, was adorned with a ferroniere of chitons, graced by a teardrop pearl, and her skin was as translucent as conch shell. An ocean dwelled within her eyes, alluring and powerful. Celadon-tinted robes, edged with silver, fell from her pale shoulders to sandaled feet so small they seemed to make no impression in the sand beneath them. Standing as her attendants were three birds with brilliant plumage of crimson, blue, and green, tipped with gold, and each carrying a branch of apple-wood, heavy with white blossoms and golden fruit.

Leaving the company of her birds, she approached the spot where Minerva and Hagrid stood transfixed and, looking from one to the other, took the hand of each, laughing with the same music as when she'd spoken.

"Dumbledore's companions, are you so amazed to see me? No more than I am to see you. I do find you both most beautiful. Minerva, Witch of the Orcadia, you are truly Hecate's Bow, and Hagrid, who knows all beasts, I believe Terra will bless you always."

Her face grew wistful as she sighed. "There are so few people, even among the wizarding, who call upon the Elfame any more. Most have forgotten us, I fear, or no longer believe we might still live."

Moving closer to the ornate frame, she smiled up at Dumbledore as she continued.

"This Bright Wizard Become has explained the purpose of your coming. My heart is torn by your request. I am pleased that a Fidelius is to be sworn in community, as was always the custom in the Long Past, but I am grieved that this powerful Making must be used for battle against such a curse of the Darkenss. I had hoped the Abandonment was lost forever. It is a sorrow that the Faery Realm did not rise up against this Dark One, but we rarely interfere in the ways of wizards anymore. We should have. Perhaps we might have prevented some of what has happened. Your young wizard Potter, who is Bright Becoming, is his heart lifted now?"

"As much as it can be, given what path was put before him by circumstance... and by me," Dumbledore answered quietly from his frame. "There are many prepared to claim him now, but that is not what he needs. The love of family and true friends - that he has in full measure, and that is what will lift him. But dear Cliodna, it is another boy who needs us."

"A boy, Dumbledore?" Cliodna's eyes were suddenly tempest-tossed, and her demeanor was no longer serene as she began to pace in front of his frame. "Surely you mean a man who swore allegiance to this Dark Lord and bore his Mark willingly?"

She turned to confront Hagrid. "Is such a man worthy of your resolve to keep his secrets safe?"

Her cold fury was leveled towards Minerva. "This curse was cast on him in cruel vengeance, but did he not draw that to himself? Perhaps his fate is just, and he suffers simply what is his due for having been Dark Becoming?"

"No more than any of us if we're held in the balance against our sins," Minerva snapped in answer. "If the only payment for forgiveness is worthiness, there's few of us able to meet that price. Leave us to our business, then, if you've only pitiless judgments to give. I would have hoped for better from you." She knew she risked Cliodna's anger, but she was dismayed by the injustice of the faery's words, particularly since they mirrored her own not-so-distant perceptions far too clearly.

"Good Faery... little one, I understand yeh know nothing of us," Hagrid abruptly spoke, his boldness tempered by respect, "but it was trust an' patience we were ter show yeh in order to be allowed 'ere. The trust we've shown, just by comin' through, but our patience might be wearin' thin with all 'o this, yeh see. Dumbledore's told yeh the truth of it, I'd say, so I'd ask yeh ter tell us whether we're to have yer help."

Her ageless face softened by an approving smile, Cliodna clapped her hands and summoned her birds around her with a laugh that was a balm of compassion.

"Ah, dearest Bow and Guardian, very well done, indeed. I am satisfied that your lost wizard truly has strong weapons to do battle for him. I have watched him from the Otherworld, and I already know that he is worthy, but the greater sorrow is that he does not. With companions such as you, perhaps he will come to see his own truth one day. If you are willing to be his Secret Keepers, then follow on and let us be about this Making."

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The true elements of magic number only four, and yet they are the All. Nothing exists and no living thing takes form if they are not present. Fire, which rules the Southern Realm and Water, whose domain is the West, Earth, deep-rooted in the North and Air, abiding in the East. To call upon them, they must be honored within a Circle, and guarding the boundaries of that Circle, there must be evidence of the four directions.

Cliodna's Circle was marked by standing obelisks of quartz, red, yellow, green, and blue, each with an inner glow ignited by the moonlight streaming down upon them. Between the pillars were bronze torches forged into the guise of supplicant hands, each one lifting its own bright flame. At the center of the Circle, the moon directly above, stood a great block of salt crystal deposited over a thousand lifetimes by endless cresting waves, crafted into a deep basin over still more lifetimes by tides long since dropped away. This was the storied Cup of Essence, standing ready to be filled and offered by the Sea's white hands.

With Albus positioned in his portrait facing them, and Minerva and Hagrid ushered into the Circle to flank the Cup, Cliodna took her own place as Guardian and Guide of the Making.

"The Lady Moon is soon to reach Her full ascension in the heavens," she prompted firmly, "and as She does, the tide is called upon to fill this Cup. Eight waves will come, each leaving a token of itself behind, and when the ninth wave comes, that which is mine, the passage of time will hover for the space of one hour. The Charm of Fidelius will be spoken and the Making will be sealed. Stand with quiet patience, as you have been told, and have no fear for the passing of this hour, for the moon and I will hold it

in our hands."

As the moon climbed to her pinnacle, no one spoke, even their breathing dropping into measured softness. Far distant, the approaching march of water could be heard, advancing in a tumultuous rush, its voice roaring through the channels in the rock, until with a great gasp it came surging up into the Cup, lingering but an instant before plunging back into the depths, leaving behind a layer of gleaming white sand, pristine and smooth. Minerva found herself counting in expectation, just as Forbia had taught her. Seven more times the waves came, each leaving its offering of sand atop the last.

Clidna's voice, strong and clarion, echoed through the chamber, in a shout.

"Now comes the Ninth, which is mine."

The wave that came was ten-fold the size of all the others, frothing and foaming, a fountain of green and silver that pushed itself to reach the roof of the cavern before dropping away, leaving behind its own layer of sand, black as obsidian.

Her birds close around her, the faery advanced to stand beside the Cup. Looking over to Dumbledore, she inclined her head in formal greeting and inquired, "Bright Wizard Become, will you be Witness to what is said and done this night and keep the knowledge of these matters hidden in your memory until all things which are of Heaven and Earth have ceased and only the Blessed Ones remain to hear?"

"I am Witness and my pledge is given, upon my true name, upon my soul," he responded, his voice so strong and full of power that even Minerva and Hagrid, who had known him so long, had seen and heard him in so many aspects, took respectful notice.

Bending down, Clidna plucked a feather from each of her birds before turning her attention to Minerva.

"Bright Witch Become, within every Beginning, there is a Knowing, and within that Knowing, there is a Beginning. Such is the un-ending Circle. Your life as Keeper was begun when you first acquired the knowledge of your Giver's secrets. Will you remain forever faithful to this Knowing and bind these secrets to your soul until your mortal life shall end and those who are Blessed take them from you?"

"I swear it. So long as breath and blood remain within my body, I will be Keeper of this Knowing. If I should break this Trust, may there be no honor accorded to my life and may I know only my soul's shame, even at the time of my death," Minerva answered, never taking her eyes from Clidna's as the faery extended her slender hand towards the Cup.

"As you have said, so shall it be. In the manner that is the oldest, write these secrets in the sand and as you write, speak them aloud as well. Summon your Giver's face and voice, call his memory to you."

The manner oldest? Before brush or quill or pen, there was the hand, moving and tracing images with the tip of a finger into the dust of the earth, and this, Minerva knew, was what was required, but she hesitated.

"Why do you falter, Keeper? Do you have doubts?" Clidna asked.

"No, but to write his secrets, to give them voice, I must say his name," Minerva whispered. "I don't wish to speak his name. He will suffer for it if I do."

"Yes, he will," Clidna nodded, "that is so, but it is necessary, and you are able to counter that a little. As you make the Charm, also write within the Cup a memory of him that is precious to you. It will ease him in the moment that you speak his name."

Whispering a silent, "Forgive me," Minerva leaned over the rim of the Cup and began to write in the black sand, seeing her runes appear from the white sand beneath. 'Black and white,' she thought, 'how ironic that nothing about him was ever set so plainly. The sand should be grey instead.'

"Severus Tobias Snape, Bright Wizard Become, my fierce colleague, my lonely, angry friend, still lives," she began to speak, unwavering, as she wrote. "I have hidden him in Gwaun, with the Healer Gareth Islwyn, and have chosen the name Neirin Maldwyn to protect him. He is cursed by Tom Riddle into the Darkness of Abandonment and is meant to wander there always. His sight is taken and his mind is clouded. There are wrongs between us, and I'll not rest until they are amended and he is whole again. I am sworn to be his Secret Keeper until the end of my days."

Her final words, the ones to counter suffering with something precious, were small, tucked under the rest in tiny runes, and whispered so softly, even the faery did not hear: "Tea, vile and insipid."

Beside her, Clidna took one of the three feathers and placed it in Minerva's hand.

"Give the breath of your body to this feather and scatter all that you have written to the four directions, so that your words may never again be read."

In an instant, the runes she had written were vanished, but she felt a weight around her heart, and had she been alone, she would have wept. Clidna smiled, and placing her hands on either shoulder, drew Minerva close to kiss her gently on her brow, on each eye, and lastly, softly, on her mouth.

"Dear Bow, do not grieve. The weight will lessen as time goes by. Now our Guardian must come and make the Charm as well."

Other than the ritual vow, Hagrid's words, and his runes, were few, for there was little more to be said. Watching and listening, Minerva was both proud and saddened - proud that at last he was able to take a proper wizardly action, but saddened that it was for such a purpose. But what could even conceivably be precious to him concerning Severus, she wondered. They scarcely even spoke with one another in the Great Hall. She could recall no particular incident between them as she saw him rub his thumb over an old scar and mutter, "For your hand." She knew it must be important to him, though, when she saw him smile as he breathed on the second feather and scattered his writing before bending to receive Clidna's blessing.

"The Charm of Fidelius, as prescribed, is finished, and I am Witness to its purpose and to the willingness of these Secret Keepers," Dumbledore quietly affirmed from behind them, and Minerva startled, having almost forgotten he was there. "However, Clidna, we are battling for a soul, and I have further need of the Cup of Essence. You have kept something safe for me for a little while. May I have it now?"

With a nod, the faery beckoned her birds nearer, and from the branch that each carried, she took three apples. Cutting the fruits open with a small silver sickle that hung at her waist, she revealed a tiny crystal vial hidden inside each one, all of them containing one minute drop of fluid, two of which were clear and one, deep crimson.

Puzzled, Minerva looked to Dumbledore.

"Albus, what are these?"

"The oldest secrets of a man, the essence of his mortal life," he answered.

Paling at what she suspected, Minerva pressed on.

"What man, Albus?"

"They are his," the answer came.

"How do you come to have them, Albus, these essences?" she whispered, gently touching each vial with the tip of the same finger with which she had consigned secrets to the sands.

"You forget, Minerva, who tended him all these years when Riddle had done his worst and there was no other place he could seek help. His sweat, his tears, his life's blood... All have fallen on my hands more times than can be counted."

"Hidden here, with Cliodna, for how long?"

"When I knew I would soon die, and by his hand, I sent them here."

"That's why yeh chose this place fer the Charm, then, because it was the place 'o Blessed Salt? Sweat, tears, blood... All carryin' the Sea, that's what yeh meant?" Hagrid asked.

"For what purpose, Albus? What did you intend?" Minerva carefully asked, wondering what other fragile revelations were about to come to light.

"It was my hope to direct him here, once the War was over. If he could be persuaded to willingly surrender his own life essences back to the Cup, his body and spirit might be whole again."

"Which cannot happen now, so long as Riddle's curse has hold of him." Minerva frowned. "So, what's to be done in the meantime?"

"There is powerful magic in sacrifice. We've seen the strength of that in Harry," Dumbledore replied. "Keepers live with sacrifice, guarding their Giver's secrets. If what I believe is true, if you are willing to protect his mortal essences also, we may forge another weapon against Riddle's curse. Will you consider it?"

Minerva turned to Hagrid, questioning, and was surprised to see his eyes light with laughter.

"I'd think if we're already keepin' 'is secrets, the least we could do is carry a drop or two o' saltwater fer 'im as well."

"It seems Hagrid and I are in agreement, once again, Albus, so what's to be done?" Minerva asked, watching warily as Cliodna approached the Cup, holding the three vials with great delicacy.

"Other hands than ours will attend to this, Minerva. We are only watchers now," Dumbledore replied, returning to his seat upon the portrait boulder.

Lifting her eyes to the moon, Cliodna began to sing in the sweet, clear voice of the wren. One by one, her beautiful birds joined her, until the cavern was filled with a glorious sound. To hear their hymn was to feel every care and sorrow slip away, every pain and illness soothed, to be flooded with an abundant sense of absolute joy and peace. Gently, the faery released each drop, fragile and trembling, into the sand of the Cup. In a fountain of mist and foam, the Sea's white hands soon came to cover them, slowly withdrawing to reveal three beautiful crystals, two as clear as rain, one as red as claret, each on a long braided chain of silver.

With careful hands, Cliodna lifted the amulets from the Cup and turned to the portrait.

"Bright Wizard Become, which Essence is to be given to each Keeper?"

Dumbledore came to the front of the portrait frame and looked first to Hagrid.

"Because you remember and honor the gift which healed you, I will ask you to guard the salt of the sweat he has shed in his labors over the cauldron."

At Dumbledore's nod, Cliodna slipped the chain with one of the clear crystals over Hagrid's bowed head and smiled to see him close his hand around it.

"Minerva, I have seen the tears you hide so carefully from view. I have witnessed his as well, guarded with an even greater ferocity. Because you love him, as though he were a brother, the salt of his tears I will entrust to you."

When Cliodna slipped the silver chain around her neck, Minerva felt a shiver pass through her, and unbidden came the memory of a pale and empty countenance. Silently, she slipped the crystal inside her robes to lie heavy against her heart.

"The third, Bright Wizard, who shall wear it?" Cliodna gravely asked, cradling the blood-red crystal in the palm of her hand.

"His life's blood carries the greatest magic, the power of the Sea. For now, I will ask Minerva to keep it safe at Hogwarts, under her protection," Dumbledore answered. "If he lives, his Third Keeper will choose to wear it out of love for him, or for the sake of a debt owed. Only time will determine which."

"So shall it be. Earth has attended, Sea and Moon have given blessing, and all is well," Cliodna's voice rang through the cavern. "Let protection surround all here, and may they rejoice in the magic of all things. Live in honor, and dwell in peace. The Making is complete."

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The dawn was dancing on the hills around Hogwarts Castle as the moon was sinking into the arms of the west, to sleep until the earth turned to greet her once again. Albus Dumbledore, Bright Wizard Become, sat dozing in his more accustomed portrait frame, his hands folded neatly over a single pearlescent whelk shell, a knowing smile teasing at the corners of his mouth as he kept company in his dreams with the Elfame.

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Having paced the circumference of the loch since his return from Foula, Rubeus Hagrid, Guardian of all that Terra loves, entered his tumble-down hut with a sigh, hanging his fine new cloak behind the door before dropping, with a grunt of weariness, onto his battered settee. It was another hour before he stirred enough to fall into his bed, still cupping a shining crystal carefully in his hand.

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Turning from the window that looked out, always, to the Astronomy Tower, Minerva McGonagall, Keeper of Secrets, having bid the descending moon good night, settled into the Morris chair that faced a cold hearth. Reaching deep into the pocket of her familiar tartan robes, she pulled out the battered biscuit tin she kept hidden there, and opening it, softly placed a small silk-wrapped packet inside. Tucking the little box away again, she sat motionless for a time, her hand on her heart where a crystal lay heavy. It was a little while before she left the silent room, raising the wards once again when she departed.

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The dawn danced in Gwaun as well as Delyth Morgan woke from a dream already lost to memory, her face wet with tears for which she knew no reason. All she could remember from her dream was the plaintive echo of the sea, calling.....

"Yes, I shall come to you..."

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Gareth Islwyn was asleep, spent beyond reason from a week with little rest. The night had passed peacefully, and finally he had permitted himself to lie down on his cot. Exhaustion crept over him, rendering him as senseless as one of his medicines would have done. In an hour or so, the sun, streaming through the open window, would rouse him with its light, and he would send the owl to Minerva. His message was already written, waiting. Lost in the arms of Morpheus, he did not hear the other message he might have sent. Not even the vigilant Tess heard the faint exhalation of a single word from the fever-cracked lips of Neirin Maldwyn.

"Voice?"

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The young man who prowled the dew-soaked gardens, his arms folded across his chest in an oddly familiar pose, had not slept at all, nor would he, even though it would offer an escape from the desperately beseeching eyes of his mother and the brandy-sodden endearments of his father. A sorry escape, sleep, plagued as it was by frenzied dreams. At least in the gardens, not even a house-elf would disturb him so early in the morning and he could try to sort his thoughts. His pale hand clutched a tightly rolled parchment, its softness attesting to its having been read, over and over again. Shivering in the cool air, he wrapped his arms still tighter across his chest, and throwing his head back, moaned his anguished query to the brightening sky.

"I can't help you. They didn't even find your body. What is it you expect from me?"

Chapter Eight: Whispers Of the Ibis

Chapter 8 of 14

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Chapter Eight: Whispers Of the Ibis

How swiftly might an owl fly, and how many miles would pass beneath its wings in the span of a single day? Could it be trusted to press on through hunger, weariness, and weather, carrying a message of importance? Would it bear straight for home or, having been kept waiting for so many days, pause to indulge in meandering swoops of abandon before fixing on its final destination? And even if it launched into the skies in absolute devotion to its goal, where might that realm of magic be? Sheltered in some sequestered valley -- perched atop a brooding mountain -- surrounded by sweeping tides of sand -- lost beneath a glassy sea -- or hidden on the dark side of the moon? How distant was this place of wizardry and how long to reach it? Ten days, if memory served him well, since Gareth had sent the tawny homeward, his singular request secured to its leg, and where in bloody hell was the witch, much less her companion? Did neither of them mean to return? And if not, what of Neirin Maldwyn?

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After the owl's liberation, as Gareth had come to think of it, the siege of Neirin's body had fallen into a numbing regimen. The barbarous armies of venom and addiction had pulled back from their first assault to wait, but he was wary of their retreat, knowing such conquerors would not break camp so easily. Still, he abhorred the necessity of forcing any patient into submission with restraints, and he'd chosen to unbind the wizard's searching hands, though he kept them loosely bandaged against a return of their desperate violence.

Neirin had begun to surface from his nether state into opaque twilights of consciousness, flickering awake barely long enough to unknowingly accept careful offerings of water or honey gruel before sinking again beneath the dark waters of his oblivion. His wounds no longer seeped black blood and showed no angry evidence of infection. The mundane needs of his body had become the hourglass for an endless cycle of replacing linens, bathing and shifting his sparse weight, keeping him from harm whenever he struggled in the grip of his silent terrors. Gareth -- Tess, too -- stayed vigilant, but there had been no more slashing arcs of light, and in the torpid depths of Neirin's eyes, whatever agents of magic lurked there remained covert.

All of this, the seasoned healer knew well, could become the pattern of Neirin's life, a constant journey of monotony towards an unobtainable horizon. And the campaign to free his shackled mind from its dungeon of flesh and bone? Heartsick from isolation and conflict, Gareth could no longer carry that battle flag alone. Under a pall of resignation when the far-distant help he'd petitioned did not come, he'd altered the flame on his hearth to send a plume of vermilion-tinted smoke into the late-day sky, conveying a new message to the waiting Valley.

My patient lives, but help is still needed, and someone's company even more so.

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To lift his leaden head off his pillowing arms at that same eventide and see Delyth Morgan standing just inside his infirmary door had been the balm to ease Gareth's battered spirit. If the Lady chose to answer his prayers by sending Delyth, he could ask for no better ally.

"Good health to you, Gareth Islwyn, and let all here be blessed." It was so like her to remember how much he'd always loved the older ways of greeting. Few her age still knew such things and even fewer chose to honor them. "And how are you, then?"

Peering through the thin illumination of the bedside lamp, she studied him in calm appraisal, assessing the entirety and, he was certain, missing little, as he rose to welcome her. He was a bit unsteady on his feet from his dozing, but if she was startled by his disheveled appearance, she managed to keep her dismay well-masked. For days, he'd not taken any time at a mirror, but he was sure his face was a stony field of exhaustion, and if his eyes were anywhere near as sunken as they felt, he knew he must look more than a little mad. But Delyth had never been one to be easily rattled, and that, he noted approvingly, had apparently not changed.

"You've made a casting, I see," she observed mildly, nodding towards the curve of salt at her feet, citing the extraordinary with a comfortable familiarity.

"Ie," his smile was wan in reply, "there was the need."

"For protection, was it? You've not done that in quite a while," she responded, the lift of her straight, dark brows revealing only a measured curiosity as she shifted the cloth-draped tray she carried. "May I enter your circle or would you rather I come back another time?"

Hurriedly taking the heavy tray from her to place it on the floor, Gareth bent to trace a thumbnail passage through the fragile barrier between them. As Delyth stepped across, careful of smudging the outline, he gathered her into a warm embrace, his voice roughened by the sudden tightening of his throat.

"Ah, we've all missed you so, darlin' girl. I'd a notion it was you tending things for me these last few days, and then I spied you from the window, down by the paddock." He reached up to cradle her face between his care-worn hands. "It's a blessing you've come home to us just now."

"A small enough one, maybe," she whispered, as though the air in the room had somehow become too scarce for her to find enough breath for any other reply.

Rescuing her tray from the floor to set it on a nearby table, she folded back the cloth and began to lay out plates and utensils, making no comment when she glanced up and noticed Gareth closing his protections carefully behind her. With firm hands on his shoulders, she steered him to take a seat and was rewarded with his happy sigh when he realized what she'd brought.

"Brithyll and koushari, both? Delyth, you're truly the treasure of two worlds," he exclaimed with delight, breathing in the enticing scents of trout and lentils, lemon and cucumber.

"I've been watching to see if you'd finally have a mind to let me in here," she scolded with a grin and a slight shake of her head. "There's been nothing but fussing from thada about you keeping yourself closed off this long." Her expression slipped from wry to wistful. "Besides, you know ummi would have no peace if she ever believed I'd not looked after you the way she always did..."

Watching Delyth ladle food from a small clay crock, Gareth sighed, drifting into a sweet nostalgia, recalling Jendayi's darting cinnamon-scented hands and laughter-creped bright eyes. Too soon gone, their Jenny. If only she'd been spared just a little longer to see the fine woman her daughter had become...

Content that she was even there, Gareth studied Delyth with a healer's eye, noting that her strong frame carried a few more pounds than when he'd last seen her, but that she was still much thinner than he felt was good for her. There was strength, but a careful reserve, to the manner in which she moved -- an aftermath of her absence, he suspected. The body has its own language with which to speak of pain, and he was troubled by the silent oration that hers was delivering.

She'd let her heavy black hair fall loose around her shoulders in a wiry abundance, but whether out of freedom from the veil, or in its place, was still unclear. The high sweep of her cheekbones, the long straight nose with its delicate hook at the tip, the generous mouth -- those were her Theban mother's, a profile worthy of some proud pharaoh's concubine. Her milk-pale skin, flushed with high color, her amber eyes flecked with jade, the firm chin and determined set of her shoulders, the lyric in her speech -- those were her father's, testament to an undaunted Celtic nature. The traces of suffering and sorrows borne -- of battles hard-fought and peace newly won -- sculpting her face and faintly smudging the skin below her eyes -- those all seemed very much her own. Gareth knew what had taken her from Gwaun, and when she was ready, he trusted she would tell him what had brought her home again.

Pretending not to notice his quiet assessments, Delyth occupied herself with pouring a mug of tea and pushing a laden plate in front of him. "Thada caught those trout just at sunset and insisted you were the only one to have them," she teased him with a soft slap on his shoulder. "He says you're to know he's very annoyed that you've not been out to fish with him in nearly a month. Now, eat, and while you're at it, tell me who it is that's kept you such a prisoner for so damned long." She cocked her head in the direction of the alcove across the room.

"He's called Neirin... Neirin Maldwyn," Gareth answered from around a mouthful of food, keeping a guarded eye on Delyth as she quickly washed and towed her hands at the earthen basin before approaching the bed. "Poor lad's had quite the rough go, so mind yourself. Snake's venom laid him low... That and other things." At the mention of snakes, Delyth threw a perplexed glance in his direction. None of the little zigzagged adders that frequented the rocky outcroppings of the valley could have so serious an effect on a fully-grown man.

"He's been blinded, as well -- very recently, I'd say, though it's not clear just how -- and he's a tendency to fight a bit whenever he first comes round. Doesn't last very long, and he's usually only with us a few minutes at best. There's strength in his hands if he takes hold of you, though -- more than you'd think -- so it's that you need to keep your eye on." Gareth found himself relieved to be able to list the traits of his patient without needing to resort to detailed explanations. Delyth would take what he'd given her and fill in the rest on her own.

"Two fine names, and both of them the old Welsh? That's not heard so much, these days. He's from away, though, I'd think?" she puzzled softly. "And doesn't he have a last na..."

Her question fell silent as she stepped into the lamplight and first saw Gareth's patient. If she'd been asked to craft an image of the dream that had pulled her awake three days ago, weeping from a loss she could not name, no rendering could have done the task more justice than the face of the man before her. For a moment she closed her eyes, unwilling to witness such raw desolation on any living face, but she quickly opened them again. Not to look at him was cruel, as though she were denying him existence. He needed to be seen. It was his right.

"You said he's 'called'? Not 'is', but 'is called'... You named him, didn't you, Gareth?" She turned to see his reluctant nod, a spasm of movement, really, more than an open admission. "How did he come here? There's been no one new about that might have brought him -- not even a lorry or a rover around that we don't already know, and he certainly doesn't look as though he could have made it here on his own, especially being blind." She searched the healer's face, wondering why he abruptly lowered his eyes and seemed so reluctant to answer. Her old friend was usually so forthcoming, particularly if the welfare of someone under his care was in question.

"He looks flayed to the bone, but he's really not all that old, is he?" She read the man's face intently, seeing not so much the ravages of years passing but of a life hard-spent within them. "Gareth, his voice..." She hesitated for a moment, turning her face towards the shadows so that he was unable to see her expression. "Have you...? Has he spoken since he's been here?"

Gareth set his mug down noiselessly, concentrating on his hands as though they might betray him.

"Only a few words... but not spoken... Not aloud, anyway," he faltered to a whisper, an icy spear of memory piercing his chest. "There was an Accord -- twice -- between us... No one... He tried to tell me there was no one..."

"You've made a casting and a Joining." She turned to confront him, her expression keen with interest, now. "All for the same man? Gareth, what's this about?"

"Come sit here by me, Delyth, and I'll tell you what I know, or at least what's been said." He pushed back the chair opposite him. "We'll want a drop of the cymreig to keep us company, and you must promise not to think I've gone daft when I tell you that man is of the wizarding folk."

For a moment Delyth stood so still, he wondered if she'd even heard him. He was ready to call her name again, but held his breath when he saw her brush her fingers lightly along the sharp ridge of Neirin's nose and softly remark, "You do have something of Thoth about you, don't you?"

Gareth leaned forward, tensed and ready, blood pounding in his temples, awaiting some abrupt reaction to her unfamiliar touch. When there was none, he accepted with a twinge of shame that he was relieved. The Lady could fault him if she chose for his lapse in courage, but he simply wasn't up to doing battle with the darkness tonight, and he wasn't quite ready for Delyth to see evidence of what he was about to share with her.

As calmly as though he'd told her the weather would be rainy in the morning, she took her place at the table to pour two ample tumblers of whisky, her only response to his assertions of a wizard in the room being to raise her glass in solemn salute.

