

Come Autumn, Sae Pensive

by Squibstress

The last thing Minerva McGonagall ever expected was to become a mother. But when she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant, her life with Albus changes in ways beyond anything they might have predicted.

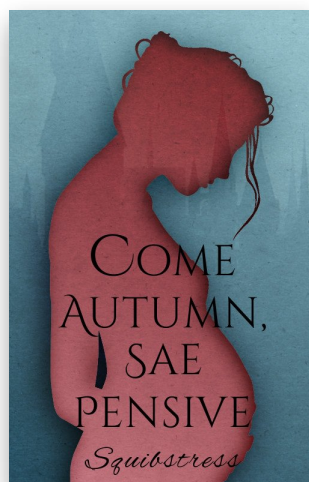
This is the third story set in the "Epithalamium" universe.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 19

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"Pregnant?" exclaimed Minerva McGonagall, her voice an octave higher than Poppy Pomfrey had heard it go in ages. "Are you sure?"

"Oh, very much so," said Poppy, grinning from her perch at the end of the exam table. "I've never been wrong yet."

"But how?" Minerva asked in disbelief.

Poppy smiled. If only she had a Sickle for every time a dismayed sixth- or seventh-year asked her that, she'd be rich as the Malfoys. She said, "Well, there's the staff-room floor, oh, and Albus' desk, of course, and your bed...that's traditional...and..."

"Poppy, this is not a joke!" Minerva broke in.

Seeing her friend's face, Poppy stopped. Then she said, "Oh, Minerva, I'm sorry! I thought you'd be happy about it. Isn't this what you wanted?" She helped Minerva sit up and handed her a sheet to cover her lower body.

A pensive Minerva answered, "I did . . . we did, but then when it turned out we couldn't, I suppose I resigned myself to it."

When she and Albus had first made the decision to try to have a child, they were both tentative and uncertain. Although the wizarding world had been relatively peaceful for years, with no sign of Tom Riddle, parenthood would be a bold step for the normally cautious couple. It would bring many changes, they both knew: first, it would transform their relationship from the open secret it had long been to a matter for public speculation and comment. Minerva was a private person, but she recognised that Albus' fame and her academic celebrity made gossip a certainty when their marriage became widely known. Then there was her career...and there was no question that it would be *her* career...which would inevitably suffer from the demands of parenthood. But the biggest (and unspoken) fear was the fact that parenthood made one exquisitely vulnerable. But their trepidation had eventually melted into anticipation, then to excitement.

When six months had passed with no sign of pregnancy, Minerva had consulted Poppy. The tests the mediwitch had run indicated that while Minerva was fertile, Albus was not. It was likely his age, Poppy had told them. It happened that way with men sometimes, she said. There were potions he could take, but they were not guaranteed to work and had risks both for Albus and for any baby he might father with their help.

When they had gotten back to her quarters after receiving the news, he was uncharacteristically quiet. As he held her, he had whispered, "I'm sorry, Minerva."

"For what?" she asked, knowing what he meant, but also knowing that he needed to say it.

"For saddling you with an old man who cannot give you children," he said.

She had felt ashamed then, realising that she had been thinking only of her own feelings. She sometimes forgot that, extraordinary wizard though he was, he was also a man...one who had just taken a blow to his manhood and needed her reassurance.

"Listen to me, Albus Dumbledore," she had said. "If things had been reversed...if I had been the one unable to have children...would you ~~feelsaddled~~ *saddled* with me? I didn't marry you for your valuable sperm, you know. I love you and want to spend the rest of my days with you, whether we share them with an entire Quidditch team of mewling brats or none. I'm happy just to be with you, day in, day out, doing what we do; anything else is sauce to the meat."

Then she had kissed him, and for the first time in memory, they slept in the same bed without making love.

So the couple had decided to let things be. Minerva was disappointed, of course, but not devastated, and eventually the idea receded into her mind like a faded scar that only reminds the bearer of the injury when it's looked at in bright light. She wasn't sure what Albus felt.

That was why, when she appeared in the infirmary more than a year later complaining of persistent nausea and fatigue, she was completely unprepared to hear Poppy tell her that she had fallen pregnant.

"Have you been using a contraceptive charm?" asked Poppy.

"No. When you said it was impossible, we just didn't bother anymore."

"If you recall, Minerva, I only said it was unlikely that Albus could make you pregnant...not impossible," Poppy reminded her.

"I know. I'm not blaming you, Poppy."

After a minute, Poppy asked, "What are you going to do?"

