Merope's Last Breath

by AngelEyez3954

What happened on the night that Tom Riddle was born? What were the events leading up to Merope's last breath? Written in response to EmeraldCity's "The Birth of a HP Character" Challenge on HPFF.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The young girl hurried down the dark alley, stumbling and tripping as she walked. She was dressed in tattered robes that clung tightly to her swollen, pregnant stomach. Her hair hung limply down her back, and she had large, purple rings around her eyes, which seemed to be looking in two different directions. She shivered as she stepped around a small crowd of people, who just stared at her hideous appearance.

Merope Gaunt once again found herself alone in the dark alley. She stumbled and came very close to landing on her stomach, although luckily she caught herself. She pulled out an old, battered wand that had belonged to her mother and whispered, "Lumos." She was not surprised when nothing happened; she hadn't been able to perform magic since he had left her. She felt the tears welling up in her eyes and hurried forward once more. When she finally reached her destination, a shop full of many dark objects, she stopped to catch her breath before entering the store.

A twinkle of a bells sounded as she opened the door, and a man came out of the back room, his eyes narrowed with a scowl upon his face. "Yes?" he said, taking in her ugly appearance. He knew she couldn't possibly be buying and that most likely whatever she was selling would be worthless.

"I need to sell this," Merope answered, pulling a heavy gold locket out from her robes. As she took a step forward towards the counter, she stumbled once again, the weight of her stomach pulling her forward, and she nearly broke the glass counter when she collided with it. When she composed herself, she looked up once again at the man, who was scowling once again. She reached out and let the gold locket fall into the man's outstretched hand. "It once belonged to Slytherin himself," she said, hoping that the shopkeeper would know its true value.

The man looked the locket over, noticing the ornate "S" sculpted into the gold. Nodding, he said, "Yes, well, unless it can be absolutely proven that it was Slytherin's, I can only give you ten Galleons for it." He glanced up at the disheveled girl; he figured she would be so desperate for money, she would take it.

Merope looked at the man, trying to figure out how to prove it. She was at a loss, but she was desperate for money, so she hung her head and said, "Fine, ten Galleons is fine." The man smiled in satisfaction, reaching into a drawer behind the counter to withdraw the money.

She held out her hand greedily, and as soon as the money was deposited there, she whipped around and stumbled out of the store, determined to find some food and a warm shelter.

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Just over one week had passed since Merope had sold her locket, and it was now December thirty-first, and she was standing in the middle of Muggle London, shivering on the sidewalk. She had used up the last of her money on food and shelter at the Leaky Cauldron. After being removed from the premises by the bartender, she had wandered the streets until she came upon this location. She was staring up at an orphanage.

She wondered if they would take in her baby, as she wasn't sure that she would live through childbirth; she just wasn't strong enough. The truth was, she didn't want to live through it. Without her magic, and without her Tom, she didn't have the will to continue living, not even for her child. She knew that this orphanage could raise her son or daughter well enough until the time came that he or she was invited to Hogwarts.

Merope was about to move on to find a place to stay for the night when the pain overcame her. She doubled over, holding tightly to her stomach. She felt something wet drip down her legs, and then she felt her legs collapse underneath her, so that she landed on the cold, snowy ground. She cried out in pain and slowly began to lose consciousness when a woman's voice brought her back to reality.

Margaret Cole had been on her way back to the orphanage after running some errands and had seen Merope collapse. She rushed over and said, "Come on, let's get you inside, where it's warm." Margaret heaved Merope to her feet and helped her balance as they entered the warm orphanage.

Merope cried out again as another contraction overcame her. She tried to reach for her wand, but she was so overcome by the pain that she was unable to concentrate on finding it. It would be useless anyways, she'd never be able to perform the magic needed, and there were Muggles in the room. She allowed Margaret to guide her into the infirmary and onto a crisp, white bed. Merope floated in and out of consciousness while Margaret ran around, calling out for the nurse, Miss Libert, and calling for one of the older children, Isabelle Nicholson, for assistance.

When the nurse arrived, she helped Margaret pull together some blankets and get some water. Isabelle entered the room only to be immediately ushered back out with orders to run down the road and bring back Doctor Roberts.

Merope faded in and out of consciousness, crying out with each new contraction. Margaret sat by her side the entire time, encouraging Merope to breathe, and letting her know a doctor was on the way. It took less than twenty minutes for the child to be born, and the doctor had not yet arrived. Miss Libert held the child high and called out, "It's a boy," just as the baby took its first breath and let out a loud scream.

Merope gave an awkward smile and lifted her head up, saying to Margaret, "I hope he looks like his papa."

Margaret nodded encouragingly and asked, "His name?"

Merope didn't hesitate, she hoped he would look like his papa, and so he would have his papa's name. "Tom Riddle, after his papa." Then, she thought a moment and said, "His middle name should be Marvolo, just like my papa."

Margaret nodded and said, "Then, Tom Marvolo Riddle, it is. Would you like to hold him? The doctor should be here very soon."

Merope glanced around, looking for her son and nodded, but just as she was about to take her child from Miss Libert's arms, she cried out and wrapped her arms around her stomach, the pain evident on her face. Miss Libert deposited the boy in Margaret's arms and rushed over to the young mother. "Margaret, there's a lot of blood here; I think she's hemorrhaging."

The two exchanged nervous glances, and Margaret decided it would be best to take the child out of the room and wait for the doctor. She stood outside of the doorway, watching the child who was much too quiet. She checked quickly to see if he was breathing, and she was relieved to find he was. The child was not sleeping, and his dark eyes seemed to be taking in his surroundings. 'What an odd child,' Margaret thought as she shifted her weight.

Margaret was shaken out of her reverie by the arrival of Doctor Roberts. She hurried him into the small infirmary and he quickly got to work. Unfortunately the young mother had already lost too much blood, and after slipping into unconsciousness, her breathing slowed and finally stopped at 11:12 PM. Just as Merope took her last breath and her heart stopped beating, young Tom gave a loud wail; it had been forty-three minutes since his first and only cry, and then he fell silent once again.