"Gareth, of all people, why would I be the one to think you daft? You know ummi taught me every story of the djinn she could remember, and you're the one showed me where to look and how to speak respectfully to the Tlwyth Teg, as soon as I was old enough to toddle along after you. Maybe even before that, I don't know. Besides, haven't I tended every standing stone and mound in this valley with you and thada? I've not forgotten and I've not lost my way, so tell me, please, and I'll make my own conclusions about your addled brain... and your blinded wizard. And who knows." She drained her glass. "Maybe our Tess and your little cat over there will listen as well, if your story's a good enough one."

"Cat? You're mistaken. There's no cat in here, my girl. Tess wouldn't abide it, would you, old pup?" Gareth smiled fondly, reaching down to ruffle the dense hair behind the dog's ears as she sprawled at his feet, hoping for a treat from his plate.

"Look again, old Healer, or I'll think it's your eyes that have gone dark," Delyth retorted. "She's just there, in the shadows beside the bed, watching us. She's not one of yours from the yard? She seems quite settled."

"There was no cat in here when I laid my head down to rest. I'd take an oath on it," Gareth rose to peer into the shadows near the bed, barely glimpsing golden eyes mirroring the lamplight. "Are you sure she didn't slip in before you, Delyth? I don't believe I know her, and you've always had a way with such." She shook her head. "Well, no matter," he chuckled, "the little thing seems content enough over there, so let's leave her be. No harm done, though I wonder where she's come from. Tess doesn't seem to mind her, though that's not the usual. Maybe my old girl's just glad for company, too, as much as I am."

The heat of the whisky igniting a tiny sun in her belly, Delyth sat in patient expectation, idly watching Gareth roam about the room. For a moment, he lingered near the alcove, having assured himself that his patient was settled deeply into herb-induced sleep. Eyeing the cat which had ventured out of the shadows to crouch just inside the pool of lamplight, he seemed to think better of making its acquaintance, stooping instead to select a long block of wood from the tidy pile of kindling on his hearth. Rummaging on a nearby shelf, he soon located a short-bladed knife and whet stone. A sure sign, Delyth knew, that he had a great deal on his mind if he intended to anchor his thoughts by carving while he talked.

When he sat back down, she pushed his glass of whisky across to him and watched him empty it in one sure swallow. The block of wood and the sharpened knife were in his hands soon after, and in a moment more, the tale began.

"I've said the man's a wizard. It's true. You asked if I named him. I did. I took what the witch who brought him told me and chose what seemed to suit him. I've made the Joining with him, twice, and either could have left me mad as a March hare if I'd not backed away soon enough." Gareth's attention never strayed from the long spiral of wood curling off the tip of his knife blade. "There's been times since they left him, I've thought it was the greater kindness if I helped him to die, but I couldn't bring myself to it, and I don't know that he's even able to make the crossing."

Delyth paled, shaken by such a testament from a Knowing One so dedicated to the sanctity of life's natural ebb and flow. Gareth did not meet her eyes as he continued. "There's something holding him between, an awful, ugly darkness..."

For the next hour, the old healer told his tale of the stalwart witch and her attending giant, of torturous potions and malevolent serpents, an entrusted wand and a dark-cursed war -- and Delyth listened. Only once did Gareth lay down his knife, his veined hands suddenly palsied and hesitant.

"I've told you that the man is cursed, but there's something I should show you, Delyth. Not as proof... There's no proof for any of this... But someone besides me should know what's kept hidden here, in case no one's able to come back for him."

When he retrieved the marble box from its concealment and removed the lid, she spent a long moment gazing at the stark black wand that lay secreted inside. Though it might have seemed a simple matter of caution, she felt no desire to touch the wand but covered it again, letting her fingers trace across the carvings of the box, lingering on the tiny snake and the slender flower that it encircled.

Drifting on the fog-damp air from the moors, raising another dream wraith to graze the edge of her memory, she imagined she heard a wild, fierce ululation, a bedouin wail of torment and loss that made her tremble. Looking to Gareth, seeing how abruptly he pulled the box out of her hands, his face the color of ashes, she knew. He'd heard as well.

"There is no one... That's what he told you?" Delyth forced herself to speak, wanting only to silence that forlorn echo of endless separation.

Gareth nodded, turning the wand box slowly in his hands, remembering every image he'd coaxed onto the blank surface of the marble in the course of almost twenty years.

"He's, indeed, the stranger in a strange land, Gareth, isn't he?" He thought she sounded disembodied, as though she'd left the room and only her voice remained to mark her presence.

He bowed his head, unwilling to answer, remembering the grasping, swirling void of the Joining where he'd been unable to summon any image at all.

"So, it's really not a matter of who he is. He's a refugee of war." Delyth sat hunched, the firelight playing other memories across her face. "I do believe you that there's lledrith here, but could you put that box away now? Please."

Gareth tore his focus from the box, and his heart leapt and crashed in the same moment as he watched Delyth stand, twisting her explosion of hair into a knot and pushing her sleeves to the elbow. She would stay and she would help him -- and she would never be the same.

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While Gareth returned the wand box to the sanctuary of the birch chest, Delyth's attention wandered to the cat which had jumped silently onto the bed to curl close beside Neirin, one paw outstretched to touch his bandaged throat. As the hours crept on towards dawn, the low mantra of her purring became the counter-point to the rest of Gareth's telling. Pouring herself another measure of cymreig to dispel the chill that had settled on her, Delyth continued to watch the cat and was not surprised to find that she was being watched as well.

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"I've asked them to come, lad. I'd look you straight in the eye and swear to it if I thought you could see me, even a little. Seems damn near forever since I sent that owl back." Gareth scowled as he turned from the open window where he'd stood searching the outline of the verdant hills for some hint of unfamiliar movement, straining to hear the whip-crack of magical arrival.

"I thought at least your Hagrid would check on you, even if the professor... Minerva... couldn't," he muttered, leaning across the bed, straightening tangled bedclothes with a grunt of frustration and effort. "Where do you suppose they've got themselves off to? That war of yours maybe wasn't quite so finished as they thought, or is this more the 'out of sight, out of mind' sort of thing? Either way, it's a pity for you."

Shaking his head at his own disgruntled speculations, the old healer laid his calloused fingers against the pulse of Neirin's neck above the pitted wounds slowly scarring from the cruelty of fangs. Far better today, more's the blessing -- heart beating in steady cadence, skin not scalding with heat, breathing no longer ragged, hands quiet at his sides as he slept -- this might yet be a good day after all.

"Still keeping any comments to himself, is he?" Delyth asked from behind the half-open door of the cupboard where she'd just stowed a pile of clean linens. "We can always hope he's just wanting to chat with herself, there, when we're not taking any notice." Her tone was bantering enough, but the pensive look on her face spoke differently.

Surveying the freshened room with a small nod of satisfaction, she joined Gareth at the window, easing one arm around his slumping shoulders. With a firm hand she pushed back the wisps of grizzled hair trailing into his face, concern tracing tiny tributaries of worry across the smooth delta of her wide brow.

"Anwyldd chyfaill, you look about as spent as I've ever seen you. Haven't I already said this is wearing on you far too much? Will you listen to me, please, and take a real rest?" she urged, giving him a quick squeeze. Gareth shook his head, moving away from her to busy himself with straightening the already tidy ranks of jars and bottles on the bedside table. "No." Her frown followed him. "That's really not the right answer." Stepping around the end of the bed to face him, she blocked his path, reaching to capture his fidgeting hands.

"You're being a bit stubborn about this, you know, and it doesn't suit you." Though she sounded vexed, he could see the fog of fear clouding her eyes. "You, my friend, have to stay out of this room for more than an hour, or you'll be no use to any of us, least of all yourself." Cutting off his protest with a lift of her chin, she began to angle him out of the alcove and towards the door that opened onto the hallway.

"You've said yourself, he's come through the fever well enough, and right now he's calmer than he's been since... well, at least since I've been here. I'll handle whatever's needed just fine, you know that, but I'd rather not have to be nurse to both of you. Tess and our friend, there, aren't leaving, I'm sure of it, so I'll have more than enough company, if that's your worry."

She was afraid for him -- he knew that -- afraid that perhaps he was too old, that his health -- or his wits -- would fail him.

"Go visit your bees for a while; they miss you -- or better yet, go to your bed and get some proper sleep." Delyth's eyes softened with affection. "Off with you, now. I'll not want to see you for at least the four hours, and five would be better." Releasing his hands from one last gentle tug, she leaned in to kiss him lightly on his stubbled cheek.

He was afraid for her, too, but she'd already know that. She couldn't help but know if he so much as said a word.

Friend, she'd said? What on earth... did she mean to say Neirin? Reluctant to leave her alone and puzzled by her odd remark, Gareth stood fisting the grit of toil and tedium from his eyes. No, of course not Neirin. She meant the cat, but that made little sense. Of course the cat would stay... Such a fierce devotion...

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"Arhosa! Look what you've done, little djinn. You've got him bleeding again and a lot this time... Why do you keep on with this?"

The open vial of sandalwood oil slipped from Delyth's fingers, shattering against the side of the porcelain cup in her other hand, splashing milk and oil across the fresh bed sheets, as the dregs from the broken vessels flooded the room with rich scent. With one hand she snatched up a towel to sop up the mess, and with the other tried to banish the cat from the bed. The work of an hour destroyed in a minute, just when all was peaceful.

Her compromise with Gareth had been working well, once they'd reached a stalemate they could both accept -- four hour shifts, equally shared within the span of daylight. If it was his time away, he was to leave the infirmary, tend his hives, visit his greenhouse, read, eat, sleep for at least half the time, and he was not to find some random excuse to come back and hover. She, in turn, was to keep Tess near her, leave the door open and the circle closed, and be ready to raise the dead with her shouts if anything the least bit out of the ordinary occurred. The hours between moonrise and sunrise, they would remain inside the room together, keeping watch over Neirin -- and each other.

Their odd agreement with the cat, on the other hand, had proven considerably more one-sided, her terms having been clearly defined by a judicial use of her claws. They were evidently free to care for Neirin in any way necessary, without interference, but they were not to hinder her attentions to him -- and they were not to touch the mark on his left arm.

Delyth had first noticed the thing in the clear light of their first morning. Gareth had quietly cleaned away the detritus of dignity left by a helpless body at the end of a long night, while she'd bundled off the soiled sheets and prepared a simple breakfast. When she'd hurried back, the old healer had been ready enough for the aid of her strong back. Turning and settling an unresponsive patient was never an easy task, even if he was as thin as a rake.

From the corner of her eye, as she moved to the far side of the bed, she'd noticed the cat, poised near the headboard, pedestaled on tightly-tucked paws and tail, with her back perfectly erect. Nothing moved, not her coin-bright eyes, not a single black or silver hair, not one rapier-straight whisker. When Delyth looked across at Gareth, he'd only shrugged.

"There was no shooing her out of here this morning, not a bit of it. Wouldn't budge and kept looking back and forth, from him to me, sizing up both of us, I expect. There's a little bauble at her neck, so she's not a wild one."

Nested deep in the tabby's fur, Delyth caught a wink of sunlight and a glint of silver. Who would give a cat such a lovely trinket to wear and then leave her to roam about the countryside? Could she belong to this man whose name was his out of need and kindness only? He didn't look the sort to have a devoted companion.

Careful not to move too suddenly, her feet well planted, Delyth slid her arms under Neirin's body, pulling him towards her before gently rolling him onto his side, facing away from her. Bolstering his narrow back with pillows to hold him steady, she watched the cat shift silently to settle closer to him.

As she reached across to place another pillow, his left arm, which had been stretched along the length of his hip, slid down to rest against the sheets, the palm of his bandaged hand turned upwards, fingers cupped like a leper's begging bowl. For a moment she stood staring, the random image of a bruised and broken lotus flitting through her thoughts, but then her gaze traveled further up his arm and stopped.

She must have gasped, or perhaps she'd held her breath or bit down hard on her lip. Maybe, she'd even cried out. She wasn't quite sure, but she would always remember Gareth's voice in that moment, tight with revulsion and dread.

"Be careful, Delyth. As I told you -- an awful, ugly darkness. He's carried that mark for years, I'd say, and it looks to have faded some, at least on the surface. Maybe not so much under the skin, though. It's why I keep his hands wrapped, so he won't gouge and tear at it. He's tried... More than once."

She'd wanted to lift that arm, to turn it over, telling herself that it must be painful having it twisted so. Nothing to do, she'd reasoned, with not wanting to see the banner of dark death burnt into it. She should simply move it, tuck the pillow under for support, make their patient more comfortable, but when she'd cupped her hand around the elbow, the tips of her fingers grazing along the scar, her hand was immediately swatted away by a needle-clawed paw and a warning hiss.

"Damn it all, what was that about?" She pulled back from the shock of the stinging scratch.

"Let it be, Delyth. It's clear enough, she doesn't want you to touch that brand," Gareth's voice was insistent. "I've not, the whole time's he's been here, except with a flannel and never with my bare hands. Didn't care to risk it. See... what she's up to...?"

Unsheathed forepaws pressed against the scar -- kneading, prodding, leaving tiny scratches -- the cat began to softly yowl, her war song low and threatening in the air, her golden eyes narrowed, focused on her attack.

"She'll hurt him," Delyth protested, but Gareth only shook his head.

"She means somehow to call him back, I think. For now, at least, we'll leave her to it. She's no fondness for the thing, that's plain enough."

"I've a feeling she might fight us tooth and claw if we tried to move her, so perhaps you're right. Cats have always kept the oldest magic for themselves, or so ummi used to say. Well, then, da cath, what name should we give you" Delyth puzzled, "since we seem to do well with choosing names around here?" A twitch of a smile from Gareth told her the point was taken. "Shall we call you Maftet, little slayer? That might please you, do you think?"

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And so, their agreements had held, the compromises had been maintained, until now.

Not caring at that moment whether things were set in magic or not, Delyth surveyed the damage done. The brisk spring breeze from the window had carried off most of the cloud of scent, but there were still wet sheets and towels to deal with, a floor to mop, and a sedated man with rivulets of blood sluicing down his arm to stain his bandaged hand.

And the cat, as motionless as well water -- murmuring her feline wisdoms into the wizard's ear.

"Be careful of his hands, don't touch his arm, Maftet has her own magic'. Well, maybe you do, but you've done some real damage here and I can't help if I'm expected to handle the man like a canopic," Delyth fumed, feeling the need to challenge the unblinking scrutiny of those golden eyes. "I'll deal with your work first, shall I? Gareth should be here in a minute to help me with the rest. You'll supervise, no doubt?"

Settling herself on the edge of the bed, she leaned across to open the drawer of the bed table, pushing aside a small worn pouch and an oblong box that looked as if it were made of old bronze, searching for scissors. Finding a small pair tucked in one corner, she bent over Neirin, cradling his hand in her lap as she began to cut away the bloodied gauze.

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The passage of time is only a conjuror's trick, a distortion of reality An hour can vanish in a heartbeat, a moment can seek the boundaries of eternity.

With a flourish, time delivered Delyth's eternal moment.

A crack sharp as pistol fire, rising from the yard below.

Maftet bolting from Neirin's side like a shot with Tess barking pell-mell behind, eager to give chase.

Gareth's footsteps echoing in the hallway, his anxious voice demanding answers for the noise. The vexed thought flashing through Delyth's mind that wasn't it just the fine thing for the cat to start a mess and then desert her post.

And then... the other sound.

Words struggling to form on fever-blighted lips, the voice a scrap of shredded silk, slashed by bloodied swords.

"Tell... me... where..."

Her wrist grappled by the pale shards in her lap. Plunging headlong into a firmament of midnight eyes, their suns extinguished.

"Is this... night? I am... cold..."

Shafts of bright mid-day, rich with heat, slanting from the open window straight into unblinking eyes.

Her answer -- scarcely breathing.

"No... This is not night. Safe... This is safe... This is the day..."

The face of Thoth, black ibis feathers frenzied on the pillow -- clutching talons tearing tiny rubies from her palm to fall crimson on the blankets -- a whisper of dust in her ears, pleading for the light -- a scream of pewter in her mind, raging in the darkness.

"TELL ME WHERE I AM... TELL ME WHERE... My Lord... you have done... NO... I beg you let me... Let me go... TELL... ME... WHERE I... AM..."

A mountain of wood smoke and hay, towering beside her, speaking in soft thunder, lifting the talons with massive hands, wrapping the ibis in oak and warm rain...

"Ah... now... yeh can't be doin' that, 'ol dragon, yeh can't..."

Gareth, smoothing black feathers into calm -- singing strong and sweet.

"Holl amrantau'r sêr ddywedant -- Ar hyd y nos... As I to thee, Neirin. Hust, now, hust."

"VOICE... WHERE... is... voice..."

A woman -- clothed in royal robes, sun and silver at her throat -- bending to whisper to the ibis.

"I am sworn..."

Thoth, falling through the stars, black feathers trailing, wrapped in oak and rain, searching for the whisperer, calling... calling...

"VOICE... TELL ME WHERE... Tell me... Tell... me... where I... am..."

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Safe in the conjuror's pocket, time resumed it's proper pace.

With silence shrieking in her ears, dreaming of a cage of stars, Delyth Morgan sank into the waiting arms of the witch.

Chapter Nine: They Shall Fight

Chapter 9 of 14

"Blood magic moves into the shadow realm of the Dark Arts... Others can call him in kinder ways, but this, I've done, and I'll live with it. He'd expect no less of me."

Chapter Nine: They Shall Fight

Holy places were familiar to Gareth Islwyn. He had knelt in endless naves at vespers, adrift on a current of plainsong, and blessed his hands in marble fonts. His prayers had spiraled towards paradise on the athaan of the muezzin, and he had bowed before the Western Wall in reverence of the singular Will. The lush teeming of Ranganatha's deities had been a marvel to his eyes, and the waters of the Ganges had set him to rejoicing. Sakya's Buddha had regarded him with benevolent indifference, and solemn kannushi had welcomed him at torii gates. Still, of all these testaments of mortal devotion to the Eternal, he considered no temple so sacred as the high hills of Gwaun and no altar more beckoning than the henge of Myrddin's Seat.

The climb to the summit had been difficult, but there had been a gradual calming in it, as well. Laboring for gulps of the pollen-dusted air, Gareth willed his heart to a quieter pace. Swiping sweat-damp hair away from his forehead, he cast his gaze down the long moraine that was as gullied as his own face. Thankful that he'd managed some small degree of foresight, he tipped up his canteen to swallow long draughts of spring water. He'd brought a bit of food as well, but that could wait for now. A little pang of hunger in his belly wouldn't hurt him. If anything, it might serve to sharpen his attentions.

Far below, his tower reigned gray and proud as a dowager queen, the encircling birches bending in attendance as her waiting maids. An equine chorus lifted on the wind, and shading his eyes, he could see Delyth surrounded by the cobs in the paddock. A sun-flash of white reflected from her bandaged hand as she stood brushing down a chestnut mare, heavy with foal. She hadn't wanted to climb with him to the Seat, silently shaking her head when he'd asked. He'd felt the loss of her in that moment, but he really couldn't fault her for wanting only the peace of caring for the ponies.

As though visiting a gathering of old comrades, Gareth entered the ring of standing stones that crowned the hill. Most likely some long-departed Knowing Ones had

positioned them high above the valley floor in petition to the Guardians, or perhaps the earth had simply shrugged in her sleep one day and left them there. Ages ago, he had accepted them simply as his grounding stones.

Tucking a token of honeycomb into the weathered niche atop the largest, he settled familiarly into the shallow depression at its base. If given the choice, he'd always favored sitting cross-legged on the ground, and at his age, he had to admit there was a certain satisfaction in knowing he still could. Often enough these days, some well-meaning young one, eager to be helpful, would try to steer him towards a seat more seemly for a man of his years. Grateful for the stone's radiant heat at his back, he closed his eyes, acknowledging the dull ache of his bones and allowing them the ease of the cushioning dirt and grass beneath him.

Rummaging the inside pocket of his coat, he found his arawd paderau, sliding them through his fingers, their smooth and heavy weight a comfort to his hands. Beads of indigo tourmaline and black falcon's eye -- an empath's rosary -- three and three repeating, spaced with copper runes -- clicking softly one by one through his prayers, sending the breath of his meditations to the Other World, attesting to far deeper aches needing to be comforted.

"Guardians of the Gates Between, accept my prayers. Believing that You will hear me and trusting that You will answer, I wait for guidance."

What an unfathomable day of circumstance and occurrence, kin to some ominous tale that Taliesin might have sung in epic stanzas.

"Raphael of the Eastern Tower, send the Winds of Heaven to lift my fears and make my steps as light as breath."

Neirin Maldwyn had found his voice and made it heard -- contorted ravings full of dark and desperate mystery -- but he was nearer to wakened than he'd been in weeks. For whatever reason, through some fragile mercy, the wizard meant to live -- fought for it from whatever hellish keep still held him.

"Mihangel of the Southern Tower, Keeper of all Flames, banish the willful pride and anger that pursue me."

Delyth had heard and fallen into the wizard's voice and hadn't pulled away from him, even while he'd gouged her hand so cruelly that it bled in a lattice of bright crimson. Heaven's blessing, it was, that Hagrid had appeared to pry those drowning fingers from her. Five small scars would remain to mark her courage, crescent moons that would neither wax nor wane.

"Gabriel of the Western Tower, send gentle rains to sooth my sorrow."

A blessing, too, that he'd found enough of his own voice to make himself heard -- enough at least for his lulling-song to counter the wizard's whispered screams of 'Tell me... tell me where I am...'

"Uriel, who is the Rock, strengthen me through all adversities."

Those ragged muted screams -- rasped over and over again, in frenzied mantra -- a raging supplication, an invocation of Joinings made on the crumbling edges of a bridged abyss.

"Ceridwen of the cauldron, temper my arrogance with humility and sustain me in wisdom."

And Minerva McGonagall -- the witch -- sweeping like vengeance into the room, bending to whisper in the wizard's ear -- Maftet's bauble flashing flame-bright at her throat, the air behind her not cracked asunder by thunder clap but heavy with its absence.

"Gwydion who walks among the stars, grant me understanding of this journey."

All this while -- all these numbing days and guarded nights -- the cat -- the fierce and clever little serpent slayer -- hissing her battle threat, yowling in discord and purring deep in her throat -- fixed on her clawing and kneading, demanding the life's blood from a death scar. Was she the witch, then, called to come? Always present, but never revealed -- giving no answers, uncovering no secrets? Watching, assessing -- and biding her time? If indeed, she was the witch transfigured, why had she stayed hidden and apart from them, knowing, all too well, how greatly she was needed?

"Brigid, Lady Mother, direct my path and hold me faithful to Your service. Bright and Blessed One, my doubts consume me. If I lose my way, how am I to heal another?"

The witch's only answer to the accusations spilling from his eyes had been a swift and harsh refusal.

"Do not ask me, Healer."

His thumb tracing the oval triskele that finished the beads, Gareth winced, still tasting the gall of the words he'd flung in retort, pulling a shivering Delyth tighter into his arms as the witch turned her back to them.

"So, that's the way of things with you, then? Keep still and know my place? Ie, you see to what's yours, then, ddewines, and I'll tend to mine."

He'd offered no "da" against the bitterness of his words, allowing her only his recognition of her presence with no honoring of her true nature or intent, for how could he presume to know them?

When Hagrid had ventured a puzzled word of truce, she'd scowled him into silence.

"Enough, Hagrid. Don't interfere."

Looping his beads over his wrist, leaving the triskele warm in his palm, Gareth rested his upturned hands on his knees and began to measure his breath into slowing waves of rhythm. A wisp of breeze wandered across his brow and the hum of bees chanted in his ears. As the sun made its deliberate passage through a sky curtained with mares' tails, he waited -- and in due time, he slipped Between to dream -- and in his dream, he saw.

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Not especially tall, the man -- spare and straight in his pearl gray robes -- seated on a great swelling of rock in a sea of sighing grass.

Moonlight flooding over the man, the rock, the grasses -- a tide of silver -- breaking, far to the West, against a battlement of soaring cliffs, shrouded in bier-black clouds.

Old as earth and sky, the man with hair and beard as white as spider-silk and eyes as blue as larkspur. Gareth knew these eyes. He had dreamed them days ago, and here -- for one brief moment -- their book of sorrows lay open to be read.

And weary with the weight of far too many memories, there was a voice that seemed as though it wished to be done with speaking.

"Knowing One, as a small kindness, I would like for you to bring a message."

"Brudiwr, what is your name?" Gareth whispered. "I have seen you -- in another vision -- before this Maldwyn came."

The old man looked away, back towards the menacing horizon.

"Albus' does as well as any other, I suppose. No matter. If you would, tell his Keepers that I will stand the Watch and I will be their Giver's cloak."

Turning in a slow circle, as the mists of dream began to blur his sight, Gareth could see no other man or beast.

"Do you cloak the Maldwyn, brudiwr? I see only you."

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A chill of shadow fell across his face, and with a slow unraveling of his visioning, Gareth opened his eyes to meet the unwavering gaze of the witch McGonagall.

With a clipped nod, she settled herself on the ground a few feet from him, her legs stretched in front of her. Some part of Gareth's awareness registered that she was not dressed in robes but in brown whipcord trousers and a buttoned chambray shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbow. A pair of well-worn althbergs, a heavy rucksack, and a stout kebbie stick all added to the illusion of a competent Scotswoman trekking the hills of Gwaun. His expression must have spoken more than he wished, since she looked over at him with a flash of challenge in her eye.

"Disappointed that I've not worn a witch's robes, Healer Islwyn? Not even a pointed hat? I thought perhaps your good neighbors, few as they are -- and you as well -- might find me a bit more -- approachable -- if I didn't look quite so out of place." She let her head fall back, watching the clouds drifting overhead. "I expect they'll have enough to wonder about if they catch sight of Hagrid," she sighed, "not to mention -- Neirin -- when he's well enough to come out of doors."

Gareth remained silent, running his beads through his fingers one by one, refusing to acknowledge that he'd heard her. Without warning, the dirt around him rose in a small whirlwind that peppered him with clods of earth and grass, forcing him to look up. Minerva sat as before, but with her wand in her hand and an expression of weary annoyance playing across her face.

"We can continue with this useless impasse or we can discuss it. I've done what's necessary," she paused, "but I'm well aware that you've been left without even half of what you've needed. I'll ask you to hear me out, but the offer still holds. We'll take him from here, with our eternal gratitude for your kindness, if that's what you wish."

"Kindness be damned, and you with it."

Gareth's words came quietly, and in their softness there was rage. He gripped his paradue so tightly he could feel the beads burrowing into his palm. A muscle along Minerva's jaw twitched and her shoulders straightened as though ready to do battle, but she did not respond.

"Was it you, for how bloody long, and you never showed yourself? I stood like some doddering fool and blathered for days to that pitiful blighter that you'd come, you wouldn't abandon us -- you'd know how to reach him -- and you were there right along, watching me do it?"

The volume of Gareth's voice began to rise as he gained footing on the ascent of his anger.

"The poor bastard's been an open wound of piss and vomit and fever -- me trying to hold him together -- his magic all wild and terrible around him -- and were you pleased, with your damn bloody claws and those god-forsaken sounds you made? The shame's mine that I stood by and let you anywhere near him. Damn fool, I am... I thought maybe the cat'd been sent... by you... like the owl... because you couldn't come. There's the laugh..."

Minerva shifted her weight, still silent. Clutching his rosary, Gareth plunged ahead, words pouring from him, as though some deep bulwark of resolve had finally given way.

"He's sodding bloody cursed and blinded, witch, and you couldn't see your way to tell me the truth of that? Cursed as awful as the reeking maw of hell and no sight to help him find his way -- and you didn't have anything to say? Nothing? I wonder, if you'd have shown yourself if I'd truly moved to help him die? A pretty prospect, that, and it wouldn't have done him any good, he's cursed so foul."

Minerva's hands tightened around her wand as Gareth's torrent of rage pooled into despair.

"And my Delyth, she's part of this, now, Brigid forgive me. I should never have let her through the circle but I was dead weary and lonely and sorry for it. My sense was near gone, I'd been in there with him so long. It's my own selfishness that let her in and now your wizard's marked her and she's heard his voice..."

The catharsis of anger and despair that swept through Gareth left him gasping, and it was a long moment before he realized his face was wet and that he was shuddering with unspent sobs. Longer still until he surfaced to a weight on his shoulder and opened his eyes. Minerva was beside him, but her grip was far from gentle.

"Bloody well cursed and blinded. Most direct of you to make that so apparent to me, Healer. Things you've learned in a few days about a stranger, and because you're a good man, an honest man, these things offend you? Someone you love is involved and that frightens you -- makes you angry? Your empathy weighs heavily?"

The setting sun reflected from the lenses of her spectacles, and Gareth could not see her eyes.

"Here's a truth, then, for you," she hissed. "I learned these things, as well, while I was standing in the ruins of my home. Most likely, you'd realized them before I was even told. Someone I love is involved -- in fact, he has his hands in all of this." An ugly gash of pain slashed across her strong face. "And here's another truth, just to be clear. That poor blighter of an open wound is a man I've known since he was still a boy in my classroom, and you've no idea how frightened and angry I am for him. I've dealt with the sodding maw of hell more than half my life, and that's far longer than you might care to guess. Don't assume you know my heart."

The grip on his shoulder lessened a bit, but Minerva still held tight. She paled, even with the flush of sunset on her face, and Gareth realized she meant to steady herself.

"Healer Islwyn, I'll only ask your forgiveness once for any of this, and whether you give it is up to you." Her voice was husky and tight. "Neirin's forgiveness is going to have to wait, and I doubt he'll give it to me, but I'll accept that. Will you allow me to tell you what you should know, or shall I instruct Hagrid that we are leaving?"

Gareth turned his head and looked away, his eyes searching the gathering dusk for the long silhouette of his tower far below. Lifting her hand from his shoulder, Minerva leveraged herself to settle beside him against the cooling rock.

"Trust me in this, at least. Delyth has gone in to rest. She's safe with Hagrid there. Full of something extraordinary, isn't she, that young woman? I think you have some things to tell me, also -- when you're ready. She's a daughter?"

Gareth shook his head.

"As I said," Minerva gravely nodded, "when you're ready. Neirin is deep asleep. I've made sure of it, and Hagrid is right beside him, should he wake again." She sighed, remorseful. "My brave friend... I did not treat him well, today, but his great heart is so kind, he doesn't take offense. Never doubt, Healer, all the ranks of Hades could storm your tower, and Hagrid wouldn't budge."

As the sun sank lower, the air stirred into a stronger breeze, fresh with the scent of pending rain. Tugging her rucksack closer, Minerva pulled out a battered kettle, a tin of tea, and two enameled cups.

"Did you bring anything besides water when you came up here?" she asked, shaking the canteen. "I suspect neither of us has tucked in much today," she carefully prodded, a frown pulling at the corners of her mouth. "A wee fire would do to make the tea and warm us."

Still silent, Gareth delved into the inside pockets of his coat to bring out several small wrapped parcels -- chunks of y fenni, two lamb and leek sausages, and a small loaf of bara brith. Ashamed of his unbridled outburst, he avoided lifting his eyes until a tongue of bright flame caught his attention. Glancing up, he saw a tidy fire flickering, surrounded by small stones with the kettle set to boil. Minerva nodded with the satisfaction that she'd jarred him from his withdrawal enough that he would look at her.

"It's not always the great and grand that magic achieves," she said, reaching for the packets to open and divide them fairly. "Often enough, it's the smallest things as well, like flicking a wand to start the fire to sit by with a friend or two." Her voice cracked, and she swallowed hard, her anguish tangible in the tremor of her hands. Gareth

reached instinctively to comfort but stopped short of touching her, his own emotions still too raw.

"While you and Delyth worked so hard to heal him..." Minerva spoke so softly the breeze almost carried her words past him, "while you fought so tirelessly, I was hard at work, as well -- torturing him."

Gareth's chest tightened, as though struck by a brutal fist, but seeing the acceptance of finality in her bright eyes, he gripped her arm.

"Tell me, da ddwines -- all of it -- and I'll listen."

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With Myrddin's Seat in apex between sun and moon, earth and sky, Minerva began her explanations. She spoke of four Founders and their noble Houses, of one Headmaster keeping his scales of benevolence and manipulation in precarious balance. The Mark of terrible fealty and the scar of a woman's devotion, a young man's fated sacrifice and a spy's bitter atonement, all were milestones of her revelations. The aspect of Tom Riddle and his deathly faithful left Gareth pondering on dark angels lost to heaven, fallen from heights not realized and never meant to be attained.

To hide me, and the dark intent I bring.

O foul descent! that I who erst contended

With Gods to sit the highest, am now constrained

Into a Beast, and mixt with bestial slime...

Minerva was a valiant bard, sparing nothing of herself, neither her triumphs nor her failings. For the most part, Gareth chose to interrupt only for a point of clarity, keeping balance as he always did, with his carver's blade and a piece of wood in his hands. Observing the truths in the witch's words, he saw how she faltered when she spoke of fallen comrades and absent friends. When the words "coward" and "murderer" were finally voiced, he saw her flinch and grasp her wand more tightly. True to his Healer's nature, he carefully probed her wounds, his questions serving as the lancet.

"Da ddwines," Gareth urged, "you said while Delyth and I were tending to Neirin, you were torturing him. Cruelty serves no purpose, and it's not in your nature. I've never questioned that, so I need to know your meaning."

For a moment, Minerva lowered her eyes and studied the fire. When she lifted her head, her face was fierce with flame.

"Battles aren't often won by kindness. I have been at war, and with all my heart, I wanted to be done. But Neirin is lost to us unless I continue to fight.

"There's no denying that he willingly took Riddle's Mark, but he soon grew to despise his choice. The snake, the Mark, and Harry's eyes. Raw memories -- the ones closest to the surface."

Minerva hesitated, and Gareth noticed her hand creeping to touch the crystal hanging at her throat, as though assuring herself it was still in place.

"I've told you, now, of our pensieves and how we use them. Every creature's life blood is a powerful pensieve -- it holds memories and instincts, even the ones we want most to forget. The Mark remains, at least its scar. I've made it bleed and I've called up the memories of how it tortures him. I've summoned his defiance of it, as well, invoked his pain so that he will fight. Blood magic moves into the shadow realm of the Dark Arts, and I've crossed that border, now. Others can call him in kinder ways, but this, I've done, and I'll live with it. He'd expect no less of me."

"This is why you stayed hidden from us?" the Healer asked.

"I've said I'd ask forgiveness only once, but you should know that my decision had nothing to do with your worthiness to know. What I've done, Healer, is not something easily accomplished or readily acknowledged," she answered. "When I received your message, I came quickly, just as you asked, but my plan was already taking shape." With a soft grunt of stiffness, she rose to pace the confines of the circle.

"It was easier to return as a cat so that I could judge how things were, without being questioned or needing to make explanations. You'd not have agreed to what I intended. I could see you'd done so well, and Delyth seemed such a comfort to you, so I chose to have matters stay on their same course. There was greater focus if I remained a cat -- I could summon the most primal magic to sustain me."

Minerva stopped her prowling to stand motionless, the firelight paling her features in a mosaic of light and shadow. "You mustn't doubt your gifts. Neirin is alive and likely to heal -- at least in body -- and the only magic in that is yours. Credit where it's due, I'd say."

Off to the West, dark clouds portended storms over the open sea, and remembering, Gareth pushed himself to stand.

"Minerva, I've heard you. I've listened, and though I won't claim to understand all you've done, I'm beginning to see. Now, you need to hear me. Will you?"

She nodded, seeing a distant place deep within his eyes.

"I came up here to pray for guidance, especially now that Delyth's part of this. I dreamed, Minerva, a vision full of images, like something out of the old tales. There was a man -- older than me or what I'd ever hope to reach... He said... the Keepers should hear that he would stand the Watch and be their Giver's cloak. He said his name was..."

As she listened, Minerva had begun to gather the remnants of their meager supper, but she halted in rigid attention as she sharply interjected, "Albus... Albus means to be the cloak and finally guard his dagger? Sweet Circe, keep us from the irony of that."

Seeing the bewilderment on Gareth's face, she huffed a mirthless laugh. "I'm sorry, Gareth, but that's a little hard to hear. Neirin, you see -- he was always the dagger of their intrigues and in the end, as I've told you, Albus Dumbledore didn't cloak him very well. Where is he keeping this Watch, could you tell?"

"Ie, and some of it I knew from the Joinings -- your Albus watches the borders of the void where your Maldwyn is lost."

Pressing a tight fist to her chest, Minerva demanded, "He was there, then, beside him?"

"Not beside him in the darkness, but near as he could go to him, I think," Gareth answered, "in a colorless meadow that rolls like the sea. The place where I walked in my Joining, you could see it, far to the horizon. Your old wizard was sitting with moonlight all around him, waiting. He wanted it known he was there and that he wouldn't leave the place," he smiled gently, "and I remember believing he could speak in any tongue needed to be understood but that he was weary with talking."

"That doesn't surprise me, but if the old lion still has his claws out, I'm glad to know it. At least he'll not hide himself beyond the Veil and perhaps he'll do some good." Minerva smiled at Gareth's puzzlement, more openly than he'd ever seen her do. "Never mind, there's still a great deal you'll have to learn about our life. I'm forsaking the oldest tenets of magic, but you being a rather exceptional Knowing One, I'll stand by my choices. Even so, pray Hecate we're not discovered. I'd rather not enlighten you on the terrors of Azkaban. Shall we walk down, then, Gareth?"

Noticing his confusion, Minerva genuinely laughed, and Gareth found himself more than happy to hear it.

"An early ramble never did anyone harm, particularly if you're a bit stiff from a night outdoors. For the love of heaven, did you think wizard folk always pop in and out of the

scenery? You'll find most witches and wizards are avid walkers, actually," she continued, settling the rucksack over her shoulders. "Tends to clear the mind. Sev... several times each season, Neirin and I would trek the hills near Hogwarts. All I could do to keep up with those impossibly long legs..." Abruptly, she bent to retrieve her kebbie, hiding her face, and Gareth made sure to keep his eyes turned elsewhere.

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By the time they'd reached the base of Myrddin's Seat, the mists of morning were only tattered scarves flung across the ground. The rain that had fallen as they'd climbed down had left the air rich with the scent of turned earth. Rocks and grass carried the sheen of burnished metal. Leaves shivered themselves free of the weight of raindrops, and in the paddock, the horses mimicked them, flinging arcs of water from their manes. From her vigil atop a low stone wall, Tess gave her report of "all's well" with a single bark as a troop of finches shrilled in counterpoint.

As they passed the bee yard, Gareth maneuvered himself with a smart step to stand in front of Minerva, hinting at a bow and extending his open hand. Perched on his palm was a small carving -- the perfect rendering of a tabby, its markings matching the grain of the wood, the "M" of its kind between the eyes. Minerva stood very still before reaching to take it. In that moment, with the dampness wisping her hair into tiny curls at her temples, Gareth could imagine the tall and graceful girl she must have been so long ago, before she'd ever gone to war.

"Ah, I thank you for this, Gareth, more than you know," she said, running her slender fingers over the rough and smooth of the little carving. "When I was close beside Neirin, I could see that you were carving. I would watch you and it helped me. It was possible to keep strong if something beautiful could be made even while I was calling so much pain. Perhaps you kept me from going too far into the darkness after him."

"Whether that's true, I can't say," he answered. "I trusted you'd come, but when you hadn't, I began to believe you might never. When you... When the cat came, I took it as a blessing. I imagined no good creature would enter that room, not if the curse was going to win out. But I will tell you," he chuckled, "this was meant to be 'for you' if you did come... not 'of you' being already here. Still, it occupied my hands and mind, so perhaps it kept me from the dark as well."

Their slow meander across the yards had brought them near the paddock. The whickers of sleepy horses greeted them, the expectant mare laying her head across Gareth's shoulder with a sigh. Minerva slid her hand gently under the heavy mane and idly began to comb her fingers through the course hairs.

"You'd be one of these Keepers?" Gareth gently asked. "I saw you whisper something to Neirin right before Delyth started to fall. Was that what you wanted him to hear?"

Minerva nodded.

"Yes. I told him I am sworn. I needed him to somehow know that but I wanted him to hear it in my voice -- not the cat's."

"And Hagrid," Gareth continued. "Is he sworn, as well?"

"Hagrid, as well -- especially Hagrid."

Seeing the hint of a laugh in her eyes, he wondered where the humor in that might be, but thought perhaps he'd best leave the question unasked. They stood quiet for the moment, allowing the balance between them to settle. When the mare wandered away, Gareth offered his arm.

"Would you walk with me a bit further on? I've something I'd like your help with."

"Of course," Minerva answered, lightly resting her hand at his elbow.

They soon reached the area behind the barn where manure from the stalls and paddock was heaped. Reaching for a pitchfork, Gareth began to fork away the edge of the pile, while Minerva waited nearby, her arched brows questioning his purpose. Under the manure were assorted lengths of wood, and from these, Gareth chose several long pieces to place on the ground at Minerva's feet.

"The warmth cures the wood slowly so it doesn't split or twist. It's an old carvers' trick, and the smell soon fades. The black -- that's hawthorn, tough as iron, lasts forever. The other -- that's the holly, the purest white wood there is, beautiful to carve, strong as any and light to the hand. Which, do you think?"

"Wh... Which?" Minerva stammered. Assessing the length and shape of each piece, she nodded wearily towards the holly bough. "He's always favored black for everything, but I suppose it must be the white, since that's the usual..."

"Ie, I can make a truly lovely thing with the holly. It's fine and straight." Gareth glanced up from where he knelt on the ground to see the shadow on Minerva's face and realized with brutal clarity what had occurred to her.

Without a thought, he bolted to his feet and wrapped her hands in his own, drawing upon every energy of comfort that he could give her.

"Ah, now, don't grieve. What did you think I mean to make?"

"A cane, a white cane, certainly," she answered, firmly lifting her chin, "for Neirin to use, to help him learn to move about. It's very kind of you to offer making..."

"Hust, da ddwines -- is that what you thought? Nah, then, that's not what was meant. Your Maldwyn can use it as he needs and chooses, but what I'll carve for him is not a cane for a man who's been struck blind," Gareth insisted. "I mean to carve the lawffon of a brave wizard to help him battle his curse, a staff worthy of Myrddin himself -- and I'll want your word on the proper making of it. So, the white holly, is it?"

"Ie, Gareth Islwyn," Minerva nodded, her eyes fierce and proud, "the white holly it is."

Chapter Ten: Comparative Silences

Chapter 10 of 14

"Let me... GO," he screams in strangled whispers, and no one knows if he means Riddle, the serpent, or his own potions. Perhaps he means Albus. Perhaps he means us.

Chapter Ten: Comparative Silences

Draco scarcely speaks to me -- he scarcely speaks at all. If I try to draw him into conversation, to comfort myself in my loneliness, he simply looks at me.

"Don't concern yourself, Mother. I do love you."

His voice is flat. It tells me nothing.

I've watched my son, my only child, retreating deep into himself. I fear the fates are gathering yet again to rob me of him. Not the first time that I have seen him slipping away, but if I cannot prevent his going, I know it will be the last.

Summer is ending, and that does not bode well. The Aurors have given us a final three days to vacate the Manor. We are to take only what is needed to keep us meagerly clothed and housed. We are watched, constantly, but I have managed to conceal a few galleons among the paltry personal effects we are permitted to keep. Whatever else that remains -- the art and antiques, the tapestries and books, the furnishings and fixtures -- even the beasts in the stables and the casks in the cellars -- is in their hands. These things are no longer ours.

The vaulted galleries and ornate salons of this house are awash in the dregs of our proud traditions -- and the failures that grew out of them. Our families' ambitions to be highly favored by the Dark Lord have cost us everything. The Dark Lord -- Lord Voldemort -- Tom Riddle -- call him what you will -- the last of the Slytherin bloodline brought to nothing by a curse-scarred boy. Gods, He was a hideous thing to see. Bella would speak of Him with such a covetous desire, as if she lusted for Him. I found Him repulsive, for all His prowess and power. It's said He was stunning in His beauty, long ago, but near the end, I was sickened by Him.

Perhaps Shacklebolt and his Ministers, all of them lavished with public acclaim, have shown us an unintended kindness by forcing us to leave this place. Even if I had the means to refurbish and replant every inch of this estate, the ugliness of Malfoy dishonour would remain. In the hours before dawn, when I am pulled awake by nightmares, I remember very clearly how our proclaimed Lord hung a woman like some monstrous fruit, high over the polished table in my drawing room -- how He left her there to twist and turn until He could finally be bothered to kill her and feed her to His snake. That witch -- a grotesque irony that her name was Charity -- she might so easily have been me -- or Lucius -- or Draco -- if that had pleased Him. There was none of us safe from His caprices once He chose to barricade Himself in our home.

I was quite careful to keep my demeanor correctly fixed in His presence, even when shrieks and moans became the music of our nights. I had never considered that the human throat could utter such sounds -- and for so long. Bella took delight in hearing them. She had become quite skilled, and I wonder if she would have found pleasure in our screams. I do not believe she would have hesitated if her Lord desired them.

For five wizarding generations, this Manor has been the hallmark of refinement and culture. Only those people and possessions considered desirable by way of their perfection, judged worthy of invitation or acquisition, are welcomed here. There have been few exceptions, indulged only when they brought consummate wealth or power, a keen wit, or at the very least, a pleasurable skill into our circle of influence. Lucius and I were always amused when those who sought our patronage compared us to the sun and moon, but why shouldn't they, we thought? We were glorious, my husband and I. Our single sorrow was that we were able to set only one star -- Draco -- in our heavens.

These Aurors have plundered every jewel and adornment that Lucius has gifted to me, except the emerald band he slipped onto my finger the night we took our bonding vows. At least, these "guardians of magical security" had the sense to recognize that rather than willingly relinquish my trothing to them, I would have sacrificed my hand. Our robes and cloaks, our boots and furs, even the brushes and perfumes from my dressing table, these have all been taken, too. Perhaps they'll uproot the orchards and the gardens, or pilfer the pantries and the linen chests -- who can say? They are insatiable in their righteous avarice. Do they believe they can erase our name by seizing our possessions? They will not succeed. In the passage of time, most may choose to despise us, but we will be remembered.

Still, our material legacy is destroyed. We are meant to become pariahs, invisible to even the lowest station of wizarding society. Draco's only inheritance is to be an emptied Gringotts vault. Reparations, they call it. I wonder how many of these reparations will line the pockets of these newly-favored Ministry officials or be seen on the backs of their current paramours. Almost all, I would think.

I've asked to keep one harp, this smallest one, and they've thrown me that bone. I cherish this instrument, so old, with its abalone pegs and narwhale columns, its silver strings. This was my first true harp, a gift from Abraxas on my eleventh birthday to celebrate my Hogwarts letter and the certainty that I would be sorted into Slytherin House. Dromeda was absolutely giddy that I'd soon join her at school, but Bella pretended to be indifferent to all the fuss. I knew better, though. Three sisters of the House of Black -- all at Hogwarts together? You can well imagine -- the entire school was soon enough in awe.

When Draco was very small, he'd toddle across the silken carpets in my morning room to reach this harp, pulling himself onto the bench and plucking at the strings, even though the elves would scold him to be careful. How he would pout unless I nestled him on my lap and played some whimsy for him until he grew bored and wandered off to find some other diversion. They were a foolish ritual of our affection, those faerie waltzes.

I remember ripe summer nights on the terrace when I would have my finest Erard positioned in a pool of moonlight so that I might beguile and bemuse any privileged guests Lucius was cultivating. He has always been pleased and proud that I am well-accomplished in all of the arts, particularly in music, though he did not encourage any such abilities in our son. A suitable artistic education, a well-defined gift, is vital to every high-born witch's social standing, but wizards of noble houses are expected to be generous benefactors only, nothing more.

And yet, my music has always been an ensnaring potion for my husband. If we were alone on the balcony outside our private chambers, Lucius would straddle behind me as I played this old harp, his thighs strong against mine, his arms wrapped around my waist, his breath sweet with brandy. If he was in a gentle mood, he might hum the tune softly in my ear, and I would lean back into his embrace, laughing. If his mood was dark, he would be silent, and his hands would roam my body, stirring my blood, possessing my attention. Over the years, we have grown attuned to one another in all things, and that is its own form of love. Each of us understands what is expected of the other. Neither of us has ever questioned what was ordained as ours from the moment we were born into pureblood families.

I am advised that I will be granted an allowance, enough to maintain only the simplest of households. Every Knut will be doled out by the Ministry, and they will expect an accurate accounting. For twenty years, I have been mistress of this great and powerful house. I know quite well how to keep accounts. They shall have theirs -- in my own hand, perfectly tallied. I wish them pleasure in the tedium of reading it.

Even my personal elves have been sent to serve in other households. I was surprised when many of them wept at the news. I would have thought they might be glad to leave our service, though I was not in the habit of punishing them unjustly. Lucius contends that I am far too lenient but I've always known that ill-used elves do not serve their duties well. How odd that Turtlefoot refused to go. What a wailing and gnashing of teeth she made, enough of a din that the Aurors relented and permitted her to stay. Either she does love us a little or she's simply too old and set in her ways to wish to adapt to the habits and demands of a new mistress. Having her with us is the final vestige of our familiar life. She knows us, in all our temperaments, and there is a certain dreary comfort in her presence, at least for me. Draco has made no comment on the matter.

What, then, would I know of love? It would be pointless to offer explanations of whom and how I love. I will not humble myself to grovel for favors by confirming that I have loved -- and that I will continue to do so. Let these fools believe I have no heart, that I feel nothing. I will not offer my pain as a public commodity.

I have little doubt that my speaking of love would seem quite impossible to most. I am the faithful wife of a sworn Death Eater, the sister of another, and mother to a third. Thrice condemned, though I never sought to take the Mark. My loyalties are my own, and they lie only with my husband and our son.

Even as I loved her, my loyalties to Bella ended when she boasted she would be more than willing to sacrifice my child -- any child -- her own, if she had one -- on the altar of her Dark Lord's obsession. I understand obsession, though. Mine served me well enough to drive me to throw myself at Severus' feet to beg him to protect my son. Who could have known that his own obsession would compel him to agree? Severus and an obsession born of love -- I would have taken a wand oath that I would never say such things in the same breath.

I've briefly considered appealing to Dromeda, but how could she possibly welcome the sight of me? We've not spoken in years. This war has left her widowed with a half-verse grandson to rear, a sufficient burden of sorrows for anyone, I'd think. Little enough wealth, no influence -- she cannot help me -- and I am of no use to her. I'll leave that road untraveled for the moment.

They have taken my husband from me. He is sentenced yet again to Azkaban, though we have not been told how long they intend to imprison him. Without funds at my

disposal, I cannot hope to bargain for clemency. We knew they would come for him, that they would make him a symbol of their victory. Our barristers gained him a few months, but as our fortunes began to diminish under Ministry control, so did their loyalties to our case. There was no avoiding this outcome. I begged Lucius to leave the country with Draco, to go deep into seclusion, but he refused, dismissing my pleas as an affront to our lineage.

"We are Malfoys, my dear wife. We may have proven ourselves fools, but we are not yet such cowards."

My son will not be permitted the use of a wand until the Ministry judges him sufficiently trustworthy. How many of my hidden galleons will that require, would you suppose? Time will tell. They have given me a menial's wand, charmed to perform only the most mundane magic. I am spared imprisonment because I did not betray to the Dark Lord that the Potter boy was alive, Draco only because he took the Mark before he had reached his maturity. Consideration was made that perhaps he acted out of fear -- they would never judge it love -- for Lucius and me. An empty justice, extended more to save the Ministry's conscience than to show us any measure of mercy.

Two days ago, a gang of Aurors came at daybreak, and before they left this house, they stripped my husband naked of his hair, his beautiful shining hair that veiled me in our bed like silk. They meant to break his pride -- not even using magic to humiliate him. Muggle shears -- the kind a common tailor would use -- they stupefied him and hacked away his hair, let it fall onto the marble floor, walked over it in their coarse boots. One strand, they gave to me -- a keepsake, they said, and they laughed. Brutal, graceless men, enamored of their power. Perhaps they thought to see me weep. How dare they expect I would shame my husband by shedding tears in front of them on his behalf?

I am proud that our son did not disgrace his father. Draco stood motionless, trapping my wand hand in his own, flinching only once when Lucius spoke to us in that final moment before they took him.

"Protect yourselves. Seek an ally, Narcissa, for Draco's sake."

For Draco's sake... I have watched my son, in the brightness of the day and the heaviness of night. I do not know him.

With each passing day, he grows more gaunt, his face more bloodless. Turtlefoot has tried to tempt him with the dishes he fancied when she was his doting elfanny. He endures her fussing, out of some half-remembered boyhood fondness for her, but if she leaves the room, he simply lays down the fork and looks away, the food untouched.

He goes for days in the same black clothing, his hair heavy and dirty, grown long enough to reach his shoulders. It curtains his face, masking him from my sight. There is something of Severus about him, now, which troubles me. I am frightened by the fever in Draco's eyes, but far worse is the emptiness that replaces it when I try to coax him into eating a bit or sitting with me.

I know he does not sleep. My child is a ghost that haunts the gardens, prowling amongst the trees, a specter mirrored in the lily pools, sinking to his knees at dawn to moan some nameless plea against the new day. He paces the parapets, bound by the fetters of his crossed arms. I've seen him clutching a shred of parchment, reading it over and over again. He will not tell us what is written on it. Before the Aurors came for him, Lucius cajoled, threatened, begged Draco to confide in him. No answer. I thought, for love of me, perhaps he'd show me what words he guards so closely. He has not. I do not think he will.

In three days, we are to leave this place. For my son, I must find an ally. For myself, I must find a way to survive.

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Neirin (only in guarded thought do I see him as Severus) struggles when he speaks to us. He struggles to speak at all, but we always talk to him as if he can answer us easily. Not conversing, really, but when he's able to say his need, form a question, or even better, shape some small complaint -- even if by a single word -- we covet the sound as if it were a jewel.

His voice is raw, still difficult to understand. It tells us little except that he knows that we are here.

We've watched him edging towards a certain degree of awareness, but some wayward fate could still rob us of him. Gareth cautions that the dregs of venom and Theriac will surface in his body for a very long time, perhaps always. There's no need to affirm the effects of Riddle's curse. Those confront us constantly.

Autumn is here, and for some, at least, that may bode well. In three more days, a handful of students will return to Hogwarts. Seventh years only, the ones who have asked to sit their NEWTS. The castle isn't ready for any larger occupancy. The younger students must wait another season, and the newest group of first years, even longer. I've managed to divide my energies these last four months between Neirin and Hogwarts, but I often think I'm doing neither the justice that both deserve.

Everywhere in the Isles there is a sense of hesitant expectation, but there are so many holes in the fabric of our world. Shackbolt sits as Acting Minister, issuing daily statements to assure the wizarding populace of a renewed stability. Auror troops are everywhere, patrolling the streets and alleys, wands ever at the ready. Flushing out the vermin, some have called it, a rhetoric I find brutally familiar. Most Aurors are brave and honest men and women, earnest in their vows to protect the innocent. But there are others, with eyes as cold and voracious as any Death Eater's, more than willing, I suspect, to substitute their brand of righteousness for Riddle's.

The press clamors for investigations and hearings, swift interments, a clean sweep of every magical department and institution. We'd best be wary, I think, of brooms wielded in the name of speedy reforms. Far too easy to condone the disposal of ugly realities into Azkaban's hellish bins -- even easier to look away when shameful embarrassments are swept under the Ministry's expensive carpets. I have not forgotten Umbridge.

I don't deceive myself. I am weary of my endless obligations to Hogwarts, and I've come to love this sanctuary that Gareth keeps so carefully for us. Magic vibrates so freely here -- in the earth and stones, the rivers and trees. The people are far removed from the ordinary Muggle sort. I could almost wish for some benevolent Horcrux to divide me into two selves -- one that could remain here to care for Neirin -- the other ready and able to carry on as Headmistress.

Hagrid needed no such wish to make his own decision. He's had me inform the Board of Governors that he is taking his pension, and sorry to say, they've accepted all too readily. In a moment of disgust with the maneuverings of the Board and Ministry, I'd briefly entertained the notion of naming him as my Deputy and letting them all be damned. My poor friend we would have driven one another mad within the week if we'd actually attempted such a thing. Even so, Hogwarts without Hagrid seems inconceivable to me -- but it's best not to argue with a half-giant once he's made up his mind to something.

The Governors' acceptance of Hagrid's resignation wasn't delivered by Lucius Malfoy, and that should have given me a certain satisfaction, but it did not. Days ago, the papers trumpeted his arrest and imprisonment, running lurid photographs of him, shackled and shorn of his hair, staring straight ahead. He looked greatly aged in the Death Eater robes he was ordered to wear during the course of his trial. Blood in the water to feed the frenzy, I suppose. How the cause of justice is served by public humiliation of anyone, even this decimated aristocrat, is quite beyond me. There has been no further word of his wife -- or Draco.

Despite his tendency to caudron up with tears, Hagrid has always been one of the most sensible men I've ever known. The very day after we returned to Gwuan, his direction was made clear. From my place at Neirin's bedside, I could see him in earnest conversation with Gareth, pacing off the perimeters of a stone outbuilding, tracing outlines in the dirt, pointing and gesturing, the pair of them fairly grinning at one another. Over the years, between my clan and my profession, I've seen enough of these masculine conspiracies to recognize the pattern immediately. Some project of construction and relocation was set to begin.

"It's the old smithy, yeh see, Minerva." Although it seemed a foregone conclusion by the time Gareth and he came to the infirmary, cobwebs veiling their hair and dust ghosting their clothes, Hagrid was eager to enlighten me. "Stout walls, a fine big hearth ter keep things warm fer the professor, and the stone floor's worn down smooth and even, so's not ter trip either of us up. Plenty of fresh air and sun, but not too bright, and the roof's good and high, as well, so I'll not bang my head against the rafters. We'll keep the center space open so he'll not blunder into things so much, until e's learned 'is way about. There's a strong sharp smell ter the place, too -- iron and smoke, charcoal, ash, even a bit of beast -- somethin' like 'is potions chamber."

"Ie, and the place being a smithy's, it's blessed with the Lady's protections as well," Gareth added with a twinkle that reminded me almost too much of Albus. "There's some old fixtures should be moved and some patching to the roof needed, maybe a beam or two to be checked, but little enough real work. It's best we move the lad from this infirmary soon. He's battled here too long and hard for this to be any sort of peaceful place for him. Since he's coming round a bit more every day, it should be

something other than this room that greets him, especially now that you've both come."

"So, you've noticed the floor won't trip either of you up, Hagrid?" I interrupted a touch more sharply than I intended. "Meaning you've decided to become his house-mate? Would that be for the short term or the long?"

When Gareth took that inquiry as an excuse to hastily leave the room, I held little doubt as to what would follow and even less when Hagrid lowered himself to sit on the floor at the foot of the bed, his eyes searching Neirin's face and avoiding mine.

"He's a fine and brave Muggle, Healer Gareth, don't yeh think? Smart as any Ravenclaw -- maybe a bit of the Slytherin to him, too -- and that Delyth, I think there's magic in 'er that she doesn't even know or maybe she's not sure of?" He looked to me for confirmation, and I nodded. I suspected the same, but there was nothing yet to prove. Her mother was from away, but if her father was of the Isles, how was it we'd never heard of her?

"Gareth says the folk here aren't ashamed ter keep their Old Ways right along with their regular Muggle ones. Seems most of 'em 'ave figured how ter live with enough a' both ter keep things nicely balanced fer 'em. Somethin' wizard folk may have ter learn if we're hopin' ter last another thousand years or so, would yeh say?"

"Hagrid," I pressed him, "say your piece or we'll never get on with this change of location." How determined I was to keep my tone brisk and not let him know the loss I was already feeling.

"Yeh do see the point of it, don't yeh, Minerva? One of us needs ter keep 'ere by 'im, Dumbledore said as much. Gareth and Delyth, they'll not know all a' what's going ter keep 'im safe or what 'e needs ter learn. If 'e starts bein' angry, like he does, a part of 'is magic might come creepin' out dark and 'e might hurt himself or someone else, not meanin' ter do it, but not quite knowin' how ter stop it." At that point, Hagrid reached into the sleeve of his work shirt and drew out his wand, the first time I'd ever seen him handle it openly.

"I'm strong enough ter take about anything the professor might 'ave slip. He can't harm me much, unless 'e really tries and I don't think e'll want to. Professor... that's what I'll call 'im, yeh see, some so I don't forget and say 'is name, but more because that's who 'e is. That name Gareth gave 'im sounds fine but it's a bit hard fer me ter get my teeth into." He chuckled at that, a little sheepish but proud and so resolved.

"Him bein' blind, might make 'im mean fer a while. Gareth told me, yeh see, the same as you did... about the potion 'e was usin'... said he'll fight us hard sometimes, not even knowin' what he's about or what it is 'e needs so bad, just that 'e wants it. There's plenty of what I learned a long time back that I have ter practice and get jus' right, and there's other magic I couldn't let on to even knowin' about. When the professor's able, I can start ter show 'im a little so he'll remember. Learnin' 'is magic over again, yeh might say, same as me."

A little scowl furrowed his brow, and he tucked his wand back into his sleeve.

"There's few enough will miss 'avin me' about, anymore than most would 'a missed 'im." I must have frowned because he stopped to smile and shake his head. "It's not so bad as that, Minerva. With me 'ere to watch over the professor and you 'searchin all the books and such at Hogwarts -- Albus doin' what 'e can -- on both sides of the Veil, I'd guess -- we'll maybe find our Third Keeper a bit quicker and be able ter bring the professor back ter 'is proper self." As he spoke, his calloused fingers slid gently along the length of silver around his neck. "I'm sorry ter not be goin' home ter Hogwarts with yeh. I'll miss it fierce, but I think if yeh ask Charlie Weasley, he might be glad ter come and see ter things fer yeh."

He lowered his head and reached for my hand, and with all my strength I prayed he wouldn't weep. How could I stand to see him cry and know I'd not see him for weeks or months at a time?

Of course, I insisted on my right to turn the refurbished smithy into a proper home. There were layers of dust and soot to be dispelled with thorough "Scourgifies" and more than a little Transfiguration of old wagon beds, wheels, anvils, and hay bales to be sure that Hagrid would have comfortable quarters to accommodate his size.

Gareth carried all sorts of tables, chairs, and chests from the spare rooms of his tower and, with the addition of a comfortable bed, created a snug sleeping alcove for Neirin, two strides from Hagrid's own. The soul of tact, he left me undisturbed to unpack the battered trunk from Hogwarts. The gray woolen blanket was soon laid across the bed, and the most worn dragon hide boots were tucked within easy reach underneath. Stacks of clothes were neatly arranged in the drawers and cupboard, all scented with pieces of the amber. I even tucked those hideous green socks safely away.

Rows of Neirin's books I ranked on conjured shelves, their drowsy scent spreading through the alcove, and as I placed them -- with my hands, not with a wand -- I made my vow.

"We'll read every one of these to you -- and someday, by all that's precious, you'll read them back to us."

His decanters of firewhisky and dryad brandy, the snifter too, I placed on the window ledge. Not the best way to treat fine spirits and crystal, and he would surely scowl at my foolishness if he knew, but the sunlight, slanting through them, cast prisms of light and color across his bed. He wouldn't see these captured rainbows, but perhaps he'd sense their blessing.

Hagrid is accustomed to cooking, however dreadfully, at a hearth, so it was easy enough to create a small kitchen. Among the crockery and utensils that Delyth brought, I found a spot for the plain teacup, with a tin of dank dark tea right beside. She and I had not spoken since the day that Neirin woke long enough to find his voice and wound her. When I reached across the table to touch her bandaged hand, in sympathy for the fear and pain I knew she'd felt in that endless moment, she pulled away and turned to go.

"Delyth," I ventured cautiously, settling the samovar in its place, not wanting to frighten her off, "would you stay and help me? I can hardly leave two men, well-meaning as they are, to finish up." She stood there for a moment, poised as if listening for some distant sound, considering carefully before she answered.

"No, you'll forgive me, but I'd rather not touch his things. I'll make good food and do whatever else I can to help Gareth care for him, but that's all I'm able to give your Maldwyn. Please, don't ask me for anything more than that." Slowly opening and closing her injured hand, she surveyed the room and gave me a small smile. "I do like your Hagrid, you know. I'm glad to know he's staying. As long as he's here, Gareth is protected from what ails your friend, and that's what's best for now."

And so, a few days after, in solemn procession, we moved Neirin to this simple home we've made for him.

It was Hagrid who carried him, lifting him so carefully, rumbling constant reassurances, taking the greatest care not to startle him. Any unexpected touch near his wound causes him to thrash and jerk his head away, his hands flying to his throat. I know it's my doing that this terror haunts him, but it means the memory remains close to the surface, and I accept the shame of keeping it there. We had thought to cut his hair to keep if from brushing against the livid scars on his neck, but in the end, we've chosen to simply tie it back. His hair has always been his shield. We couldn't bear to leave him naked of it now.

Every day, we have hope that some minute sensation will trigger a memory other than the awful ones I've stirred within him. Whatever his body needs, we try to answer with the things that are familiar to him.

We dress him in the Muggle clothes, just to be safe. Gareth does have neighbors, and they do stop in to visit. Even for the tolerant folk of Gwaun, wizard's robes would be an oddity that might cause comment. The fact that their Healer has a patient in his care that no one knows has only served to bring more help. Polite inquiries on Neirin's progress are made, but no one pries, and there is never the matter of repayment. I've introduced myself as a professor of anthropology spending the summer in support of my former student's recovery. Hagrid is spoken of as my field assistant. Of course, his size triggers some curiosity, but Gareth simply hints that there might be a distant cousin somewhere in Samoa, and that's the end of it.

Offers to sit with Neirin are always gently discouraged. We've said he's a soldier from a vaguely alluded-to conflict that's left him blinded and gravely ill. We explain that having been a prisoner of war, he's highly agitated by the sound or touch of strangers, sometimes to the point of violence, and his physicians have recommended seclusion. Enough generations of these good people have seen their fathers, sons, and brothers returning from distant wars in a similar condition that the story isn't

questioned.

Several of the oldest women have lingered over their hampers of food, as if they wish to ask me something. They nod respectfully, studying me with knowing eyes, and I suspect eventually at least one will venture the question. Your lad, so pale and ill, and blinded, poor thing -- do you think he's maybe been cursed? Is there something we might do to help him? How I'll answer to that, I've no idea.

Albus' advice is always with us. Speak to him, surround him with the things he knew. Hagrid says the elves call these the things his hands could find without looking. I hope that's true. When he trembles, we wrap him in the heavy blanket from his bed. When he's thirsty, we always reach for the plain teacup from the shelf. When Gareth or Hagrid help him bathe, they use the plain white soap from Hogwarts. For a man with such abundant whiskers, Hagrid has shown an exceptionally light hand with a shaving charm. Neirin needn't be frightened by the touch of Gareth's razor at his throat -- and Gareth needn't take the risk of Neirin's desperately clutching hands at his. A wise precaution, either way.

Tea remains our ritual. I brew the horrid stuff he fancied, holding the cup to his lips every day at our accustomed time, and I always murmur "vile." It's difficult for him to swallow, even now, and I must repeat a charm to keep the tea from growing cold. I speak the words softly, close to his ear so that he can hear me. The lovely cup he gave me so long ago would be useful. I must remember to bring it next time I'm able to stay. In my absences, I know that Hagrid faithfully makes the tea and says the warming charm. With some faint hope, I've even brewed the Scottish blend, the one so loathed, and given Neirin that to sip, watching for a grimace of disgust. I would so welcome a scathing "insipid."

Gareth is usually the one with Neirin for meals, sitting close to keep him steady, supporting his hands, guiding him so that he can regain the dignity of feeding himself. He sings to him softly in the Welsh, chats about the doings of the bees and horses, coaxes one more bite. Delyth brings wonderful dishes, savory tidbits to tempt Neirin's meager appetite, carefully portioned to ease both his throat and his pride. So long as Gareth is there, she stays and waits to carry off the dishes. I've seen her touch Neirin's shoulder as she leaves, but never his hands. Whenever he attempts to speak, she departs quickly. She seems to shun the sound of his voice but for no reason that I can determine. And yet, she comes... every day.

Neirin is able to walk a little now, with one of us on either side to guide him from his bed to a leaf-shaded seat in the yard. He fights to stand tall and straight, something his muscles must remember. We each take turns reading aloud to him, even Hagrid, but whether he's truly listening is difficult to know. When I'm the one reading, Gareth sits with me, entranced with the music of the words, especially if the book is a magical one. Usually he works on the lawffon, asking my opinion from time to time or gently wrapping Neirin's hands around the wood for a moment. An introduction of souls, he calls it. If Neirin hasn't the strength to manage the few steps back, Hagrid will carry him, but only after quietly asking if he may and waiting for a nod of acceptance.

There are blessed days when simple tasks are easily accomplished, and Neirin seems stronger, more present. At the sound of our footsteps, he nods in greeting and carefully forms his "Please", remembering to say our names. We are voices, hands, scents that he has learned to recognize, nothing more. Knowing there is no memory of us behind our names is a great sorrow for Hagrid and me to bear.

There are other days which are damned, when Neirin is possessed with craving, choking on the blood of hoarse ravings that tear the wound at his throat, lashing out at any touch, biting at the Mark like a chained animal. "Let me... GO," he screams in strangled whispers, and no one knows if he means Riddle, the serpent, or his own potions. Perhaps he means Albus. Perhaps he means us.

Gareth has offered another Joining. I cannot permit it -- he could so easily go mad in the attempt, and we would lose them both. I think of the warded chest I brought and the bronze box that Gareth gave me, asking what should be done with it. They are guarded, now, by the standing stones of Myrrdin's Seat. Neirin's freedom may lie within those potions, and I've not the skill to know.

In these awful hours, we bind him with spells, or Hagrid's arms, as gently as possible, and stay beside him, waiting. He may plead for release with a sob, or howl with rage, demanding it. We grip his hands, and I allow myself the wish that dark gods would let me face Tom bloody Riddle one last time. I tell myself that I would not hesitate to curse him until he was the one left sobbing, screaming for an end to his torment. I accept these thoughts for what they are. My soul's capacity for darkness does not require surrender, only recognition.

Neirin's agonies always yield, eventually, to Gareth's fierce compassion. In the aftermath, I am Maftet again, curling tight against his heart, matching my purring to his breathing, hoping to comfort him, praying he does not remember me as his torturer.

There are moments, on the better days, when his head will tilt a certain way or his fingers will curl as if to hold a pestle. A corner of his mouth will lift, like the specter of a sly smile. In the light of mid-day, there are flickers of flame, deep in his eyes, and I bite my cheek to keep from shouting "Severus, LOOK at us, see us, we're bloody hell right here."

Between us, Hagrid and I have sworn that we will answer whatever he asks with honesty, but we are guarded in our truths. We could shatter him so easily.

Too often, there is a return of the awful "Tell me... where I am..." like some endless spasm of his mind. Safe, we always say, you are safe, you are protected.

"Why... protected...?" We are cautious, and tell him it is because he is ill and cannot see.

His hands crawl towards his eyes and he rasps, "How... did this... happen?" Venom, we explain. You were attacked by an enemy, and you were bitten by his snake. Your enemy is dead and you have survived.

"Name... my name..." We speak the truth that shelters him. Neirin Maldwyn, we answer, you're called Neirin Maldwyn. He shakes his head, struggling to shape this sound, to say the name aloud, seeking its reality.

"Hagrid... says... professor..." Because it suits you, we assure him. The wraith of a sneer drifts across his face, and we don't even breathe.

"Too dim... witted... for that... to suit..."

Tomorrow morning, I'll return to Hogwarts. There are students wanting to complete their ritual of a formal education. These few who've asked, or been coerced, to return, some of them will fail miserably, some will merely pass, some will exceed all expectations. Merlin willing, at least one of them might excel at Potions. If I see his teachings used intelligently in even one essay, I swear I'll bring those pages to Neirin and lay them in his lap like a gift of roses.

Tonight is mine, the last I'll spend in Gwaun for several weeks. My "Lumos" fills the room like fog so that I'll have light to read aloud to Neirin, letting the pages rustle between my fingers so that he can hear them. Because he knows my step, he says my name.

"Minerva..."

"Hust, Neirin, 'ch angen at bwyso. You must rest," I soothe, hiding the sorrow of my leaving behind the old speech that Gareth's taught me. I watch the wings of night brush past his face.

"I... dream..." he whispers. Today was an ugly day, thick with pain. What moves within his mind?

"Is your dream kind to you, Neirin?" I need to hear, but I fear to know.

His voice is slurred by Gareth's lulling herbs. "Man... waiting..."

Circe's grace, who does he see?

"No... reason... worth... waiting..."

Ah, but you're wrong, dear friend. I'll happily argue the finer points of worthiness with you. Merlin's Heart, I'll happily argue the finer points of anything with you until my voice is as raw as yours -- but not this time. No debate permitted here. There is a reason. There is every reason.

Chapter Eleven: And If These Dreams Be Real

Chapter 11 of 14

Tis the Night of Shadows, when vigils are kept -- and journeys begun.

Chapter 11: And If These Dreams Be Real

The dragons of Wales slumber deep in the earth, the flame of their breath frozen in the dense, dark coal. Sorrowing that they must allow the hands and backs of mortal men to free their fire, they dream of times long past and not soon seen again.

For those who dwell in Gwaun, perhaps it is sharing this breath of magic that makes the presence of the Otherworld scarcely a matter for discussion. The likelihood of faeries at every well, coblyn in the mines, and mist wraiths on every hilltop, is hardly a cause for concern, unless of course some witless misdeed or grave offense happens to stir their ire. Unearthly messengers, parting the Veil, traveling for good or ill between the Worlds? A certainty at Nos Galan Gaeaf -- you need only be attentive.

Even so, familiarity does not deny the necessities of tradition, so patterns of salt must be scattered as protection on every stile, hearths prepared for winter's coming, and churchyards carefully avoided, lest you hear your own name whispered on the wind as one who is to die. No harm, either, in tossing more than one white pebble into the nearest Hollontide fire, just to be sure that the thin light of dawn lets you find your name still written on at least one stone among the ashes. And, of course, there should be vigils kept.

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Still there, then? This vague presence must be driven by need that it would remain so long -- and choose this as the night to do so.

Approaching Me so warily, this is but a whisper of essence, shivering along the edges of My awareness, and not one I have been anticipating, though there are certain notes of the familiar there. This magic does not hum with the pleasing prickle of My elves when they are fixed on their tasks. It carries none of the guarded anticipation of those who are quartered, regardless of prior Sorting, in those of My anterooms that are still habitable. One score and twelve students, but not one of the Three is among them. A significant number that may restore the balance between -- and within -- My Houses, just as the Founders first intended. I am inclined towards the effort, but we shall see what outcome may arise. The world of magic chooses to believe this conflict well-ended, but there have been so many of these Final Battles.

There is a small conclave of professors in residence, as well -- the steady, watchful ones -- but their rhythms are nowhere evident in this curious pattern, nor is there any influence of My Acknowledged's honed authority. The witching hour has brought this peculiar magic to pace just beyond the reach of My wards. The decline of dark towards dawn will surely reveal some manifested form, should it choose to wait so long. I suspect it will.

Of course, on this Night of Shadows, even the most sensible of magical folk might imagine a journeying shade or covetous wraith -- some wandering spirit not already sheltered within My walls -- attempting to slip between the Worlds but held reluctant by the Samhain fires that have dominion in My dormant courtyard and along the twisting road to Hogsmeade.

Those of a fanciful nature -- their courage well-fueled -- will nod knowingly, eager to speculate on which tormented souls might seek passage through My gates. Pausing below the crossroads, within earshot of the Shrieking Shack, far too many will conjure stories of the slain Potions master, My Scrifan Acknowledged, recounting over and again with delighted shudders how his fang-pierced, bloodless body was carried off by vengeful werewolves and never found for burial. The fact that most have laid eyes on him only from the safety of considerable distance should make little difference to the fervor of their accounts.

There will even be those bolder few who dare to speak the name of Voldemort, summoning visions of his apparition prowling the wastes in search of the shards of his soul. How fervently they will boast of his defeat, their faces lifted in triumph, as though they themselves had flanked the Chosen when he faced the Eldruhn Wand.

Epic legends are birthed on nights such as this, but that has always been so.

Embracing whichever tale best suits, these besotted bards will find sufficient cause to wand an extra protection or two as they bundle into their cloaks, looking towards sunrise and the welcoming comfort of their beds. Small wonder, given that Magical folk have always relished their bloody tales of the macabre as eagerly as any of those mortals who are more Usual.

My own perceptions are not so easily colored by morbid terrors and spectral illusions. Whatever -- whoever -- waits in the moon shadow is very much alive, wizardly by nature, but of a spirit divided within itself. There is a signature of defined ability -- an instinct deeply rooted -- with skills well-taught and a sharp intelligence, but there is also a twisting, a convoluted understanding -- wavering between innate pride and profound respect, devouring dread and fierce devotion. Like some curious gnomish puzzle box, the outline of this essence shifts, coming near for the briefest moment to its full reveal only to collapse tightly back into itself. What ever serves to vessel such a volatile brew of emotion and purpose demands a thorough consideration of its intent. I feel I know... and yet...

Fortressing the Sorcerers' Path for nigh a thousand years, I expect, now and again, to bear certain of the ravages of time and even, when necessary, to witness the horrors and suffer the dark wounds of war. For almost three Turnings of the Seasons, weary from this newest siege of opposing wizardries, I have been content to dream under the care of My Healers, but that brief respite must end. This clouded and unsettled presence requires My attention.

My Healers have not been the usual sort of medi-mage, gathered in hushed consultation. Mine are of another breed -- sun-leathered and wide-stanced, boisterous and argumentative as they've stood rough-shod amidst the ruins of My body. Masters in the mystical calling of stone, their wizardry is straightforward. Brash they may be, but whenever they've laid their heavy hands against My sides, they've been as gentle and sure as any of My matrons, rebuilding slowly, thoughtfully, sympathetic to the scarring that comes from the cruelties of violent magic. I commend their instincts for My need.

What has not been so expected, as I've lain quietly, allowing Myself to drift, is missing the Scrifan quite so much. He was but one among the host of My Acknowledged, his tenure scarcely more traceable than the vapors of his cauldrons. Yet, if he were present, he could so easily have directed these Healers' attentions to those places where I am still bleeding and in pain from Dark magic. I would willingly have done the same for him, given the occasion, even though that was never asked of me.

I have come to rely on the company of My Healers. Some of them sing to Me while they work -- bawdy songs of desire and drink -- or tell Me small stories of wagers made, lovers wed, children born, elders passed. Sprawled in the lap of My Great Hall at mid-day, sated on mutton pies and ale, their heads pillowed on bags of pozzolan, they share news of the day in eager accounts of Auror patrols and Ministry sentencings, Wizengamot edicts and those Orders of Merlin bestowed -- or denied.

In My near-forsaken halls, the rolling burr of these Healers' voices has eased My loneliness. Still, I find that I am sorry for the loss of the Scrifan's sueded speech. Bound within his chosen isolation, he had steadily acquired an understanding of My nature -- a store of knowledge approaching that of the Phoenix Portrayed, and nearly as defined as that of My elves.

Boy, youth, and man -- always the Scrifan sought Me out as his confidant and confessor, baring himself to Me. I knew his aspects -- the hideous and the beautiful. I have given ear to his discourse of sparse whispers and terse revelations, his muffled gasps and unbound rages -- and to the eloquent oration of his silences -- but never more so than in those few brief Turnings when he was My Acknowledged, Master of My Houses. While the cacophony of conquest sounded ever louder, only the Phoenix Portrayed and I were listening for his voice, and I believe the Scrifan despaired of being heard.

I have begun to note which names spool from My Healers' lips like the waxed cord of a joiner's plumb. In this heaving aftermath of war, the Scrifan's name is still spoken, his truths sparking much debate. Something deep within Me suffers greatly at the echo of his name, as though I am afflicted with a wound that cannot heal into a scar. I am much aggrieved to hear declarations made that I deny him the honor of his Portrayal because he was never My just Acknowledged.

Such a cruel assumption to be made against us both when no false Acknowledged has ever been seated in My Gargoyle's Tower. Rather than serve any Unworthy, I would will My return to the primal dust from which I was first summoned by the Founders. I hold to My right to offer or refuse Acknowledgement. Fool he was, this Tom Riddle, not to know.

It should be said. I have not forbidden the Scrifan his Portrayal -- he has denied himself its opportunity.

In defiance of tradition, the Scrifan spurned the rendering of his image. Only victory, he swore, would deem him worthy of portraiture. Even the most fanatic of his dark brethren fell silent in the face of such a vehement refusal, for none wished their own devotion to the Dark Lord to be measured against his and found wanting. Foundering in their appetites and ambitions, they failed to see the duplicity within My Scrifan's vow.

From his place within the secreted frame in the Shrouded Tower, the Phoenix Portrayed urged the creation of a portrait as a useful screen against closer scrutiny, but he had no judgment to offer when the Scrifan demanded an opinion. Having achieved this Acknowledgement, was it more fitting to be depicted as craven murderer -- his predecessor's broken body at his feet -- or as ascendant Death Eater standing in masked attendance to the Dark Lord? Which image should be commissioned for the artist to begin?

The Phoenix had no further counsel to offer that day.

The Scrifan's deceptions served him well with most, but I recognized with brutal clarity exactly his meaning. There would be no portrait begun to mark his Acknowledgment, to patiently await his death. Better he was lost to memory, as though he had never been.

In a counterpoint of sympathy for My dismay over the vile remnants of this War, My elves have begun to wrap their conspiracy of whispers around Me. Their secrets course through Me like breath and blood.

My newly Acknowledged, they tell Me -- the Felid Witch -- has instructed that "the Other's" name -- for such My elves have declared the Scrifan -- be held in strictest silence. She has entrusted certain of his possessions into the keeping of the Key Bearer. Such actions do not speak lightly. The Shrouded Tower is warded with a singular word from the Old Speech, known only to her. The Key Bearer has taken leave of Me, intending no return, it seems, and the Felid spends long hours in private counsel with the Phoenix Portrayed, their conversations confounded against all ears, even those of My ghosts and portraits, the very elves themselves. My Acknowledged has the right to share My full awareness, but she has not required this of me. We are bonded, yet our deeper secrets still remain our own.

Affirmation and confirmation are needed. The Scrifan has been torn from Me -- I can no longer sense the rhythms of his magic or attend the measured subtlety of his movements. Our bond of Eternal to Mortal, My fealty to his Acknowledgement, is severed. Even so, My First Stones have not become the reliquary for his wand, nor was I permitted to usher his final breath into the Charon's keeping. Even his body is denied repose within My blessed earth. These are My sworn duties with the death of any Master or Mistress of the Four Houses. Never have these hallowed obligations been left undone. A thousand years' tradition is left unsatisfied, and I am made uneasy. By the grace of the Founders' Hands, I know the Scrifan did not abandon Me. Beyond the Veil, does he believe that I have forsaken him?

And now there comes this skewed and uneasy magic, cloaked in the Samhain shadows. This is not the Scrifan's body... nor even the shadow of his essence... And yet it is somehow guised... in palest reflection... so closely to his likeness.

I will stand ready for the Felid's coming. She may wish to walk at First Light, as the guardian fires relinquish their final sparks to hold the Otherworld contained. The choice to welcome or banish whoever waits must be hers.

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"You'll not mind an old biddy's sitting here with you for a bit, will you, lad? I'm worn near to a frazzle."

Indulging in a weary sigh, Mab Williams shook back the hood of her anorak and settled her ample weight onto a blanket-cushioned bale just beyond the bonfire's throw of warmth and light.

"Agh, I've had too much of Gareth's mead and all this fine food that's here," she muttered, shifting into a more comfortable position.

"Best sweep the corners a bit before I try to drive on home. My old Rover could probably steer itself, but I'd not want to doze off and then wake up to find I've crossed to Annwn, now would I?" With an even greater heave of breath, she leaned back against the stone wall behind her, propping her wellie-shod feet on another bale while surveying her solitary companion with an anxious frown.

"But, look here, you've touched naught on your plate, man. Not wanting to eat at all? You're so slight, you should be eating a good deal more -- and I should be doing far less of it." She chuckled with the ease of a woman quite comfortable about herself. "Well, maybe later you'll feel more like." She pursed her lips in disappointment at the waste of a good supper. "What you've got there, now, is cold, so just say if you'd want a bit of something else. There's some of my own good rarebit that won't vex your throat at all, if that's the cause of your not eating."

The sounds of rural fellowship lay like a soft old quilt over Gareth Islwyn's compound. Closest to the great bonfire was a covey of the older folk, warming their bones and their memories. Younger, rawboned men sat nearby, in communion with their pints, commiserating over the price of wool at market and the lack of work in the mines. Their strong, straight women herded a brood of giddy children away from the reach of the flames, bundling them off to sleep on the floor in the old Healer's front room or on the cracked leather seats of battered lorries, their cooling engines ticking quietly in the dark.

"A fine night to keep our vigil, don't you think?" Mab asked, clucking in her contentment like a nested hen. "And the Lady Moon's out nearly full to bless us, too." A wry grin deepened the creases around her mouth. "Who knows -- there might even be one or two of the ellyyllon to guise themselves and come for a visit, eh?"

There was no response from Neirin Maldwyn, not even a twitch of muscle. No matter and certainly not a surprise. Her conversation with him could just as easily be one-sided until someone else stopped by to make sure that he was well. Someone would, of course. Neglect of family, neighbor -- or dour stranger -- was simply not an issue.

Mab relished chatting, finding it a useful benefit in what she laughingly called her dotage, and she'd already spent a good space of time bantering amongst the small knots of neighbors scattered about the dooryard. After all, it was both necessity and obligation for any self-respecting Wise Woman to know something of everyone's business. If Gareth's patient became agitated at her blathering -- her dear old friend had already cautioned that his resident convalescent sometimes roused into a temper without warning -- well, it was easy enough to quiet her tongue and still keep watch over him. Perhaps he'd appreciate knowing what was happening around them, and she could show him a kindness for his poor, blinded eyes.

Her gaze swept the yard before fixing on the particular scene she'd share first.

"Ah, now, here's a treat for us." She craned her neck for a better view of the three people seating themselves on the wide stone steps leading into Gareth's tower, the light from inside pooling around them like milk spilled by a hasty hand.

"Collen had best keep one eye on his bow tonight and the other on his Delyth. The Tlwyth Teg might look to carry her off to wed their prince, with her so lovely in her mam's coat." Mab's chin quivered. "She always wears that pretty purple for Hollontide. An abayah she calls it, from her mam's country. We all remember our Jenny, you know, and the dear woman that she was... And don't we love to hear our girl when she sings..."

From under a fringe of graying frizz, Mab stole a sideways peek at Neirin, though she could have studied him full-on if she wished and he'd be none the wiser. Or perhaps he would... So dreadfully gaunt and pale, dressed all in black, with a swath of white bandages still at his throat -- he could easily be taken for some ghostly cleric. Gareth had said that the lad's illness had taken both his sight and his memory, but whenever she'd stopped off before with a hamper of food, she'd had the distinct sense that those cavernous black eyes were fixed on whoever was near him, searching out confessions to unspoken inquisitions. For the moment, though, his eyes were closed and he was still.

If her saying Delyth's name straight-out provoked any interest, he gave no visible indication. Mab had hoped he might, seeing that the brave girl had stood with Gareth for days on end keeping this unsettling man from the jaws of the cwn anwn. Surely, he'd spend at least one penny of thanks in a simple response to the sound of her name? With a small grunt of defeat at his unbroken silence, Mab returned her attentions to the trio of musicians.

Music was always part of Nos Galan Gaeaf, sweet laments sung in close, pure harmony to comfort the hearts of the living and cheer the beloved dead. If the tunes lulled the Dark ones back into their slumbers, so much the better. Gareth had taken his smaller bodhran -- a gift long past from a colleague across the water -- down off the wall. As Collen Morgan's bow coaxed his fiddle strings awake, Gareth began to send his cipan dancing across the drum, calling the rhythms of the wind and water to his hand. And in a moment, Delyth began to sing, her clear voice weaving through the men's rich tenors, layering with the fiddle and drum and the notes sparking from the brass zills on her fingers.

"The dead I have mourned are again living here.

From ev'ry dark nook they press forward to meet me

I lift up my eyes to the broad leafy dome

And others are there, looking downward to greet me

The ash grove, the ash grove alone is my home."

"They're fine singers, all of 'em, with Delyth bein' the best 'a the lot, but their song's so lonesome. I'd rather they played somethin' that would make yer feet glad teh hear it."

Hagrid's bulk cast an even deeper shadow over Mab and Neirin as he settled onto a makeshift bench of bales just opposite, positioning himself to close their circle. A simple and sure way to provide privacy -- and protection -- as needed, the old woman noted. Setting Neirin's plate aside, after a frowning assessment of its untouched content, he combed his fingers through his beard, dislodging a fall of leaves and twigs.

"A fine Hollontide teh yeh, Mab. Yer lookin' pleased as the cat with the cream."

"And a blessed Vigil to you, as well, Hagrid," Mab chuckled. "I'm as content as any tabby could ever be, that's so. Look, will you, though, at the state of your beard. Did you know you could pass for Green Man himself?"

With a shake of his head, shedding even more debris, Hagrid rumbled, "So I've been told, a time 'er two." His reddened face had less to do with his labors than with his pleased embarrassment at her teasing. "I thank yeh fer sittin' 'ere with the professor. I was needed teh help with the last 'a the wood but I'm never at ease about leavin' 'im alone for too long... especially..."

"Especially?" Mab prompted.

"Yeh'll forgive me, missus," he answered hastily. "It's nothing I've a right teh say and he wouldn't want it, so we'll leave it be. There's jus' those few times I sometimes think he's blessed that 'is memory's not with 'im, that's' all."

"A heart wound, is it," she nodded in sympathy, "and one you'd rather he didn't face with the Veil so thin around us?" Though Hagrid shook his head against her persistence, she continued softly. "Something you carry right along with him, I think..."

An instinct for burdens of the soul was a useful trait for a Wise Woman, but without knowing the cause, there was little to justify inducing undue pain, even if that might begin the healing of a broken spirit. She would not pry. With time and patience, truths would come of their own accord.

Hagrid's answer was to turn his face away. Mab leaned in to pat his knee, waiting for the balm of music and laughter from across the yard to shift his mood. She quickly sought a different topic of conversation, and her gaze dropped to Neirin's hands, his long fingers curled loosely around a tall, sturdy staff of whitest holly.

"Here, now, I'm happy to see the lawffon's finished. I knew it was going to be a lovely thing and we've the proof right here. Didn't Gareth make such a fine job of it, with all the carving? There's no one better at coaxing what's beautiful from the wood." With obvious pride, she nodded towards the staff. "Blessed it with a Knowing One's prayers, too, did you notice? Myrddin himself would come down from his seat, just to see such a fine piece. Your lad's finding it useful for getting about with?"

Distracted from his musings, Hagrid nodded.

"He's learnin' the way of it, but that's no surprise. He's always been clever an' quick with 'is hands and soft in 'is step so yeh'd hardly hear 'im comin'. Learned every one a' the carvings, forwards an' back again, the names an' their meanings. Only took 'im the one day for that," he beamed, his own glow of pride lighting his face. "He'll tell 'em back teh me without missing any, if he's in the mood for it, but if he's not, he'd as soon bash me with that fine staff." With a wince, Hagrid rubbed his elbow. "Gareth's put a wallop in it, right along with 'is prayers."

The lawffon was, indeed, a work of great beauty, and full of old wisdoms. Twining up its length in one direction were the twenty letters of the Ogham, each one framed by a delicate rendering of a leaf from the tree it honored. In balance, spiraling in the opposite direction, were the thirteen symbols of a lunar year, each one carried aloft in the beak of an ascending heron. The grounding end of the staff was tipped with beaten iron, and the top was crowned by a heavy finial of four beasts, each one with runes at its throat.

"Gareth chose strong talismans for your friend, I see, and made sure they'd always face the four directions for him," Mab observed, reaching across with a knobby finger to lightly tap each one as she studied it. "Old Broc, the badger -- that's to give him a guide in his dreaming. Iolair the eagle -- he guards the courage and long life of warriors. And here's a griffin, for seeking truth." Her finger hovered in front of the final carving, not quite touching it. "This one, though, does it trouble him, seeing as what's happened?"

Hagrid sat silent, and Mab wondered if he would answer.

"Most times he'll shy away from that one," he finally replied, "but I have seen 'im tracing it sometimes with his fingers, like he's tryin' teh puzzle out its purpose. What's carved is what was asked, yeh see, things that are important. Minerva told Gareth what should be there."

Pulling a battered pair of spectacles from her pocket, Mab continued to assess the finer points of the staff.

"Did she, now? Knows what she's about, doesn't she?"

Hagrid looked up in surprise, nodding cautiously in agreement.

"But then, of course, she would. Probably studied plenty of our old stories, what with her being a professor of the sacred places and such? Either that, or she has the Knowing, but you'd have said if that was so, surely." Seeing Hagrid turn a bit pale, the Wise Woman smiled to herself.

"There's some that see the neidr as cursed creatures," she went on, tucking her spectacles away, "but in the old tales, it was the serpents that knew the healing wisdoms and always had the wits to survive when there were troubles. They taught the First Wise how to transform themselves, how to shed what's past and start over fresh." She rubbed the space between the carved adder's eyes with the tip of her finger. "Let's hope that's so for your friend."

Busily patting the pockets of his greatcoat, Hagrid cast an absent-minded grin at Mab. "He's still not sayin' all that much. A bit more willing with me but that's expected with us being under the same roof. Won't speak at all to anyone he doesn't know." For a moment, he looked up from his rummaging. "He'll only answer Delyth sometimes, and she's careful as a bird around 'im. Odd, that is... He did hurt her, but it wasn't meant, and the scars on her hand aren't so bad as all that. Like little crescent moons, they are." With a shrug, he resumed the search through his pockets. "Whenever Minerva's been here is when he tries the hardest to have a proper chat."

"Does he remember her, then?" Mab asked.

Hagrid shook his head sadly. "No, none 'a that, but he accepts some 'a what she's done for 'im. When he was first here, yeh see, it wasn't just 'is wound that wanted to take 'im. There's an ugly need -- like a poison, it is -- that has its claim on 'im. At the start, he had such a want for it, he was just as bad from that as from the snake. Not sure he knew that 'imself, but Minerva did. Pulled 'im back by the scruff of 'is neck, yeh might say. He doesn't remember 'er from before his bein' ill, but he respects what he knows of 'er now."

"And this need?" the old woman asked, anger dark in her eyes.

"Still there, but with Gareth's watchin', it's keepin' quiet for now," was Hagrid's answer.

For a moment, Mab thought she was about to lose his attention again, but he continued.

"There's plenty 'a times I know he'd rather just be done with all 'a this. I've been bringin' 'im somethin' different every day, to keep 'im sharp and let 'im know where he is. Most are things I find, here an' about -- and there's some that were already his -- things that Minerva's brought for 'im."

Hagrid opened his hand to reveal a papery hornet's nest, long abandoned but with each cell still perfectly intact.

"I remind 'im what things are called, let 'im get the feel and weight of 'em, listen for their sounds. He'll want to know the smells and sometimes the taste of most of 'em as well. That's 'is way of remembering, and I let 'im when it's safe to do." Frowning a bit, he shook his head. "We've 'ad our words over some 'a that."

He slapped his free hand against the moleskin pouch at his belt, producing a muffled thump.

"Been readin' to 'im a fair bit from Gareth's books, so he'll know the proper names for things, yeh see -- what's common and what's educated. Learnin' a lot myself... Neither of us is ready for most of 'is own books, though. We're far from that..."

"We've heard he took ill from a snake's bite while he was a prisoner," Mab commented, "but from what you're saying, he's other things besides to lay him low. We don't see much of that here, except for those with a heavy need for the whiskey. I've watched you. You say he's a teacher, but you protect him more like he's a soldier with an enemy waiting. Not the first time a man's come away from war, and his demons right there with him. Which was he, then?"

As though it were an object of the rarest porcelain, Hagrid took his time deliberating just how and where to position the nest within Neirin's reach, using the diversion to consider his reply.

"Both, he was, though it wasn't all so clear at the time. We thought everything about him was plain as day. It wasn't, yeh see..."

Hagrid's voice was husky and tight. For a moment, he stared down at the ground, the heel of his boot digging gullies into the hardened earth.

"All 'a this is what I was asked to do for 'im, but me bein' his teacher still seems out 'a place sometimes."

A sudden broad smile burst through the brambles of his beard as he gingerly rubbed his sore elbow.

"He remembers what I tell 'im, all of it. I've tried to catch 'im up, just to see, but I never get away with it. If he decides there's somethin' that he wants to keep, there's no gettin' it back. He's got those shelves in 'is room 'an he knows right off what's been touched. Guards 'is things, he does... Always did..."

His smile was carried off by a great sigh, as he sat unaware that he was circling his thumb across the back of one hand.

Wondering what memories Hagrid was visiting, it occurred to Mab that they were speaking about Neirin as though he weren't right there beside them. Silently she scolded herself, knowing better than to assume he wasn't aware of their conversation just because his eyes were heavy-lidded and he hadn't moved. The sudden tightening of his grip on the holly staff when she hastily tried to cover her mistake affirmed the fact.

"Such a grand Hollontide fire, we've not had for years." Her crinkled, round face was a moon of reflected flame. "Neirin, your Hagrid's a joy to us. It would have taken three stout lads and the biggest lorry to carry as much deadfall as he fetched from the high hills. The young trees will sing his name when they're stretching themselves in the Spring."

Lifting her face to the freshening breeze, she breathed deeply.

"Ah... and the smoke of the fire, so heavy and sweet on the air, you'd almost think to bite into it like an..."

"Apple."

If Mab's ears weren't sharp, she might have missed the hoarse whisper, might even have talked right over it or thought it was only a cough. She could see Hagrid holding himself absolutely still as she answered in her own whisper, fearful that whatever ghost of speech had prompted Neirin Maldwyn to speak to her would flee.

"Ie, lad, that's so. It is the smoke of the apple wood that smells so lovely."

When no other comment came, at Hagrid's encouraging nod, Mab took up where she'd left off.

"Gareth always prunes at Candlemas, and then lets the wood cure for the year. That's what finished up our fire." She nudged the canvas carryall she'd tucked between her feet. "My share of cider and the sweetest of the mead always goes home with me at harvest. The best part of Hollontide, some might say." The clink of bottles was her testament. "Oh, and don't his pippins set all the girls to paring madly, at least any that are looking for a husband." She chuckled softly to herself, thinking back to younger days. "Delyth should take her turn and see what letter's there for her."

As if she'd heard her name wandering on the wind, Delyth abruptly rose from her seat on the steps, tucking her zills into a pocket. Never missing a sweep of his bow, her father mouthed a questioning "Are you all right?" and she answered with a kiss on the top of his head. Buttoning the high collar of her abayah and pulling on her kidskin gloves, she crossed the yard, her shadow stretching back as though reluctant to move beyond the warmth of the fire.

When she reached the odd community by the wall, there was Hagrid's enthusiasm, Mab's endearments, and Neirin's silence, to greet her. For the first she offered a bright smile, a warm embrace for the second -- and for the third, a quiet greeting.

"Noswaith dda, Neirin. Sorry to see you weren't hungry, but I'm glad you've had good company," she said, letting her gloved hand land feather-light on his shoulder. "It's getting a bit too cold for more music, but I hope you listened to some of it."

When there was no response, she gave him a gentle pat, as if to say she'd appreciate his attention but had no expectations.

"The last of the games and the afters are over and done with, so most with little ones are packing up to leave. You needn't worry, there's only the old folk nodding by the fire and they won't pester you." A half-smile lit her face. "We've plenty of what you pass off as tea. Minerva made sure of that, last time she visited, and if we add a drop or two of good whiskey, you'll be warmer and maybe feel like eating."

With a sudden jolt, Neirin uncurled his left hand from around the lawffon to fist the front of his coat, its heavy black wool scoured by age and use.

"Warm enough... to get by," he rasped, as his thin fingers began to spider along the seaming of the worn collar. The cant of his mouth spoke to an understanding that another's carelessness might serve to his own small benefit. "This was forgot by some rat-arsed git... All's... fair... for me to use it..."

"Well, I'd say that's true, unless whoever lost it comes back, but that's not too likely," Delyth calmly assured him. "Seems to fit you, so whoever left it must have been near your build, I'd think."

"Bad luck's his, innit, if there's a ruck... Bone-idle... Can't watch out for what's been given him..." A sudden triumph flushed his pale cheeks. "Scouser's in for a right bloody beating when he's found out..."

His clenched fist dropped, heavy as brick, back into his lap, while the other strangled the lawffon. Only the tilt of her head revealed Delyth's surprise. What few words Neirin had spared for her in the weeks past had generally been terse, but never as coarse as these.

"Mine to keep, now... innit... INNIT?"

Neirin's face was suddenly raw with menace. As if in alliance, a great knot of oak on the fire suddenly split with a savage crack, spewing crimson sparks into the wail of a rising wind. Far off, over the distant sea, a great drum of thunder sounded once, twice, and yet again -- and then fell ominously silent. The heavy scent of ozone stung the air as jagged tongues of lightning forked along the edges of the moon-dyed clouds.

Hagrid was paying very close attention, torn between wariness and wonder. There'd been plenty of that biting alley manc from the professor nearly thirty years ago when he was just a feral whelp, but not a word of it once he'd gained the advantage of Lucius Malfoy's attention. Not even the most tortured of his poisoned fever dreams had brought him there.

Surely, this was just some ragged Muggle coat, and far better than his familiar cloak if Neirin was going to blend in with the rest of the men. Still, something was struggling for release, chained deep in the pit of his curse-bound mind, and it was maybe this old coat, dug out from one of Gareth's cupboards days ago, that was calling it? Minerva would need to be owled.

Cautiously, Hagrid's hand crept into his own pocket, seeking his unfettered wand. If any of the professor's darker magic began to surface by instinct, there might be the need to intervene, but Merlin's beard, why with so many of these decent Muggles about?

To Hagrid's untold relief, just as abruptly as they had leapt into being, the ascending sparks resigned themselves to falling as a soft rain of ash. The wind's wild dirge leveled into a droning chant of lament. As though another man, identical in face and form, had transfigured from the stuff of shadows to assume his place, Neirin's tone shifted from the surly parlance of a mill drudge into the precise cadence of an educated man.

"Allow me some small credit that I can identify... wood smoke... and its... source. You state... the obvious," his empty gaze swung abruptly towards Hagrid, "when this one's... providing... the opportunities... for my... education. Clearly, I have senses... other than sight... and... at least some capacity for... reason... even with a... vacant mind..."

Lifting her hand from his shoulder with a puzzled frown, Delyth ventured further. "Neirin, there's no one about who means to harm you, certainly none of us. Why would you think so?"

Swallowing hard against what must have been a torment to his throat, Neirin focused only on the complex art of breathing. After a long moment, he pushed to his feet, forcing himself to stand without the steadying prop of his staff.

"All of you... so hellishly... concerned. Have you considered that I'm simply not... hungry?" he croaked. "If I were, I would eat. Shall I... demonstrate the skill? Joint of lamb at... twelve," he stabbed the ground around the neglected plate of food with the iron tip of the lawffon. "Potatoes and neeps at four and eight. Just as my learned physician has so ably... trained... me..."

The shred of a sneer surfaced as he turned his head from side to side, in a parody of searching.

"Where is... Islwyn? Not here for this... exhibition... of my... accomplishments?"

The bolstering strength of his anger deserting him, Neirin collapsed back onto the bale behind him, a fog of pain creeping across his hollow cheeks, as he let his head drop back heavily against the stone wall.

"Alert the fucking... multitudes," he gasped, choking out his words. "The blind fool is conversant... he can feed himself... and he's not pissed on his boots, today. Caesar comes... to Rome... triumphant."

Mab had dealt with her share of snap and snarl from cornered people and beasts. Despite her surprise at such a sudden shift in tone and its wash of vitriol, she wasn't about to be cowed by a man still frail enough that she could put him on his arse with a well-placed shove.

"Settle yourself, there, lad. If we've been rude, I'm sorry for it, but you've had your growl, now, and there's no need for your spite, especially with those who've been naught but kind to you." She folded her arms across her formidable bosom, clearly determined that calm -- and better manners -- would prevail. "Delyth's only asked whether you wanted to sit by the fire or make your way back to the house. So, which would it be, then?"

Hagrid allowed himself a grin of satisfaction. A bit like Minerva, this old Mab, a force to be reckoned with. He wished, though, that it was possible to cast at least a warming charm without being noticed. They were too far from the fire for a spell's warmth to be passed off as the heat of flames. That old coat wasn't serving its purpose as well as before. With his rage spent, the professor was beginning to shiver like a newborn Thestral. If this Hollontide carried any blessings at all, those tremors were triggered only by the sharp chill of the wind. But if darker hands were groping through the Veil, there could well be bitter hours ahead, with the ravenous beasts of Theriac and venom prowling for their prey.

With a low grunt, Hagrid lurched to his feet, pretending to stretch away his stiffness. Keen eyes might have noticed him shifting something from his pocket into his sleeve before tightening his belt and loosening his greatcoat. Too many opposing elements of magic and nature were afoot, tonight. He thought of the crystal entrusted to his care. For the moment, a guardian might be needed far more than any teacher.

"Here where it's cold's not the best place for you, Neirin. You've come a fair ways in these last few weeks, but we don't need to surrender what ground we've gained. We've fought too hard for that." His bodhran slung at his belt, Gareth had come to stand beside Hagrid with Collen Morgan close beside him. "There's no one here that will take what's yours. That coat's for your use and it suits you, though it won't for long if you continue treating food as the enemy." His voice was low, but beneath its calm, there was a vein of iron. "As for those boots, you're blunt enough about it, but we'll thank you for the favor of your better aim."

Gareth moved closer to sit beside Neirin, receiving no resistance as he slid a sheltering arm around his patient's concaved shoulders. Hagrid took the flank, harboring them

against the wind.

Across the yard, lorry engines coughed, and from the barn came the high whinny of a mare, roused from her dozing. In a flurry of plumed tails and clever paws, Tess and her clan dashed about with eager barks, anxious to find whatever should be herded homeward. A fog of sleepy voices crept on the air as families continued to make their departure. Some called out good-byes or waved their farewells, but no one approached the group by the wall, recognizing that whatever was passing between their Healer and his patient was private and did not invite inquiry or intrusion.

Recognizing the urgency at hand, Gareth spoke to Neirin in gentler persuasion.

"Will you walk to the fire with me, lad, and share some stories? I know you've little liking for most people, but there's only those of us you know who will keep vigil until the sun's up. Just an hour or so, more, and we'll be through this night."

Even as he spoke, Gareth was idly tapping a subtle pattern against the rim of his bodhran, a rhythm laced with the beat of a heart at rest -- an old Healers' ploy to still anxiety.

There was only an exhausted resignation in Neirin's response.

"Have you forgotten, Islwyn? I have... no stories."

Leveraging to her feet, Mab planted herself directly in the blind man's path, bending to grip his hands, the lawffon rising like a slender mast between them.

"Shall I tell you, Neirin Maldwyn, that you have many stories?"

Her voice had left its bantering place, and was strong with a Wise Woman's certainty.

"Everything your friend is teaching you, these hands of yours already know. They will remember your stories for you, but you need to be listening."

His lips drawn back in a grimace, Neirin tried to pull away, but she held him fast.

"Friend..." he hissed through gritted teeth, "Hardly that... Far too shameful to put a blind man down in the road like a dog... so here's my bloody... keeper... to watch that I don't wander off."

"And aren't they the same?" Mab challenged. "What truer friend than one who's willing to keep watch over you?"

"Tell him to leave, then... I want neither... Set me loose on the moors and let me be." Despite the cold, a film of sweat was oiling Neirin's face.

"You would die out there alone, child, you know that," she answered, clasping his trembling hands tightly so they would not lose their grip on the staff.

"Your sworn... guarantee?" A grotesque smile twisted Neirin's lips when no answer came. "As I thought... What I know, old woman, is hardly worth the effort of remembering." His head began to shake like that of a cruelly bitten horse. "I know the voice and step of everyone who touches me, the smell of them and whatever they compel me to swallow. I know the number of steps from my bed to this wall. From my bed to the gate -- not yet, but I will. I know enough to parrot what my... keeper... and this... practitioner... insist I learn. I've even learned to... know... my name... and answer to it."

Another spasm contorted his thin body as his agitation grew.

"Eat, I'm told, you'll grow stronger. I wonder, if what you ate tasted of ash, how eager you'd be for food. Sleep... Another lie... Sleep so that you will heal. I sleep... They make sure of it... but I do not heal... I dream."

Revulsion darkened his face like a stain.

"My dream... That I know, very well... Always the same... I... see... I SEE... stars... a cage of them... beautiful because I do... SEE them... Spinning and weaving... until... I am INSIDE the cage... and then... they are gone. I am alone... in the darkness with... whispers... that bind me... I cannot MOVE... There is something... heavy... kissing me... my throat... softly... KISSING me AGAIN with... NEEDLES in its... breath... needles..."

Rivulets of sweat were beginning to course down his face. Though Gareth and Mab both held on tightly, without the anchor of the lawffon, the tremors shuddering through Neirin would have hurled him to his knees. As relentless as an advancing legion, a devouring emptiness began to slacken the hard planes of his face and shred the roughened edges of his voice into a frenzied ebb and flow. His body began to rock, forward and back, as though some manic internal tide had claimed him.

"My EYES... I cannot OPEN them... something... foul... thick... around me..." Unbidden, his eyes widened as though they were capable of sight, with his breath coming in harsh pants. "I cannot stand... Why is it so SILENT? COLD... there is no ground... only a cloud... everywhere around me... it stinks of death... knows me... WANTS me... DROWNS ME... a hundred times... a THOUSAND..."

Strangled gasps began to rattle in his throat, his ravings thinning into a fading canticle as his body's ghastly pendulum began to slow. A terrible vapid calm began to slip across his face.

"Someone is... close... watching... me... die... The darkness... is... screaming... That is my... is it... is it? No... I WILL NOT BEG... Voice... VOICE? Voice is... here... Kiss is... here... beside me... I can feel... The needles are singing..."

In anguished sympathy, Mab demanded "What is this?" with her eyes and Gareth, in that moment, bore the regret that he could translate such horror for her so easily.

"The curse that holds him, may the Lady have mercy..." His free hand threaded the air in blessing.

Though he'd already heard the horrors of the Abandonment, knew their purpose, Hagrid longed for battle against this merciless curse, but what point would there be? His anger would make no difference to Tom Riddle's splintered soul and would give no comfort to the professor, either, in such a state as this. Still, he must do something, say something -- somehow show himself as guardian.

"Professor, there'll BE none 'a THAT."

Splitting the air like the blade of an ax, Hagrid's voice rang strong and fierce.

"Yeh don't DO that, now, yeh hear me? Yeh DON'T follow that cursed creature into the dark and yeh don't breath the POISON 'a that cloud." His hands were balled into massive fists. "Yeh DON'T. Yeh stay HERE like we've told yeh. THIS is where yer meant teh be and with us that can help is where yeh'll STAY."

Biting back a snarl of frustration, Hagrid stood rooted, giving witness as, yet again, Gareth produced an all too familiar vial of silvery tincture, softly chanting his comforts.

"Neirin, listen to me... hust... listen... listen to this voice, my voice. This dream does not have hold of you, now -- you're awake. Take a true breath, then. Now -- you must do it now." Reluctantly, he was obeyed. "Do you smell the smoke of our fire, the sweetness of it, how clean it is?"

At the spasm of Neirin's rigid jaw that was the reply, he continued.

"Good, that's good. That's real. Try now, stay fixed on these voices... ours... for now, no others."

Neirin remained slumped between Gareth and the wall, head down, his answer barely made but lucid.

"I know... you... Islwyn..."

Gareth only smiled, keeping his steadying arm in place.

"As you should, lad, me and all those that are here with you. We talk to you, read to you, we've sung to you, even -- many, many times. Remember?" Pulling out a handkerchief, he motioned for Delyth to wipe the sweat from Neirin's face.

"When you were first here, no matter how bad the pain, how sick you were, you'd hear my voice and later there was Delyth's, too. You'd hold on for another minute, another hour, isn't that so? We fought your dream, together, Neirin, and I need the same from you, now."

With deft fingers, he removed the bottle's stopper. "This will help... It will... and quickly. Lift your head for me... You know I won't let you suffer... Gently, now... Swallow slowly... There's the lad."

As pale as if she'd witnessed a brutal death, Delyth stood kneading the sweat-sodden cloth in her gloved hands, searching for the shelter of her father's face in the shadows.

"Friends or keepers, Neirin Maldwyn, that's yours to say," Collen offered, "but you're safe enough, here. Whatever's in these dreams, it won't find you, not tonight. We'll keep watch. Come and be warmer, at least, so you'll feel a bit more steady about yourself." With a quiet smile, he hefted his fiddle. "Besides, I've a tune or two that would sing any nightmare to sleep."

Stepping around Hagrid, he crooked his arm through Delyth's, urging her back towards the circle of firelight. Even through the soft wool of the abayah, he could feel her trembling, and he knew the chill of the coming dawn was not the reason.

"Thada, he's so near the edge... What if I've not enough...?" she whispered, burying her face against his chest.

Collen pulled her tight against him, cloaking her in a fierce embrace. Over the top of her head, he watched Neirin struggle to stand and wondered at the man's strength of will.

"My sweet girl," he murmured into her hair, "I can't answer that. You've all your mother's nature in you, Delyth, and that much of me for there to be a balance. What you show that man... How much he's able to bear of it..." At a loss for wisdom, he fell silent.

With the mercy of Gareth's tincture guiding him slowly back to awareness, Neirin stood quietly. Judging it safe to release his hands, Mab gently laid her own across his eyes.

"I would like to tell you this and have you understand me, although I doubt you will. What truly ails you, child, are naught but the curses you have inflicted and those you have accepted."

Bowing his head into her hands, Neirin rested his chin against the carved finial of the lawffon.

"Curses?" he whispered, "Islwyn keeps those... from me... with all of his... brews... or isn't that what I am to believe? Simple truths, old woman... I despise sleep and yet I crave it, just for that moment when I see the stars. No doubt, I am mad. Only a madman would dream such things... over and over, so clearly. If this dream is my memory... then, I am just as mad. Tell your Broc he needn't bother..." Unerringly, his fingers sought and found the badger carving. "I can reach my abyss without a guide."

Swaying with weariness, he touched the bandages at his throat with the back of his hand.

"This, they've told me, is the work of my enemy and his snake. So much for the good counsel of serpents." His pallid face was fixed with loathing, his voice barely audible. "I would like to remember my enemy. He is dead. I have been assured of that -- repeatedly -- and his snake with him, it seems. So... who has the better end, do you think? Their corpses are rotting... but mine is still here... dutifully breathing."

"You'll overcome such things, if you'll allow it. In fact, you've already begun," Mab answered. "You dream with the instinct of your nature..."

"This... nature of mine... it has a name, does it?" Neirin summoned a faint sneer.

Reaching out her weathered hands, Mab untied the leather tie that held back his hair, letting the heavy strands fall like a cowl around his face, and gently turning his head, began to whisper in his ear.

With a groan, Neirin staggered back, brandishing the lawffon in both fists.

"You're barking mad, Mab, you know that... don't you... with a head full of drink and faerie stories?" he snarled. "They'll haul us off to the asylum together. Adjoining wards..."

Moving closer, Mab slipped her hand inside the pocket of his coat.

"And stealing from me, as well, old bint?" Neirin scowled. "Not much there worth blagging, is there?"

"There's naught I'd take from you, but I'll leave a blessing for you, Neirin Maldwyn. Use it to see the truth of your name... and learn the gifts of your nature... brudiwr," she answered over her shoulder, as she turned to walk away. "Collen Morgan," she called, pausing to retrieve her canvas bag, "I'll want a conversation with Gareth and your Delyth, if you please... and you're to join us..."

Stopping a few paces from the fire, she waited for Gareth to come to her, and felt the burdens of time as she noticed the heaviness of his steps.

"Old friend, what's in your heart?" she said, reaching for his hand.

Gareth stood motionless and grim, and when he answered, the dread in his voice was incarnate in the set of his mouth.

"I've seen his dream, Mab, walked it in a Joining. It would have taken me if I'd not had the Lady's Flame to guide me out again." The old Healer shook his head in dismay. "The lowest circle of hell lives within that dream, and he's pulled back there, over and over again. Of course, he believes he's mad -- that curse carries madness, breeds it like a pestilence. I was told he was meant to die into it and never leave it. There's a viciousness to that I'm not even able to fathom."

Keeping hold of Mab's hand, Gareth peered intently at the leaves skittering across the hard-packed ground.

"From what you've said just now, I'd guess you've sorted a good bit of this without help from me?" he asked.

"You mean this Professor McGonagall's being a true witch?" Mab smiled, "That wasn't so hard. She's as fey as they come. No doubt she's onto my suspicions, though. And Hagrid?" she laughed, "Whatever else he might be, he's plainly a force unto himself. I'd question the bit about his relatives in Samoa."

"And Neirin, he was clear to you, as well?" Gareth continued.

"Ah, that one..." she sighed, "A dark star, I think. What's deep in him's a torment to him, and we'd best find a way to help him through it, or we'll have more on our hands than we're ready to deal with -- far worse than just an ill and lonely man..."

"That's my fear," Gareth answered, "that'll he'll lose control of all that's in him. I've had my own dream, Mab, very powerful, very clear. I saw the cloud there, just as he said - far off above terrible cliffs, waiting, barring any way forward. There was one of his own, an old brudiwr, keeping watch. He looked as if he might even be kin to the First Wise. Such a sadness to his eyes and... somehow... proud and shamed, all in the same breath. He said he was a cloak and that he meant to stay, but I think he's not able to free this young man. The distance between them is too great, this curse too strong... He can not reach him..."

"The trick, then, is for one to join the other, isn't it?" she nodded, squeezing Gareth's hand.

"We're old for this, Mab, and Delyth's not long back..." the Healer muttered.

"Ie, but she's her mother's child, and you and I haven't lost our Knowing. We're still able to battle what's Dark, aren't we?" she laughed, wrapping her arm around his narrow waist for a moment. "And this time, for a true brudiwr, one of Myrddin's kind. I never thought to have the privilege of such a thing. Wouldn't want to fail in this, now would we?"

"Not a bit of it, my girl, not a bit," he answered, returning her embrace. Satisfied in their trust of one another, the two old friends made their way back through the veil of wood smoke to take seats, side by side, at the fire, motioning for Collen and Delyth to join them.

Braced with one hand against the wall, summoning as much strength to his voice as he was able, Neirin demanded Hagrid's attention.

"What's that old woman put in my pocket? A... feather... it feels like... and a stone? Damn two of a kind with this nonsense..."

Scarcely believing what he saw resting on the palm of the professor's outstretched hand, Hagrid answered, fairly beaming with the knowledge.

"That's exactly what's there, yeh see... Just the one white stone, and that's a wren's feather, by the look of it..."

"You great fool... I do not see... and what would the look of anything matter? Mad as bedlam, the pair of you... Islwyn should save his brews to sedate that old... witch... before she's carted off, and keep enough back for you," Neirin growled through labored breaths. For a moment, he hesitated as if debating what to do with the objects he held, before shoving his hand back into his pocket. "Magic she says... claims I'm... the wizardly sort... and cursed... by... dark arts... By the company of my fellow lunatics, is more likely..."

Hagrid remained silent, choosing not to lend assistance, only watching while the professor carefully explored the space where he'd been sitting, his questing fingers finally locating the fragile nest.

"Wasp or hornet?" Neirin muttered, half to himself, his ragged voice fostering a seed of curiosity.

"Hornet -- and near perfect. Not broken anywhere," Hagrid replied with a grin.

"Then it's worth adding to our pitiful... stores," Neirin nodded, standing still and straight, the wind whipping the hair back from his drawn face.

If yeh didn't know, yeh'd say he looks nearly himself... almost sounds it, too... except for that "our" part Hagrid pondered, watching as Neirin slipped the nest into his pocket and began the epic pilgrimage across the yard to the house. A few steps into the journey, Neirin stopped to turn his head, his profile a sharp silhouette against the firelight.

"Hagrid..."

"Professor..."

"In spite of yourself, I believe you are... a well-meaning... keeper. You write to Professor McGonagall... Minerva... do you not?"

"I do... whenever there's the time... or the reason for it," Hagrid answered.

"When you do... tell her... ask her... does she know what became of the cat that was here... It has been... It is... absent."

He stood a moment longer, again resting his chin against the lawffon's finial, a gesture that Hagrid noted was becoming a newly familiar habit.

"You might also tell Islwyn... and her... Delyth... that, yes... I do remember."

Without hesitating for a response, Neirin turned back to resume his cautious passage through the maze of light and shadow.

There was no question that neither help nor advice were wanted, but when he saw there was a shade less dependence on the support of the lawffon and more on the guiding span of its reach, Hagrid shook his shaggy head, his thoughts in a quandary.

'Saw a shred 'a the boy he was, tonight, Dumbledore, and a bit 'a the man, as well. If it's true what Minerva and this old Healer say, that yer keepin' watch there in the Between, this might be the time for yeh teh let 'im know... Whatever he means teh do, he'll not wait much longer...'

Following quietly behind, Hagrid noticed one other detail he decided ought to be included in his owl to Minerva.

Perhaps it was only a trick of the firelight, but the worn black coat, though it had none of the ominous majesty of flowing robes, still appeared, however briefly -- to billow.

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For eight days running, Minerva had watched Charlie Weasley drop gobbets of suet and mince into the Thestral team's eager mouths before slipping the dragon leather harness over their bony heads.

"One of Hagrid's old tricks," he'd grinned the first time. "Give these beauties a treat, and they'll stand at the station as quiet as phoenix chicks."

A single carriage had usually been sufficient. Poppy would climb up beside him for each trip to the station, with little talk between them on the way except to confirm which two -- or four -- or sometimes one -- were scheduled to arrive on the Express that evening. Charlie always wanted to be sure he knew each student's name in its entirety, including whatever nickname they preferred -- or feared.

"Better to know these things straight away," he'd say, "Avoids hurts that have to be healed later."

Poppy always squeezed his hand when she heard that, silently blessing him for understanding the wounds that didn't show.

Whoever disembarked from the train always walked directly towards the carriage, looking straight ahead with trunk and bags in tow, but not one acknowledged the Thestrals. For any student returning to Hogwarts, there was no need to affirm that they had seen death quite plainly.

On the return trip to the castle, Charlie and Poppy would fall into an easy chat, discussing which gardens were to be readied for the coming of Winter, would Madam Hooch start up the Quidditch matches even if it snowed, how many shops had re-opened in Hogsmeade, what was Filius planning for Samhain, and where might a suitable Yule log be found when it was needed -- weaving their subtle spell of the ordinary.

At a certain point along the way, Poppy would turn and indicate the small parcel, wrapped in gray silk, tied with white ribbon, that each young wizard or witch would soon

realize had been beside them right along.

"From the Headmistress -- a gift to welcome you back."

Once opened, there would be a pause and then the moment of recognition, the breath of "Oh..." in answer to the touch of soft wool spilling from the boxes.

For each one there was a muffler in the colors of their House, the crimsons, yellows, blues and greens, threaded with their gold, silver, or bronze -- as token and talisman of their traditions. Each one carried its weighty fringe of somber black at either end, and was stitched with the crest of Hogwarts, edged in mourning ribbon. Tucked among the folds of wool was always a simple piece of parchment, its message penned in a precise hand.

"To be worn with honor, knowing who we are, remembering always those who are lost to us."

When the carriage was in sight of the castle, along the wide expanse of the lake where Hagrid's henge of trees guarded the White Tomb and its attending gravestones, Charlie would slow the Thestrals to a halt, and Poppy would motion the students to climb down.

"From here, you are asked to proceed on foot to the castle. You may walk together, if you wish, but out of respect, keep silent until you reach the Gates. Take what time you need. A good supper and a warm bed will be waiting."

From the hill above the Gates, Minerva had watched them come, washed in moonlight, passing between the Tomb and the blackthorn tree, around the House cairns, across the lawns and up the drive. Hogwarts' gentle Hufflepuffs and forthright Ravenclaws, Her stalwart Gryffindors.

And finally, the last of the chosen students had made the journey -- Her proud Slytherins.

"I will not stand back again and see them broken, my maldwyn, not by themselves or any other House." Minerva had imagined her message traveling to Gwaun on wings of thought, rather than those of an owl. "Your House will thrive, in fair measure with the rest. You'll see that for yourself, someday. Accept that as your Secret Keeper's pact with the Headmistress of Hogwarts." She'd smiled, thinking of the answer Neirin would have given, had he been able.

"And if this pact should prove untenable, Minerva, to whom shall I appeal for recourse?"

The answer would have surprised him.

With his graying head held high, it was Horace Slughorn who stood beside her, watching the children of his House return.

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Horace's request for a formal audience with Minerva had carried every nuance of pride that he could conjure, but behind the meticulously mended sage and silver robes, the small but perfect gift of candied violets, and the familiar smile of benevolent superiority, she'd seen the tatters of age, regret, and loneliness.

They had performed a civilized minuet of afternoon tea and cakes, taking practiced steps around one another, until the shadows in the Tower office grew long enough to allow them to move on to brandy and dwell on other matters.

"Minerva, have you considered the circumstances, should I return to Hogwarts?" An attaque simple, delivered with finesse.

"Those which would set the Ministry's teeth on edge?" she'd answered in flawless coup d'arret. "Or those which would guarantee a proficient Potions master for the students and a seasoned colleague for my staff? I have considered them. I assume you have, as well."

Of course, he had -- quite thoroughly in fact -- just as he would consider carefully which ingredients would best enhance a complex potion. He had the acumen to mentor academic excellence and an instinct for tallying and collecting favors owed. He had made a significant stand in the battle, and had managed to sustain enough Slytherin pride to claim his share of respect on behalf of his House. Useful circumstances, beneficial in the aftershock of war and worth his position, surely.

"Minerva, will you make me say it?" He'd lost his taste for flattery. He was too old and didn't wish to waste the time. "Very well, let me be direct. I am in need of both a livelihood and a residence and I'd prefer that both be here with those who would regard me with some kindness. I would like to be of use to my House and its place at Hogwarts. There is no reason to deny our students the benefit of my teaching when it is needed, particularly as you have the ability to offer it."

His face was halved by candlelight and shadow. "There are several new terms in the lexicon of Slytherin, Minerva. Perhaps you've heard them? Heroic martyr, and traitorous coward -- and both are for Severus."

Folding his hands across his no-longer-ample stomach, he stared into the fire, avoiding Minerva's eyes. Had he looked up, he would have seen, in turn, her avoidance of his eyes, the slash of pain that crossed her face.

"Do I confess my shame that I watched my finest student choose Tom Riddle's path and took no action to protect him? I do. Do I regret my lack of understanding for the man that he became? Without question, yes. Would you like to know how much I grieve his loss and honor the courage of his life? There is no measure."

Standing, he turned to face her, offering his wand on the palm of his hand.

"Will I devote whatever feeble years I have left to guard the children of my House, and any other, Headmistress -- any other -- from following another Dark Lord? On the heart of my wand, I swear it."

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The traditions of Samhain had been celebrated simply but well.

"I'd rather see them laughing for a change, Headmistress, wouldn't you agree? There's not one of them past the age of seventeen. We'll need to remember that, I think."

Their gathering had been more of a Welcoming supper than a true feast, but Filius had been insistent that there be as much food and merriment as limited resources -- and a temporary loss of good sense -- would allow.

Color and light had been his tools, and he had used them with abandon.

With the help of the house-elves, he had created a forest inside the Entrance Hall, and this one, not Forbidden. Instead of black and brooding trunks, he had used the straightest gray and silver ones, with branches set aflame by color, their falling leaves showering the floor like sparks of light. If the earth was soon to sleep, he could at least borrow her autumnal canopy, her leafy coverlet, to soften stony floors and conceal workmen's scaffolding for one night.

Five tables were arranged in the shape of the pentagram, with one section for each house and one for the staff. The purpose of the shape was easily apparent. No House would sit with its back turned against another and all would be able to look into each others faces, openly and equally.

Pomona had carried in a myriad of late-flowering plants, sheltered under warming charms -- goldenrod and mahonia, cockscombs and salvia -- filling the hall with their subtle spice. She had more than enough help with the task.

A letter had come by owl, the week before, and when she'd opened it at the staff breakfast table, she'd forsaken all sense of a Deputy's propriety and fairly jigged for joy. A hasty conference with Minerva had assured a return owl. Neville Longbottom arrived in the quiet of early morning two days later, making straight for the greenhouses. They'd scarcely seen or heard him since, except at the occasional meal, but Pomona assured them he was peacefully content with having his arms elbow-deep in

compost and slumbering mandrake rootlings.

It was Horace who took credit for creating the shimmering mist that hovered in the corners and alcoves, under the tables and high in the rafters, casting muted halos around Filius' hovering turnip lanterns. A soothing, gentle smoke of scent, it called to mind those things that spelled the peace of home.

"To bewitch us all, just a bit," he'd said with a chuckle, "After all, potions aren't always brewed for a serious purpose. There are those which are merely pleasing."

And might ensnare the senses, if only for a while, Minerva thought.

The fiercest of adversaries have been known to cease conflict for a while, given the offer of food and comfort. The returning Houses of Hogwarts were no exception.

Even Death Eater families had suffered lack and deprivation during the final days of the Dark War. A leader with no mortal needs had little regard for those of his followers. A certain degree of starvation kept men and beasts on edge, lusting for blood and pillage. Promise much, but allow only enough for them to lift their wands or bare their claws effectively.

Resistance families had access to even less, and meager portions served to quiet empty stomachs for only a little while. Whatever their ancestry or loyalty, these youth of Hogwarts shared one overwhelming bond at the moment. They were hungry for food and company without demands attached, a need that Filius and the elves anticipated and soon met.

Fish and fowl, roast and chop, the platters of meats were laden. Mountains of potatoes and parsnips, heaps of vegetables, rounds of cheese, baskets of bread -- the harvest of lakes, pastures and gardens. Simple food to fill the belly and calm the spirit. Need does not stand on ceremony, and none was required as plates and bowls were passed from hand to hand, with no one really caring which House sent the next course around the table.

And there was laughter, raucous and wonderful, just as Filius had hoped, when the ghosts presented their pantomime of Beadle the Bard's more humorous tales.

After pudding -- baked apples drenched in cream, in keeping with the blessed Season of Samhain -- Minerva stood, her tartan robes rich with autumn color, her hat wreathed with leaves of oak and ivy. As one, the staff beckoned with their wands and the turnip lanterns descended to hover in front of the students, one for each of them.

"In the past," Minerva's voice filled the room, "it has always been the custom for the Headmaster or Headmistress of Hogwarts to make their welcoming speech within the Great Hall. That is not yet possible so we will proceed, together, into an even greater hall. I ask that you keep your wands at your sides and unlit for the moment. If you will, please follow me."

In solemn procession, the students and professors, the elves and ghosts, all exited the hall through the massive oaken doors that Filch had propped open with the heads of broken gargoyles that had fallen from the ruined battlements.

Guided by the glow of lantern light and the risen moon, directed in silence by the professors, the students circled a great pyre of boughs that Charlie and Neville had built earlier in the day.

"Before the Founders, before this castle was summoned into being, there was magick." A sigh of wind carried Minerva's voice around the circle. "From the time beyond all memory until all time shall cease, magick was, is, and ever shall be. We are favored to stand in this hall of earth and sky.

"This is the blessing of Samhain, the longest night, when life enters into darkness and sleep, waiting for the Light's return." Her gaze swept the courtyard, seeing every face. "These recent years have been full of talk of who is chosen and who must not be named. None of us is left untouched by war. Tomorrow, as the dawn comes, the cycle begins anew -- the nights will be cold, but each day will be a little brighter, the light will remain a little longer. That is our example. Each of you -- every House -- is named and chosen.

"I am not so naïve as to think that you will all become sworn friends or even willing allies. Respect can be earned, trust can be nurtured, but neither is guaranteed. I cannot require that you love or even care for one another. I can, however, require that you remain decent to one another. Any who are not, will not be permitted to stay.

"If we are in accord, lift your wands, and we will light our Samhain fire, remembering that we are one school, built upon four strong pillars. Professors, join me, please, and four by four, one student from each House come behind us until all have called the light."

Nine times the call "Incendio" rang within the courtyard walls, nine times the Samhain fire leapt higher still into the night.

"The Light and the Darkness are in balance and all here are blessed. Now we'll send you to your beds. Work begins in the morning," Minerva advised as the professors began to shepherd their students back inside.

"Professor Slughorn, sir, are we sharing the quarters of the other Houses?" a Slytherin, Leland Worthington, asked in dismay.

"No, my boy, the sharing of quarters is mutual to all," the Potions master answered. "Ours are theirs and theirs are ours. Perhaps you and your mates can set the example of how the gentlemen of Slytherin take up residence in rough circumstances with civilized decorum and orderly efficiency. Our Slytherin young women have already set the barre on the matter, I believe. Now, off with you. Advanced Potions commences at nine sharp."

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If in Wales the breath of dragons waits in hard and dark concealment, in Scotland it shows itself soft and gray upon the open ground.

Minerva had always enjoyed the swirl of fog around her feet. There was something feline in the way it moved, silently stretching itself into whatever crevice took its fancy, holding itself aloof from touch, advancing and withdrawing as it saw fit. There was no depth or height it could not claim.

Even the Samhain embers had accepted the fog's supremacy. Only ash remained, blowing across the courtyard in feeble imitation of the mist. Far too early for anyone to be about -- even Charlie was still asleep in his snug loft above the stables. Soon enough, the elves would rouse and begin the task of breakfast, but for now, only Minerva was awake.

She had intended to walk the path along the lake, to spend an hour with her thoughts. Her address to the students had been of some effect, she knew, but old habits and lingering perceptions would not disappear so easily. Soon enough, a remark would be made, a hex leveled, and the temporary calm would vanish. Rebuilding the castle would be easy by comparison.

Knowing the air would be cold, she'd left her hat behind, choosing instead her heavier cloak with its deep cowl. It was fortunate that no Muggle, recklessly crossing the moors before dawn, would have the opportunity of seeing her. They would surely flee for home in terror, with tales of Death roaming the wastes.

Savoring the touch of mist on her face and hands, she crossed the lawns, heading towards the memorial henge.

"Mineeeervaaaaa McGonagaaaaa!"

All around her were the creak of branches, the whisper of leaves hastening across the frozen ground, the flutter of a night bird's wings. If she were the fanciful sort, she might think she heard the pleading voices of those who had fallen in battle, calling to her, but she had never been a romantic, and fog had a way of transfiguring simple sounds.

"Mineeeervaaaaa... come... I beg you... come..."

Curious, the way one could imagine their own name to be a song the wind would sing at dawn.

"Come here to me... I will not leave this place until you come..."

This, Minerva recognized, was no gypsy wind, wandering in search of haven. This was a summoning -- strong enough to tear the Veil, so full of anguish that Death itself would obey.

Throwing back her cowl, her wand in hand, the Headmistress of Hogwarts strode in all her power towards the great gates of the castle, and found them locked and warded still, breached only by what was surely a duine sidhe's piercing wail. But there -- just beyond the wards, shrouded in the fog -- sweet blessed Circe, beyond...

A woman, robed in gray, her face veiled in fine pale hair frenzied by the wind -- a terrible beauty, a pieta of sorrow, clasping to her heart a body as thin as a wisp of smoke, the face concealed by heavy ropes of hair, dark with dirt and damp, one arm outstretched upon the ground, black sleeve pulled back against the Mark of Death, slender fingers curled in waxy stillness.

The duine sidhe's mourning cry could not match the silent shriek that tore in that moment through Minerva's heart.

'He's died... oh gods... oh gods... Riddle's curse has somehow taken him... He's died and I wasn't there... The duine sidhe has brought his body home... I wasn't there...'

And yet... Even as her knees threatened to give way, Minerva's mind cleared, her sight demanding clarity of thought.

The hair, the man's hair... Not raven black -- but tarnished silver -- Slytherin silve...

And the woman, lifting her face in agony...

Not spectral but nakedly mortal, with skin as pale as funerary ash and eyes wept raw... and in her arms...

Narcissa Malfoy, on her knees at the gates, cradling the motionless body of her only child...

"Mistress of Hogwarts, take my life in payment, but help me... I beg... Minerva... please... my son... my Draco... He means to go to Severus..."

## Chapter Twelve: From This Path, Shall Be No Turning

*Chapter 12 of 14*

He cupped his hands to his mouth, thinking to call out -- but swallowed his voice. Perhaps his shout would make no sound. Not a comforting thought... And if it did? What if he called -- again and again -- and no one answered? What if he called only once and someone did?

Chapter Twelve: From This Path, Shall Be No Turning

*He was barefoot. Like a house-elf, he thought... or a child.*

*Crouched against the silted sand of a primal shore that spoke of nothing he recognized, Draco shuddered with cold, as though all of him were naked, not just his feet. A stab of vulnerability pierced him as a skim of waves crept closer and a stiff breeze lifted the heavy tangle of hair from his shoulders.*

*Running his hands across his chest and along his thighs, he realized that he no longer wore his black from... before...*

*Not that it mattered, so much, except... He couldn't quite remember when... before... had been...*

*But the where... That he could remember...*

*He'd chosen the place... By way of a demand, really... and as some faint guarantee against failure... The worn stones at the foot of Hogwarts' boar-graced gates... He'd always been a bit annoyed with those great iron beasts, with their absurdly improbable wings... He'd wondered, in his first year, if they might not be charmed to report to the Heads of House or even to the Headmaster himself. Merlin knows, McGonagall had always seemed to show up at the damndest times... Still, they'd been accommodating enough to his presence as he'd waited in the shadows, watching the Samhain flames drop away to ash... But had he heard them calling out to him as he fell? No, that was nonsense. Statuary would hardly give a bloody damn what he was about... But something... someone... had been wailing... as if their heart would burst... had nearly pulled him back just as he slipped Between... As though they loved him... beyond all reason... and would have followed... A woman... It was... He should know... He might still... But no, the memory was too dim to hold its shape...*

*Here... in this... now... he was dressed in denims faded to the color of smoke and a shabby white shirt, collar open and sleeves rolled haphazardly to the elbow. Old clothes... Someone's cast-offs... So... ordinary...*

*But why no boots, he wondered, scrabbling further back from the encroaching waterline. It made no sense not to have them, not if he was going to...*

*Search...*

*He was supposed to be searching.*

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There was a humbling contentment in surfacing to wakefulness in the same bed for sixty-four days straight, although, if Horace was pressed on the matter, he'd hardly tarnish his dignity with an admission that he'd been keeping count. To lay one's head on a familiar pillow and not need magic to make it suitable -- such a small but welcome comfort. Indeed, his accommodations were most satisfactory, except for this infernal poking of some wayward bedspring into his shoulder... Quite bothersome... Strange that he hadn't noticed it before... Perhaps a cushioning charm...

The diffusion of sleep that filmed his eyes suffered nothing from the light that ghosted through the mullions above his bed. Lowering his lids once more with a grunt of irritation, Horace shifted his weight, seeking a few more minutes of repose against what promised to be a cheerless gray morning. The arms of Nyx were warm and

welcoming around...

Damn and hex... This cursed bedspring was becoming maddeningly persistent, and its poking was growing... rhythmic... and vocal...

"Up, now. Old Cauldron Keeper must be awake. There is no more sleeping. There is getting out of bed."

Hardly the dulcet voice of slumber's lovely patroness... More like...

A house-elf -- and a very demanding one at that...

With a phlegmy snort, Horace squinted himself awake to meet the unrepentant gaze of Pinkham, Minerva's senior attending elf. The creature stood with a bony finger poised to launch another barrage of pokes and was clearly not about to be denied a prompt response.

"Headmistress is requiring you. No delay -- hurry quick," the elf croaked, fairly convulsing with agitation as he yanked the blankets from off the bed. Stepping back to allow Horace to sit up properly, Pinkham brandished the heavy dressing gown that was clutched in his free hand.

"Cover sleeping clothes with this," he demanded. "Mistress says bring you with no stopping."

Wincing at the intrusion of cold air on his spindly shins, Horace reached for his wand, muttering to himself. Cheeky thing, this elf, waking him so rudely... Hardly the proper fashion to begin the day, but a bit more light and a warming charm would...

The dressing gown was thrust into his lap, and the stomp of Pinkham's bare feet on the flagged floor barely missed assaulting his own.

"Young Slytherin is through the Veil. Mistress calls your promise."

Through the... Someone was dead? A student? One of his... One of theirs... His promise... On the heart of his wand... he'd sworn...

Snatching the brocaded robe from the elf, Horace threw it around his shoulders and stumbled for the door of his chamber, forfeiting only the time required to Summon his slippers. Gaining steadier footing, he swept through the young men's quarters, wand at the ready, his heart lurching, his eyes darting... here... there... counting, searching for an empty bed but finding none. Everywhere were soundly sleeping youths, their arms and legs flung akimbo in the total abandon of their slumbers. Nothing seemed amiss... No one masked and robed for Death, standing in triumph over a broken body...

One of their young witches, then? Attacked... taken... under Pomona's very nose... Dear blessed gods... again... Again? But the wards... surely between Minerva and the Castle...

Even as Horace turned towards the double doors of the girls' dormitory, a strong gnarled hand seized his tasseled belt, urging him to focus on a different direction.

"Not these," Pinkham rasped, reading his face. "These are safe, not hurt, not stolen. Old Master comes this way, should follow me. No more puzzling what is wrong. Mistress says to have you run," he insisted, and then, as if recalling the way of things between elf and wizardly folk, added a hasty "if not too much difficulty for not-so-young feet."

His pride a bit ruffled at such an affront to both his age and fortitude, but randomly thankful that the War had, in fact, cost him a few stone, Horace plunged after the elf. Heedless of distractions, they tore past drowsing staircases and brooding alcoves, down arching corridors lined with shrouded portraits, ducking low to pass beneath hovering scaffolds, skirting herds of sawhorses and tidy hillocks of debris, until they reached the small south-facing wing Horace knew Poppy Pomfrey had recently taken as her own.

Her old hospital domain had been one of the earliest casualties of Riddle's assault that dreadful battle night. Despite her shields and the Castle's wards, the instruments and aids of Poppy's arts were consumed in Fiendfyre, her skills for comfort drowned in the wash of healing potions that bled from hundreds of smashed vials. A clear declaration of what she and her wounded could expect at the hands of Lord Voldemort victorious.

Brave Poppy... In the hours that followed, how fiercely she'd fought the pain and death that were allied against her. She'd used all her strength, expended every resource to save their own. If she'd chosen to forsake her Hygeian Oath and had turned away from the suffering of Riddle's fallen, Horace could have forgiven her, believing she'd make her peace later, when there was time. But even those, separated from the rest under the guard of steel-eyed Aurors, were given what remained to her.

"They're barely grown, some of them," she'd snapped when one of the Aurors wondered aloud why she'd waste her time on Azkaban fodder, "the same age as our own young ones. There's some here that *were* ours before that bastard murdered their hearts and marked them..."

At daybreak, dizzied between sorrow and relief, Horace had taken for himself the task of finding Severus's potions reserves. That they existed was never in question. He'd squandered nothing to the hope of breaching the wards of the Shrouded Tower or finding what was wanted in the Headmaster's office. Severus would not cache what was most precious in just one place. There would always be an alternative to any anticipated course of action.

Laboring his way to the top of the Astronomy Tower, scanning the melee of elation and devastation far below, Horace had dropped to his knees in the humility of his exhaustion. If anything useful was hidden, the proper questions needed to be asked and answered, but his heart and mind were battling their own naked truths. He'd been able to offer no contrivance against them. Blatant honesty had seemed his best recourse -- but so dreadfully Hufflepuff that he'd almost laughed. Still, since he was addressing the newly dead -- and aloud, no less -- and hoping for directions not confounded within the usual Slytherin ingenuity... Hoping not to see a pale, bloodied wraith smirking down at him, he'd spoken the few words that occurred to him...

"Severus, where is there help for Poppy, here? She has so little..."

Precisely where Dumbledore had waited, with such exacting deliberation, for the mercy of his spy's vow, the stones had begun to tremble, parting with only a sigh of mortar shivering into dust. An ironwood chest had risen readily under Horace's beckoning wand to rest in front of him. No auras of light, no quivers of magic -- just the chest, shadowed and silent in its waiting, like its maker.

Horace could still recall the grace of Poppy's scrubbed-raw hands when he'd brought her the portions trove. She'd received it so gently, and his heart had seized with pride and grief when she'd raised the lid with a whispered, "Necesse vel Somnium, Severus?"

Meticulously arrayed within were flasks, vials, and ampoules -- dozens upon dozens of them -- each labeled in a terse black script, outlining their unflinching purpose -- with that beautiful, terrible voice almost tangible in the words. Here -- these will be useful for healing those fortunate -- or damned -- enough to remain alive. And these -- they may offer some small dignity for the dying. Poppy had scarcely breathed when she'd touched them, so afraid, she was, that they might vanish.

"I'd pester him for whatever I needed, and he'd scowl at me so. Necessity or some foolishness, he'd want to know..." Poppy's face was an unwritten page as she turned the lid, over and over, in her hands. "I'd laugh... say something about the necessity of foolishness, and there'd be this smallest bit of a smile... Not so you'd notice... unless you knew him..."

In the blatantly hopeful light of that Sundered morning, she'd asked Horace if perhaps he'd fetch her some strong tea, a good cuppa not conjured by a wand but made by the elves, brewed by their hands... living hands... Anxious for her well-being, he had stepped closer, touching her arm in fragile comfort, in some faint hope of his own reassurance. She was fine, she'd said, quite all right, only wanted a moment... please... just a moment to herself... to take stock... make an inventory of what had been left them...

Glancing back as he'd left on his meager errand, Horace had suspected he'd seen a tremor run through her body -- that she'd been close to tears -- but later, he'd chosen to believe he was mistaken. Madam Poppy Pomfrey had rarely been inclined to trembling or losing herself to weeping...

Racing, now, to keep some measure of pace with Pinkham, Horace realized it was his own hands that were palsied by dread.

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*If he'd had any boots, he would have had a proper place to stow his wand, but there was evidently no need for that. On either side of Life, it seemed that privilege -- no longer his given right, not any more -- would still be kept from him. He had hoped, though... a little...*

*Draco's fingers curled into themselves, lonely for the weight of hawthorn and unicorn hair.*

*A hasty search of his pockets had revealed nothing -- no charmed coinage, no spelled scrap of ticket. A fool's errand... Had he truly thought he'd be met and made welcome, that he might simply hand over the proper fare to whomever waited and be directed onward? There was no Express here, no Thestral-drawn carriage -- not even a great vessel with some immortal Hagrid at the helm, his lantern held high to show the way.*

*All of his life, he'd rarely been without someone hovering at his elbow to cater to his whims, had never had to consider the finer points of solitude. Not until...*

*Now, at least, he had a better understanding. He was alone -- the sojourner left unclaimed. Baggage left behind at King's Cross might have fared better...*

*This was such a still and vacant place -- no disk of sun or moon that he could see, everything in shades of gray and silver, without so much as the depth of a shadow to draw the eye. Even the waves and the wind were silent.*

*He cupped his hands to his mouth, thinking to call out -- but swallowed his voice. Perhaps his shout would make no sound. Not a comforting thought... And if it did? What if he called -- again and again -- and no one answered? What if he called only once and someone did?*

*Until he knew more, it would be better to endure the silence -- and to keep it. He had, after all, been warned... and very plainly...*

*"When thy Making should prick thy veins and send thee forth,*

*Trust no senses of thy mortal flesh, lest they deceive thee into madness."*

*With shaking hands, Draco tugged down his sleeves, fumbling clumsily with the buttons at his wrists. It was the slash of cold that made his muscles seize and twist, nothing more than that... This urgency about wanting to cover his arms... the left one first... Simply so he could be warmer, that was all... Nothing to do with having doubts or... being afraid... No... Otherwise, he'd never have the will to even move, and he must... stand up... Besides, his choice, this time... His... It was... It is... He'd meant to be here... was supposed to be... here... had a debt to be answered to... He was only being... cautious, nothing more... Anyone would be... coming here... Anyone...*

*The sting of an icy wave against his knees wrested Draco's attention back from his thoughts. With a deliberate show of calm, he rose to his feet, turning his back to the water, and crossed the tide-tamped sand until he reached a low swell of dunes, netted in place by silvery sedge. Dropping cross-legged to the ground, he burrowed his back into the yielding grass, which, thankfully, was at least dry.*

*His shivering had lessened, despite the wave's onslaught, and his heart had ceased to race. Should he even be cold or feel his heart steadying? The silent wind smelt of salt and rust -- but should he even have the breath to notice such things? Everything that lay around him might be a reflection of illusion. Perhaps if he closed his eyes, he could think more clearly, reason out the why... Consider, weigh, discard or include... Just as he'd been shown, again and again, for seven years... As with a potion... the one he'd made... the one that brought him... here...*

*There was no guide, no transport and, unlike the Muggles' martyred god, he had no skill to walk on water. No hippogriff to mount, the Fey be thanked, and he'd not been taught otherwise how to fly... not without his broom... not like...*

*Gods, he was weary, to the point his body felt as though it were seeping into the very ground beneath him. He really ought not to sleep, shouldn't even need to, should he, being here? And in the open... But maybe, for just a bit, seeing as he seemed condemned to walk, and likely for a very long while. Perhaps, if he waited, rested, there might be better light in time... so that he could see... find the way... what... way...*

*Draco's lids closed, and the gray fell into black.*

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In that first moment, bracing to a wheezing halt behind Pinkham, Horace dared one final hope that Minerva's summons might have been excessive in its urgency.

The doors of the infirmary were wide-flung. Twin rows of white-draped beds stood in smartly ranked attendance, the windows behind each charmed so that the light touching a patient should always be gently filtered, and any visiting breezes, soothing. The muted glow of wand light tented only one bed, the one most distant, the last in its row. The form within seemed long and slight, but too far from Horace for the face to be clear. The profile, though, appeared to be young... familiar...

Peering through the thin light slipping in from outside, he could just make out Poppy, already dressed in her matron's robes, the soft wool and pristine linen of her calling. All her aspects were as they should be, even her cap, with its sweep of starched white wings that extolled her authority over illness and injury as she bent over her patient.

Her alder wand was sweeping through the air in whorls and arcs of great complexity, and he could hear her strong, steady incantations flowing beneath another witch's voice -- educated, elegant -- clearly accustomed to being heard. The wand light caught the flash of hair as pale as tangled flax, and Horace felt his throat tighten.

"For pity's sake, Pomfrey, another vial... another... These are Severus', you're quite sure? Why is there no effect? His potions never failed, never..."

Horace could not see the woman whose voice collapsed into whispered sobs of desperate demand.

"Wake him... You must. You know how... you do... you've cared for him, before... you have... He likes you... He does..."

The witch's voice began to rise, pitching towards hysteria.

"Headmistress, I have already said I will give anything... I swear it... My life... a vow... what must I promise you?"

Horace could almost feel the weight of Minerva McGonagall's counterpoint.

"Hardly my wish, Narcissa, but if you cannot calm yourself and be of use, I will surely quiet you for your own sake," she snapped. "Come now, witch, tell me, is this the vial that was used, the only one? Horace will need to know..."

Horace could never have sworn what dragged him forward, whether it was Pinkham's tugging hand, his own unsteady gait, or that most unexpected name. His only focus was Minerva's grim face when the sound of his approach attracted her attention.

As she hurried towards him, her heels drumming double time across the flagstones, Horace felt as if the ground beneath him were crouching in wait.

"What's happened?" he demanded, clutching at her shoulder. "Your elf says one from my House... Through the Veil, he said... Merlin help us, Minerva, why is Lady Malfoy

here and in such a state? Her boy's not even here. Neither of them has been seen since Lucius..."

Before his Headmistress could begin to shape an answer, Horace released his grip on her robes and staggered towards the bed, scenting the air, his grizzled head raised like a hound's.

Every well-wrought potion, exactly rendered, bears the underlying trace of its maker's hands, a signature of the senses for those with a finer skill for recognition. Horace could offer thanks to some beneficence that neither age nor indulgence had robbed him of that gift.

The clean breath of lavender and sweet flag hung in the air, but were overshadowed by deeper, richer pungencies -- juniper root and tansy leaf, phoenix ash and thestral dung. A *Suscitatio* of the most powerful measure -- calling and summoning -- demanding an awakening, tolerating no refusal...

Only against the strongest Draught of Living Death would Poppy need such a powerful potion...

Horace clenched his fists against the lingering notes of Severus that reached his nostrils. Sharp as a blade, they were, brilliant, balanced, perfect... wrenching...

And of no avail...

The beast beneath Horace's feet no longer crouched in wait. It writhed and bucked beneath him as he sank into the chair beside the bed, his vision swimming between the bloodless face of Narcissa Malfoy -- willing herself not to scream -- and the empty visage of her son, his rigid fingers locked around a slender silver cylinder.

The dread that had run with Horace through the halls of Hogwarts settled itself into his hands as he firmly pried the vial from Draco's grasp. Moving to the window several paces from the bed, he fought the tremors of his fingers as he gripped his wand and cast his *Protego*.

Offering a silent appeal to whatever deity might care to hear him, Horace carefully removed the stopper. A strangling scent rose to hover in rank miasma -- heavy with the stink of thorn apple and henbane. A profound potion, perfectly crafted, correct in all its essences -- but its maker's signature far too young for the terrible gravity of its purpose. Far too young, indeed. No fame or glory brewed or bottled, here -- but death? Ah, now that had been most impeccably stoppered, curse that infernal speech the boy had, no doubt, swallowed like dark honey.

Shaking his head in dismay, Horace lowered his shield and turned back to the waiting witches, ringed around the bed. Narcissa, her pale hair a spreading hood around her shoulders, stood slowly swaying, never taking her eyes from Poppy's swiftly darting hands. The cobra and the mongoose -- and Minerva, the lioness between them. Poor cobra, he thought, she must allow the lioness and the mongoose to prevail or nothing can be done.

"It is not the Living Death that holds this boy, Poppy," he hissed. "All your store of *Suscitatio*, even though it was brewed by Severus' own hand, will not wake him."

Horace knew he dared not be too gentle with Narcissa. Her sanity would shatter in an instant if he gave her that permission. If they lost her to her grief, there could well be no turning back from that pit, and she would be powerless to help her son.

Willing his pity for her to withdraw, he forced her attention to him, his voice carrying none of its usual satisfied affection.

"Lady Malfoy, it would appear young Draco has achieved a terrible Making."

The cylinder glinted in his creviced palm, as though it sought to take the wand light for its own.

"This is Viator Cuspis, the Traveler's Blade. Even with Severus as his master, I would not have thought he had gained the ability, and certainly not the inclination. Severus would not have encouraged such a thing, though Riddle might..."

At the edge of his anger, Horace saw that Minerva was tight-fisted, that she'd turned nearly as pale as Narcissa. Merlin, she looked as though *she* were the one close to screaming. He'd noticed that, from the day he'd sat in her office -- how even the slightest mention of Severus seemed to wall her into some far place...

"Madam, your boy's gone to walk Between, remaining with neither the living nor the dead."

He could no longer hold back his pity as he watched Narcissa, swaying, clutching at the empty air...

"Gods help you both, what has this poor, arrogant child begun?"

## Chapter Thirteen: Tokens Of An Uneasy Devotion

*Chapter 13 of 14*

"What hope is it that you were holding to, Draco, to make you craft this Traveler's Blade? Poor lad... Severus is dead... You cannot bring him back to us, and you mustn't go to him..." Her attention lingered on the pale scarred hands, the heavy cowl of oily hair and the too-thin frame. "Were you thinking you'd somehow find a path that would let you become Severus, child?"

### Chapter Thirteen: Tokens Of An Uneasy Devotion

She was quiet--at last--just as the hourglass marked its last grains of midday, though it had taken the threat of exile to an anteroom of the Great Hall to convince Narcissa Malfoy to swallow a Calming Draught and lie down on the bed adjacent to her son's.

"The curtains between us, Madam Pomfrey, you're not to close them. Are we clear?" She had walled her voice in ice. "Order your elves to keep them open. If... *When* Draco wakes, he's to know that I have not left him... One hour... Understand me... No more... Until the Headmistress returns... I'm to be informed without delay when she does... or if my son..."

Poppy simply nodded, biting back a sharp response. It was pointless to waste her effort parrying words from a woman who was clearly marshalling every possible defense against her terrors.

Slumping back against the pillows heaped behind her, Narcissa abruptly shielded her face with her hands, her voice faltering into little more than a whisper as the Draught began to take effect.

"Your pardon, Madam... I do regret... I am behaving so badly... making demands with you of all people... I have no right and you have little cause to be kind to me... or my son... except for who you've always been..." Narcissa let her hands fall heavily to her sides, as though lifting their weight was more than she could bear. "Please... Madam... Poppy..." she forced a rigid smile, "I only meant... if you would... if I do sleep... wake me... should anything..."

With only a moment's patience needed to confirm that emotion, exhaustion, and the Draught had drawn Narcissa into surrender, Poppy studied the woman who had crumpled onto her side as though felled by a brutish fist.

The manor-born perfection of Narcissa's profile was dulled by the shadows of strain that bruised her high, pale cheekbones. One fine-boned hand was tangled in the dishevelment of her unbound hair while the other, drooping with lethargy, still reached for her son. At rest, the grim set of her mouth had softened, as though behind her grief she sheltered some precious revelation.

Her charcoal robes of fine loden cloth hinted at careful alteration, but failed to hide that her figure had passed from fashionably slender to merely under-fed. Their severity boasted no trace of the Alencon laces and Kashmiri embroideries she'd always worn with such indifferent elegance, even as an ornament of a girl already plighted in her seventh year to Lucius Malfoy. She wore no jewels other than her trothing.

Though Poppy knew it was unlikely she'd be heard, it was in her nature to offer the rhythm of her voice as a cornerstone for those lulling reassurances that urgency had not allowed earlier.

"The *Prophet* said you refused to give up that ring when the Aurors came for your husband, and our Harry says you lied straight-out to Tom Riddle there at the last. Terrible risks to take... and brave..." The starched wings of Poppy's cap fluttered as she shook her head. "First our Severus lost to us, and now the two of you come to Hogwarts of all places... Far more, I'd say, to the Slytherin heart than most would give credit to... We see what we look for, I suppose..." She gave Narcissa's outstretched hand a small squeeze. "You'd give all that's left you for Draco to be safe, wouldn't you? And Lucius, if he's ever free of Azkaban... So, here you are, and more like your Andromeda than you knew..."

Poppy's gaze shifted to Draco, as still as death in the bed beside them. "I believe you'd ransom your last breath to protect your child... You and Molly Weasley ought to have a chat." She laughed, softly, a little surprised that she could. "Now, there would be something to relish."

Careful not to jostle her awake, Poppy tugged at Narcissa's cetus-leather boots, grateful they came off without any problem. The fact that shoes of sylphan silk had been forsaken for something far more sensible wasn't lost on her. "Planned ahead for being on foot--and in rough places, I see," she smiled in approval. "You're a survivor at heart, aren't you, my girl? Good to know." With a practiced flick of her wand, she settled an eiderdown coverlet around Narcissa's shoulders. "Now, you stay asleep, and give me a bit of time to see what this son of yours has done to himself... Nothing good, that's plain..."

Relieved to be spared the hindrance of a desperate mother, Poppy rolled her sleeves above the elbow and wanded a pile of flannels, a pewter basin, and a ewer of steaming water, fragrant with cedar, to settle on the bedside table. Without a fuss, she began to tend to Draco, her thoughts sorting themselves as she moved along her familiar path.

A broken bone from a Quidditch fray or a bloody gash from a dragonbriar? Either would seem a blessing. The bruises and stings of wayward spellwork? Little more than splinters. Now that there were students again, with all four Houses studying and--Merlin protect them all--living in such close quarters--she'd soon enough see a goodly share of such things.

There'd be cauldron scalds and the like, and those she'd be all right with, too. Horace was an able enough Potions master, but he was no Severus. He'd admitted as much, many's the time, over the last few months...

Severus... Dear gods, what to think about all of that... How many years had he been at Hogwarts? Seven as a student--and sixteen--or seventeen, was it--as a master and the Head of his House? Had it truly been so many? His lifetime was in those years, and yet so few, really, if you measured them against the flow of wizardly time... And his one awful year as Headmaster... Hardly more than the chiming of a clock at the quarter hour...

All that time--and not even the most dim-witted of his students ever suffering a brewing injury of any real consequence. Quite remarkable, what with Potions being such a volatile study. Not that anyone thought to offer him much praise for the importance of such a thing, but she'd certainly noticed... noticed... and appreciated the wonder of it...

There'd been all the lesser brewing mishaps, of course--that was to be expected--just part of a thorough Potions education. Such rivers of tears to be diverted before she could quiet the anxious tics that usually followed close behind, or soothe whatever plaque of blisters and boils appeared. She'd always sent Severus' students straight on back to the dungeons with her assurances that, yes, they would, indeed, survive.

Odd, how that had become just another thread of the ritual woven for them over time--she, bristling to Severus that it absolutely wasn't necessary, for any reason whatsoever, to bully his students so mercilessly just to keep them out of her infirmary--and he, scowling that he'd leave the coddling of puerile idiots in her more-than-capable hands. Rarely, though, had any student ever repeated whatever potions error sent them to her in the first place.

Never acknowledged, really, their comradeship--not something they'd ever felt the need to labor over, not even the handful of times he'd come to her for help, broken beyond what he could remedy himself. Not so many times that it had made any real difference in their understanding--watching him retreat to his dungeons, after his assurances to *her* that, yes, he would--as long as was necessary--survive...

Almost to the end, until the Tower... when Severus had dealt their alliance its killing blow, past any healing...

She'd been so damn sure of its ugly death... until Horace had found that hidden potions chest and left her bloody near undone...

But this Malfoy boy, he seemed to truly be undone--scarcely breathing, body thinned right to the bone, skin as dry and white as chalk... All his spun-silver hair, tarnished dark by sweat and heavy with dirt, straggling past his shoulders in tangled hanks... And his hands, freckled with half-healed burns, his fingertips newly calloused... A young Potter's hands, with their own text of scars... So much here that reminded her... No... too much, to think of that just now...

And there... right there... on his left arm... as black as bier smoke...

It wasn't quite right, then, was it, to think of Draco Malfoy as a boy any longer? Well, then... What to do about this young man...

"So low in the flesh, so high in the bone... lad, I hardly knew ye..." From the look of things, the verse of that old lament could have been written for him.

She'd patched him often enough. If it were put to her, she'd have to admit he'd usually managed to be infuriating but he'd been endearing, too, and more than once... Damnably good at both, he was...

Such a vexing child--far too attached to his family's influence in wizarding society. Full of his own sly intrigues and crowing Quidditch victories, and always with some reason to seek her immediate--and preferably undivided--attention. In the scope of Draco's perceptions, any injury could be elevated to the status of a near-fatal wound.

The first time she'd had any real dealings with him--some recklessness with his glorious new broom--how stunned he'd been that his lineage failed to impress her.

*"I assure you, Mr. Malfoy, your blood is quite red. Whatever blue blood's in you hardly counts with me. You've not lost enough of either to keep you off the pitch and certainly there's nothing here to excuse you from your studies. No need to owl your father about this, I should think. I believe Professor Snape will agree."* Something akin to relief had crossed his face, and she'd briefly wondered just what it was he dreaded answering to. *"Hold steady, now, young man, and let me finish up with you."*

Purely unreasonable demands, more often than not--soap and water, a bit of ice, and a simple balm usually did the trick. Magic wasn't even a factor. The Hippogriff incident had been more serious, no denying that, but the trauma had healed perfectly in less than a week. Somehow, though, young Mr. Malfoy had managed to wring every last

drop of sympathy from his parents--or at least his doting mother--and more than a few of his Housemates, enough to serve his ends for nearly three months.

He should have been thoroughly throttled for the dreadful upset he'd created--and the terrible damage that had spilled over to poor Hagrid.

Heedless... selfish... disgraceful behavior... unworthy of any Hogwarts House...

Why had Severus tolerated such a thing, even though he tended to favor Draco? The lad had proven to be keen on the study of Potions, so certain allowances might have been made. But perhaps that hadn't been entirely the case. Slytherin House did tend to keep its personal disciplines to itself...

Of course, she'd been wary when Draco first stepped outside the preening and posturing of his privilege. From the start, she'd tended to refuse his entourage admittance to her infirmary, and without his attending audience, a subtle shift in temperament would often surface. Since he wasn't busy *being* watched, he began to watch--most attentively, and with a measure of respect that she wouldn't have expected, since she wasn't a professor he'd want to court for House points.

It wasn't so long before he'd begun to comment on her wand work, her spells and charms, and to question her potion choices for the treatment of even the most trivial ailment. He was off-handed about it all, but it would have been naïve to assume he was simply being conversational. Idle chats didn't suit most Slytherins. Severus had always been proof enough of that.

What a curious pattern they'd fallen into, debating healing traditions--potions always holding Draco's favor, of course. He was truly bright, and Circe's robes, the boy did have a wicked wit. In fairness, she couldn't fault him for having been bred to an aristocratic bearing, but what she saw and heard of him in the public eye, she didn't much care for. Only in the haven of her infirmary would young Draco Malfoy show a side of himself she actually enjoyed knowing--enough to think she might encourage him towards a field of Healers' study if that's where his talents lay.

An unguarded and fierce pride--reverence, some might have said--always sparked in the boy's eyes if Severus was even mentioned. There was no question that he, too, hoped to master the "subtle science and exact art of potion-making." How many times had he quoted that speech to her--every word, every intonation--as if it were some Potioners' Creed?

*"Professor Snape swore if I disturbed these Morgaine's Tears before they were safe in your office, he'd have my head for a cauldron. He's been called away, so he's allowing me to bring them even though they're his personal brewing. Of course, who else would dare try to take credit for these--not with his hand-trace so strong on them."*

How devoutly the young Slytherin had handled the opalescent bottle, raising it up to the window to watch the late-day light shiver through it.

*"Lunar-eclipsed larkspur distilled through crushed aragonite. The Headmaster requested these because of the Tournament, is what I've heard. My father provided the funds, naturally, at the Ministry's request. The petals alone were over one-hundred galleons."* Draco's rapt expression had soured as he placed the potion on her desk.

*"Dumbledore really should be more appreciative of what my family provides to this school. Professor Snape would be, if he were Headmaster. He respects the obligations of tradition... not like some."*

Intolerable, for a student to speak about the Headmaster so dismissively, but she'd paused in her reprimand, seeing how fixedly the boy's attention had fastened on the potion, shimmering softly in its vial like flowing mother of pearl.

*"For one full day, a single Tear will hold death dormant within the living, even if the very heart has been pierced."* The words had been ancient and epic, and she'd known Draco was quoting what he'd been taught. *"Professor Snape lectured us on the Arcanum to prepare us for Advanced-level Potions. They're deadly, even to the maker, if you're careless with the brewing... but they're the most powerful of any, all about the balances between life and death... I don't think he's told us everything, though... There's more..."*

To her amazement, a sudden wash of pain had flushed Draco's face.

*"Do you know, Madam, I have... I had... Lyra... My sister's name... For a star, the same as mine. Mother and Father took her to Constanta, on holiday for her first birthday. I wasn't even born yet, not for another six months... She didn't feel well one morning and by moonrise, she just... died. Ty'erian Fever... from the East..."*

Draco's voice had dropped so low, he could scarcely be heard. *"There aren't any portraits or pictures... so I don't know quite how she looked, but like the rest of us, I would think. My father doesn't ... Sometimes... some days, he goes a bit mad... He destroys... things... rare, beautiful things... uses his cane to do it... My mother just goes quiet for days..."*

So dreadful, hearing that, never having known--so unexpected, seeing vulnerability in Draco's eyes, but there it had been, bleak and raw.

*"There hadn't been any Ty'erian deaths in pureblood families for three generations, so probably it was some... half-blood... she caught it from... No one could brew the Arcanum against it quickly enough--or well enough--to save her. They buried her there in Constanta and came home right after. Father was afraid for my mother... and for me, I suppose."*

Draco had cupped his hand around the small vial, as though yearning to hold it again.

*"Professor Snape could have... He doesn't make mistakes... I've asked but he says I'm not likely to be ready for the Arcanum anytime soon. It doesn't matter--eventually I'll master them--all of them..."* With a shrug, he'd shed his reverie, hardened his face. *"The professor said you'd want to have some of this in supply. Potter's probably going to need it the very first day of the Tournament. That would be brilliant--the bloody Chosen One having to show some respect..."*

Unnerving at times, those drawing nuances of Lucius' mentoring reflected in Draco's voice...

*"Are you certain that you're quite content here, Madam Pomfrey, being simply the Matron for so many years? That hardly seems much of a life. I could mention something if you thought you'd prefer a more suitable position at St. Mungo's..."*

Arrogant pup, he'd bruised her pride with that, enough to get himself pointed out the door without another word. It was only later that she'd considered the odd notion that perhaps he'd fancied himself as her benefactor, that he'd intended his offer as payment for a favor owed... Hardly appropriate, and disheartening that he'd thought it necessary...

She might have written him off as yet another entitled pureblood, destined for some pinnacle of empty acclaim. Maddening, that she couldn't quite dismiss him, though...

She wasn't fooled, not a bit of it, whenever he'd pretended to fall asleep on one of her beds, but no real harm in it, allowing him to stay another hour before rousing him with a cup of tea and releasing him to his House. Perhaps he'd hoped to be catered to just a while longer--or had simply craved the calm and peace. She'd seen self-doubt and false bravado often enough to know the signs. Surrounded by admirers and rivals, Draco Malfoy was terrified of falling into failure and obscurity--and was quite alone, even with his flanking guard of Crabbe and Goyle, not to mention the grasping affections of Miss Parkinson and the like.

The pity was, the boy had strong instincts for Healing theory--she'd seen it, knew it. He could actually deserve the princely success his House expected of him. Somehow, she'd thought she'd like to see that happen. But hadn't she thought the same thing about Severus, years ago, and failed to act quickly enough? A bitter pill, that she might make the same mistake again...

And of course, there'd been Draco's smile...

Without fail... just at the doorway as he'd leave her infirmary...

Not his usual cultivated smirk, offered in counterpoint to the properly gauged nod... This was an open and genuine smile... The slightest bit crooked... Beautiful because it wasn't quite perfect...

*"Thank you, Madam, for always taking care of me..."*

But, she hadn't quite managed that, had she?

Almost the end of his sixth year... the last time she'd spoken to Draco, when Severus had ordered him to her. He'd looked dreadful. Eyes narrowed against the light, wand hand clenched against its own twitching, he'd paced and prowled, refusing to have his scarring wounds examined, however much she'd threatened and coerced. She'd already heard the whispers that he'd taken the Dark Lord's Mark and she'd wondered if he was proud to carry it... She hadn't asked... Merlin's Heart, she should have done...

*"I've only come because Professor Snape expects it. He's already seen personally to my recovery from Potter's attack, so there's no point to my being here. There's nothing I want from you... Matron."*

Matron... Not Madam or even Pomfrey... Denying her... Distancing himself...

He'd had only one question for her that day.

*"Tell me... Matron... has anyone died that you were responsible for? I wonder, did you grieve, knowing that you'd failed them?"*

Even as his words twisted in the air, he'd moved towards the door as though any reply she'd give was hardly worth his attention. Gods, how she'd wanted to hex that damn fatalistic arrogance straight out of him, to purge whatever had poisoned him. She could see no trace of the annoying, elegant boy she'd rather grown to like... and she could taste her bitter pill.

*"Yes, Mr. Malfoy--twice over, the answer is yes. I've suffered both, and will again, no doubt."* The shadow of something unreadable had darkened his face, just then. His signs hadn't been so clear, anymore. It would have been easy enough to reach out, touch his arm--the marked one--but the rigid set of his stance had warned her off.

*"Since, as you've said, there is nothing you want from me, I'll ask you to leave. I'd hope not to see you here again."*

*"Then, I'll leave you to that hope."* He'd bowed, then--formal and unsmiling--as graceful as a crane descending. *"I do thank you... Madam Pomfrey... for having been... kind... to me."*

With the slightest gesture, he'd conjured a sprig of white bellflower and one of monkshood, placing both on the table just inside the door as he departed.

She wouldn't have expected him to bother knowing the language of flowers. He'd once dismissed the humble posies her patients left outside her office door by way of thanks.

*"Pitiful weeds... Really, Madam Pomfrey, if you enjoy bouquets, I can have them sent to you from my mother's gardens. She wouldn't mind, if it pleased me. Our rooms at the Manor are always full of roses, even in the dead of winter..."*

Of course she'd cautioned him against excessive gifts, but seeing she'd hurt him a little by her refusal, she'd told him how a single bloom, sincerely given, could speak volumes. He'd simply shrugged and changed the subject.

Bellflower...left in token of gratitude and constancy? For all those times she'd cared for him, challenged him, and looked past his mask? But, he'd willingly chosen both the Mask and the Mark, hadn't he?

And the monkshood... The perfect flower for a Death Eater... telling of poisonous words and mortal danger, a warning to beware and yield before the power of a superior enemy--all cloaked in the dark chivalry of a born Slytherin...

She'd meant to spell the flowers into ash, but she'd waited a bit too long. A house-elf had tidied later in the day, and they were simply... gone. Draco Malfoy had made no more visits.

Yet, here he was...

*And with a terrible need for kindness*, Poppy thought, as she slid her arm behind his neck, intending to deal with the ravages of his hair.

Carding gently with her fingers, she suddenly felt the resistance of a short plait, worked deep within the matted locks. Cradling Draco's head in the crook of her elbow, hefting the woven hair gingerly in her palm, she could feel the weight of something trapped inside its length. Wary, averting her eyes as she shielded his face with her free hand, she murmured a spell to counter the magic that kept it bound.

*"Solve vestri captivus. Free your captive."*

Slowly, the strands of hair began to unwind, sliding lightly across her skin like a trickle of oil, until the object within was visible.

With a start, Poppy realized she was holding a great viper's fang, a tapering crescent of sinister grace, as long and thick as her thumb. The deadly tip was blunted with silver filigree, and the hollow throat was capped with a faceted emerald stopper. Her cautious shake produced a faint rustle of whatever was hidden within. Not liquid then, she reasoned, but something else... something solid but light...

"A brother to that vial of yours, Draco?" Poppy muttered, setting the fang to one side and returning to her task. "We'll leave this for Minerva and Horace, I think. They can speak with Albus' portrait about it if they like. I only wish that.... Ah, never mind... a hope long gone..."

A few minutes more, and all was done. Mother and son, both settled with as much peace and safety as either might dare hope for.

There was other work to be started elsewhere in the infirmary, but Poppy found she was unwilling to move away from either bedside--not with Narcissa's voice still sounding in her head.

"He means to go to Severus..."

Narcissa had whispered those words, over and over, until a gorgon's glare from Minerva had silenced her. Her litany made no sense. If Draco thought to follow his Head of House through the Veil, why had he crafted a potion that would send him only half the way on that dark journey?

A simple poison would have served him well enough if he truly meant to die... But why would he intend to do so? Draco had always shown affection--a fierce devotion, even--to his mother. Why would he abandon her to such a torture? She would never recover... he must know that...

And would he willingly choose to become his father's Dementor by ending his own life? His worship of Lucius and the pendulum shift between harsh disdain and fond indulgence that was the response--perhaps that was what had passed for love between them. Poppy had seen Lucius Malfoy as he tore through the Great Hall in search of his son--the madness of shame and grief harrowing his face. Whatever epiphany he'd reached that awful night, she'd leave him to it.



"What hope is it that you were holding to, Draco, to make you craft this Traveler's Blade? Poor lad... Severus is dead... You cannot bring him back to us, and you mustn't go to him..." Her attention lingered on the pale scarred hands, the heavy cowl of oily hair and the too-thin frame. "Were you thinking you'd somehow find a path that would let you become Severus, child? That wouldn't do, either ... You must come home, you know..."

Thoughtful for a moment, Poppy raised her wand.

"Courage and protection be at either hand," she whispered.

With great care, she tucked the summoned stalk of yellow mullein into Draco's hands, pushing away the unbidden image of his body blessed for burial with a gift of flowers. Wherever he was journeying, perhaps he'd see--and understand--her talisman offered against both their failures.

Rolling down her sleeves, Poppy settled herself to keep watch.

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"Minerva, you may choose to arrange your office however you wish. I often found that to be a most pleasant diversion, adjusting one's surroundings to suit the mood of the moment. A change of the patterns in the room might be best--a fresh start, as it were?"

From the comfort of his frame, Dumbledore cautiously watched the Headmistress circle the vast parameters of the room as though they were the Castle ramparts and she the only sentinel. The air around her was fairly crackling, though what had loosed this particular storm was unclear.

Approaching Minerva through an envoy of mild interest had seemed best, but he was still being thoroughly shunned, and the Headmistress' silent tirade had not lessened. Her pacing continued, the heels of her walking boots pummeling the carpets into submission.

"A change of patterns, Albus, that's what you thought? Oh, and certainly, let's discuss the wisdom of making a fresh start. You've set me such a fine example to follow, after all." She abruptly shattered her silence, slowing not a whit, every angle of her body taut. "Which pattern shall I change, then? So many to pick from, and all of them quite tidily woven together. A very fine tartan, indeed, we've made, and all the Houses well represented, wouldn't you agree?" A grim amusement made a furtive dash across her face. "Pull one thread wrong, and we'll have quite the new tangle. But you've always had your talent for dealing with tangles, haven't you? Just as well--you've certainly had a wand in making a good many of them."

An uneasy murmur of curiosity rippled through the room, every portrait that happened to be awake suddenly alert and eyeing Dumbledore, wondering how he might react to such an accusation.

"I was speaking, actually, of that fine Aladdinian carpet you are destroying, Minerva, but since that is quite obviously not the problem, perhaps you would enlighten me?"

For several long moments, there was no response. Minerva had stopped to stand in spare silhouette against the wavering light filtering in from the massive window that overlooked the courtyard. Dumbledore found himself wishing she would move away to another part of the room. Any part, really, would do nicely, just not that ever-accusing window, though at one time he had favored it himself. Part of his penance, now, to be continually reminded of his lost Keeper--equally spare, scarcely more than a shadow at the last--standing in that same window, hour upon hour--waiting, watching, knowing...

Nodding the other portraits into silence, he remained motionless until the heavy quiet caught Minerva's attention, and she turned to confront him. Dumbledore rose from his cushioned seat to face her.

"Tell me, then, Headmistress... what has happened?"

Nothing else would have served in that moment but to fully acknowledge her authority, what she offered by her expression--regret and sorrow, surely that--courage and strength, always and beyond measure--an angry stain of loss, no question of those traces--but something else, now--an anticipation, ferocious and fragile...

Her Silencing Charm fell over the other portraits as Minerva crossed the room.

"The worst and the best of our old patterns, Albus, come back to haunt us, yet again." She hesitated for a moment, shaping her words as carefully as a spell.

"Draco Malfoy--and his mother--they are both in the South Wing, with Poppy. I discovered them at the gates, just at dawn. Young Mr. Malfoy is in a very bad way, and Narcissa is close to collapse."

There was only the sigh of her robes as she stopped in front of Dumbledore's portrait, so close he could see the glint of the fairie-silver chain around her neck.

He waited, remembering the Tower... the trembling wand hand of a desperate and terrified young man, struggling to summon enough will to tear his soul forever... reprieved by another soul already bloodied...

"Oh, yes, Albus, it's quite true. Now he holds a Traveler's Blade, instead. And, there we have our pattern. A young wizard who's far too untried for whatever choice he's made, however willing and able he might think he is," Minerva whispered, as though she'd seen Dumbledore's thoughts. Perhaps they were written too plainly on his face, or she had simply learned, too well, how to read them.

"Ah, a most dangerous and unwise turning of events, certainly, for our young dragon. Still, not so unlikely as most would think." Seating himself, the old wizard picked up one of the silver trinkets that had been painted into his portrait, idly setting its gears spinning. "I must believe, though, that our Draco has moved beyond rash choices, given the length of time the Blade requires for its completion. Considerable ability with potions, as well... It must be brewed to a singular intent. Was there a reason given for this making?"

Minerva's gaze dropped to the hand-worn volume of Cicero's essays, resting on the corner of her desk, exactly where she'd placed it the day she'd first taken up her reluctant residence and heard Albus' terrible confessions. A private talisman, she'd decided. If the book remained in place, the one who'd left it would return to take it up again.

"Narcissa was quite clear on that, to the point that I wanted to hex her into eternal silence. Over and over, she kept saying... the same thing... that Draco means to walk Between, that he intends to go to..." Minerva hesitated, despair and hope still bannered in her eyes.

"A courageous friend, perhaps?" Dumbledore gently prompted.

"Yes," she nodded, "though I've not been told why the boy wishes to do so. And before you shame me, Albus, with my own words, I do recall what I said about a Slytherin's willingness..."

Before she could continue, Dumbledore raised his hand for her to cease.

"Perhaps, dear friend, that is one of the first tangles we should undo--allowing our shame to overshadow what we learn from past mistakes." The familiar balance between gravity and levity sparkled in his eyes.

"That may be, Albus," Minerva replied, "but this immediate thread is the one we need to stop from fraying any further. The boy may be beyond his senses to try such a thing, not to mention he's on entirely the wrong path..."

Dumbledore frowned, tucking his diverting toy into a sleeve, and rising to begin his own pacing within the confines of his frame.

"Regretfully, Minerva, we cannot simply bring him back. Those who wield the Blade and find no answers have been known to lose their way and not return, or else return in

body but leave their spirit behind." The Headmistress' sharp hiss of dismay brought him to a halt, and he nodded. "I know, Minerva, I know--the same words and all too familiar. That is not to say, however, that this young wanderer may not have companions on his travels. Has Poppy hung any paintings on her infirmary walls just yet?"

Minerva allowed her memory to scan the infirmary--Poppy had been so pleased to have established a usable space, scrupulously clean, well-lit, and reasonably stocked--had made quite the tour for her, just yesterday, a short while before the Welcoming Supper...

*"Did you notice, Minerva, that the old painting of the Hesperides' Garden is here? I thought one of the elves had found it, but they said that wasn't so. It was right there, already in the room, leaning against the wall. The Castle... perhaps She wanted me to have it again... I've missed the nymphs and their songs..."*

"One painting, Albus, there is one... hanging between the two largest south-facing windows..."

"South, is it? Close to Draco and his mother?" By now, Albus was seated once more, combing his fingers through his beard, smiling in anticipation.

"Within five paces of both, but why does..." Minerva stopped, a realization forming. "Dear and blessed gods, Albus, do you believe...? Draco? One of his own? Oh sweet Circe... how right that would be... But the path is wrong.... Very wrong...."

Seeing that, Dumbledore nodded in satisfaction.

"For the moment, we will be patient, and I will visit our charming nymphs. Near enough to allow me to keep a useful watch and be of some benefit, I believe. Would you consent to that, Headmistress, and consider joining me in Poppy's infirmary as soon as you're able?"

"That I'll do and gladly," Minerva replied, wasting no more time in heading for the door. "And, Albus, on your way, do consider advising me on the ethics of Obliviating Horace... Dear old fool, how he does go on, blathering the very thing I'd most want not to hear..."

## Chapter Fourteen: If But a Single Grain Should Shift

### Chapter 14 of 14

Draco wakes to the awareness that he is no longer alone in the Between. He may wish that weren't so.

"Be present, little brother."

The whisper at his ear might as well have been the blare of trumpets, coming as it did out of the maw of stillness that had swallowed him. Draco startled into a blurred and stinging focus.

Pox. He'd been asleep. Stupid to let that happen. Shouldn't have given in.

Dredging his eyes with the heels of his hands, he squinted through sticky lashes, struggling to throw off the heaviness of sleep.

Stronger a little, the light and, thank Merlin, there was even color... or at least an edge of what seemed some sort of yellow dawn. Well, almost yellow...looked a bit like buttermilk carelessly dribbled across the floor. Something for an elf to...

But there'd been... sound. Sound that woke him, which meant something was here... HERE. The wind and water, he could hear those...he could...muffled but definitely there, and there'd been words, too... Some one had been speaking. Some ONE. He should move. He should do that now... Right now... NOW. Get the bloody fuck UP.

Frantic for footing, Draco clutched at the sedge, scrambling gracelessly in the shifting sands, his awareness boiling over. His fingers clawed at his thighs, his arms, his chest. Son of a hag, no wand, still no god-forsaken wand.

Dreaming. He'd been... A woman's voice, steady, calm, quietly incanting. She'd sounded sorry. Something about flowers... One flower... One...

"Resting from your crossing is wise, little brother. Staying too long in the dreaming is not, unless you choose this place as your forever."

The whispering voice that had shouted him awake... It was close. Hardly more than a shiver of the air, but it was real. Oh, very real indeed.

A fluid weight, smooth and cool, something that didn't feel at all like sand, shifted across the naked arch of Draco's foot. With a strangled gasp, he staggered back, sprawling against the dune, staring down the length of his outstretched leg.

Nothing there. Maybe it had been just the sand, after all, chilled and damp from the receding fog.

"Observance? Evasion? Never taught you? Disappointing. I'd have thought... "

Again, the voice. To his right this time, his wand side, for all the use that was.

Draco bolted to his feet, pivoting in place, shifting his gaze rapidly from point to point but finding only sand, sea, and sedge within his range of sight. The fact that he'd been caught unawares did not sit well. He didn't much care for the stab of panic between his ribs and even less for the sense of being studied and found wanting by something...or someone...he'd yet to even see.

In anticipation of an enemy or acknowledgement of an ally, present the bearing of a Malfoy-born and a Slytherin-sorted. Reveal only your lineage of blood and breeding. His family's example, his House's expectation.

Draco cringed at the heart-wound that tore open from a sudden, piercing memory. Far into the dreaming... His mother outside the Hogwarts gates, abandoning example and expectation. On her knees in the dirt, clutching and wailing. Shrieking like some mad thing for McGonagall to come to her...bloody well demanding it. Merlin, how she pleaded... for him... For him. God, the shaming, terrible *joy* of knowing that she would do such a thing... again... still.

But only mothers, fools, and dead men unmask so plainly. Blood and breeding, keep to that, blood and breeding.

"All that I'm observing is a sorry lack of manners," he managed to drawl. "Why don't I set the example then, shall I? I am Draco Lucius Ebenus Malfoy. And you would be?" Praying that the curl of his lip was convincingly unconcerned, he shook back the matted tangles of his hair and shoved his hands deep into his pockets. It wouldn't do for their tremors to be visible. "Since you've obviously seen me, you might take the bother of introducing yourself properly. Or are you afraid, that if I see you, I'll hex your own

evasions straight out of you?"

As if he could actually threaten or produce any sort of harm to anyone or thing in this place, other than to himself. But, better to preserve at least the guise of holding the upper hand for as long as possible.

"Courtesy, little brother, or I will neither show myself nor greet you, properly or otherwise." A sting of irritation had darkened the voice, coming, now, from behind him. "Easy enough for me to leave you here to make your way alone."

Draco affected a shrug with enough nonchalance...or so he hoped...to make a worthy show.

"My apologies, but you can hardly blame me. You make no sense at all. I'm no one's brother, not that it should be of any concern to you or anyone else."

Except to a memory he couldn't even claim to truly hold...

Allowing his focus to wander a moment for effect, Draco waited, casting with a Seeker's instincts for an edge of shadow, the sigh of someone slipping in stealth across the sand. He could hear only the thrumming of his own blood in concert with the singing of the rising wind and tide. Too much sound, now, a damn cacophony of it. The silence had almost been better. If he lay down again, he could probably slip back under. Far easier that way... Peaceful. Painless. Finished.

But there...just at the periphery of his sight, a bit behind and to his left...five or six broom-lengths distant...something... Damn and hex, why the left, his slower side? Bastard Potter always used that against him on the pitch.

Draco could hear a long-drawn hiss of breath hovering on the wind. A scaled column of buff...as though the sand itself had taken shape...was rising as high as his waist, swaying atop a pedestal of its own looping coils, with a broad, flat head, ringed at the throat in a jagged band of darker gray...and great black eyes, fixed on him.

A serpent, and nearly the thickness of his branded arm. Not even a decent irony to that, was there?

"Are we, now, properly met, having seen one another, young Malfoy?" A narrow ribbon of tongue darted and retreated. "Shall we speak in good faith or bad?"

Parseltongue...the living speech of serpents...and every word, Draco realized, was distinct and understandable. To know the Tongue was a subtlety of magic that few could claim, other than the formal greeting every Slytherin-bonded child was taught from infancy. How in Hades had he managed to miss so profound a point until just now? And the serpent understood him equally well?

Deceived into madness by the senses of his mortal flesh? Maybe that was so. The Blade... That had to be the means for this. How else could this be?

The serpent reared higher, and Draco hastily nodded his acknowledgment, embedding his nails into the palms of his hands, willing himself to not give ground. God, how he craved a wand, absolutely any wand. A first year Hufflepuff's would do.

"Sufficient manners for the moment, I trust, little brother?" came the question as the snake's body began to slowly uncoil. "If you are appeased, we should proceed."

Madness of his senses, it had to be. He'd dreaded being alone so badly that he'd somehow summoned... What exactly was it that he'd called into being?

"Yes, but I've offered my name, so what's yours, then? And kindly don't say 'elder brother'. Are you from my House? Someone I know or knew... from before? An Animagus or something like..." Draco's thoughts flashed through a catalogue of faces, flickering over those that haunted him and the one that was only an imagination. Little brother...

Lyra might have called him that. Never did, never had the chance... but might have.

"A Slytherin nestling, aren't you?" Again, Draco nodded, and the snake slithered closer. "Surely, you know the Beginnings, then. We Drakon were of the First." The snake's tongue flickered between fangs as translucent as petals. "We shared the oldest of the Ways with those wizard-kind who wished to know...called their magic, woke their wands. Your name honors more than stars, nestling."

Silent and swift, the snake stretched its length atop the sand, sweeping into one sinuous arc around Draco who froze in place, swallowing hard against the tightening of his throat.

"The oldest of all the magics, little brother," the serpent hissed, "cast for your consideration."

*"Your first lesson, my darling, is the Circle."* Draco fled into the memory of a mid-summer afternoon, the languid air spiced with fruit and flowers, the song of bees and peacocks making him drowsy. He could recall the childish distraction of knowing that Turtlefoot, setting out tea on the shaded terrace, would have a special treat of almond milk and unicorn cakes, just for him. He'd always loved to save the spiraling sugared horn for last. His mother, smelling of roses, taking his face between her hands, urging his attention. *"You must learn to do this well, my heart. Above all things, there is the Circle to give you power and protection. You may cast for yourself, and if needed, for another if they cannot."*

Having left the imprint of its body in the sand around him, the serpent fixed Draco with its gaze. "You wear the Darkness, is that not so, little brother?"

Despite the lingering chill of the air, Draco could feel the sudden slick of sweat under his shirt as he drew his left arm tight against his side, resisting his need for its ache to be soothed against his heart. When the Dark Lord fell, his father had imagined for the space of a breath that the Mark might leave them both. Hardly that. Faded, yes, a mere wraith of itself...burning in ice, now, instead of flame, but not gone. Never gone. Not even here.

"Are you going to trap me here or kill me if I step outside this circle? Because I bear the Mark?" The questions broke free before Draco had even fully shaped them in his thoughts. "The Blade's supposed to let me move freely Between and not have to die." He cringed a bit at the note of strain to his voice that he couldn't quite keep hidden.

"Your death may be waiting for you here, but not by my fangs. If there is purpose for your Blade, then we both have elsewhere to be. Will you journey on with me? This is not my forever and I will not stay much longer," the reply came. "Look more closely, nestling. You have seen me often and you know me. Before the Death Singer bound me to Him and shaped His Mark in the image of my kind, my name was strong with the Ways. It would please me to hear it spoken again."

Abandoning the pretense of swagger, Draco sank to his knees in the sand, careful to keep within the circle, studying the serpent's face for all he was worth. Suddenly sick with memory, he fought the wash of bile in his mouth, tasting its sting on his tongue, shaping the sharpness into a name.

"Ah, fuck no, that's not even... Are you Na...Nagini? You're not... You're not the same. You're so much smaller..."

"As are you, little brother... far smaller than you ever thought to be."