Minerva sighed. "I don't know. Talk to Albus, I suppose."

"If you decide you want to end this pregnancy, I can refer to you a Healer I worked with at St Mungo's. He's good and very discreet," Poppy said.

"Gods, Poppy, I haven't even had time to think about all this yet," Minerva said.

"I know, love," said her friend. "But you'll have to decide soon. According to your estimate, your last period was around ten weeks ago, which would make you about two months along. Talk to Albus. Whatever you decide, I'll support you," she added.

"Thank you, Poppy. I didn't mean to snap at you. I'm just a bit . . ."

"Pregnant," Poppy finished, and the two women shared a grim laugh.

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By late Saturday afternoon, Minerva still had not said anything to Albus about her pregnancy. When he knocked on the door to her private quarters, she told herself firmly, *Today. I'll tell him today*. She knew it might be the last time she'd be alone with him for the next few days.

"Come in," she called and closed the copy of *Transfiguration Today* she had been thumbing through.

Albus stepped into her sitting room, chessboard in hand and a characteristic twinkle in his blue eyes. He set the chessboard down on a table and asked, "Are we alone?"

It had been their standard greeting for the past two years, ever since Albus had come into her rooms for one of their Saturday trysts, grabbed her, stopping her protesting mouth with a kiss, and had her blouse halfway open before he noticed a very embarrassed Filius Flitwick attempting to make a rapid and discreet exit. The tiny Charms professor, who had been obscured by the tall back of a chair, had shown up at Minerva's quarters unexpectedly, hoping to discuss a Transfiguration article she had written. He hadn't been able to look at either of them for a week. Albus had thought it was funny.

"We are," answered Minerva, approaching her husband and putting her hands on his chest as he leant in to kiss her. When he slid his lips to her neck and his hands to cup her breasts, she forgot what she had planned to say to him.

Later, after they had made love, they lay in her bed, her head on his shoulder, his hand stroking her hair gently. She forced herself to speak without thinking about it. "I'm pregnant."

She felt his hand stop mid-stroke and his chest still mid-breath. "What?"

She shifted to her side, propping her head on her hand so she could look at his face. "I'm pregnant."

"How?" he asked.

"Given what we have just spent the past hour doing, I'm surprised you have to ask that," she said, forgetting that she had asked Poppy Pomfrey exactly the same question not three days ago.

"You know what I mean, Minerva," he said.

"Poppy said it wasn't impossible, just improbable," she said, a little defensive. "I suppose we just got lucky."

When he didn't speak, she asked the question that had been burning in her mind for three days: "Do you want it?"

"Do you?" That's how he always dodged difficult questions: by turning them back on her.

But she wasn't a Gryffindor for nothing. "Yes."

"Then so do I," he said, and it was decided. "How long?" he asked.

"About two months."

"And how are you feeling?" Now that they had gotten the Thestral quickly out of the room, they could concentrate on other questions.

"All right. A bit tired, a bit sick, but not too bad," she answered. "My breasts are sore," she added.

"Well, I shall have to take very good care of you," he murmured, kissing each breast gently at the nipple.

"You're off to a fine start," she purred as he kissed his way down her still-flat belly. Words began to fail her as he moved lower, gently parting her thighs so he could show her how much he loved her.

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Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 19

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When she told Poppy the next day that they had decided to have the baby, the younger witch threw her arms around Minerva, squealing, "Congratulations! I'm so happy for you!"

"Thank you, Poppy," said Minerva, beaming at her friend. They were sitting in Minerva's quarters enjoying tea.

"You'll need to decide where you want to have this baby," said Poppy, suddenly all business.

"I thought here . . . unless you think there's some reason not to," Minerva said, her brows knitting slightly.

"No, it should be fine. You're healthy enough; I just wasn't sure if you'd want me to attend you," said the mediwitch.

"Of course I want you, who else would I have?"

"Well, it's been a few years since I've delivered a baby," admitted Poppy. "But I'm fully qualified, and I can do a bit of an obstetrics refresher with Jean-Baptiste before your time comes," she added.

Poppy had been dating a French Healer she had met during a spell-damage conference on the Continent the past winter. The two had found they shared an interest in wizard chess and unconventional anti-jinx spells, among other pursuits. He was doing a research fellowship at St Mungo's and had been visiting her on weekends for several months.

"Thank you, Poppy," Minerva said for the second time. "I think I'd feel better with you than with anyone else, especially a stranger."

"You say that now," said Poppy. "Wait until I start riding you about getting too fat!" she joked.

Minerva laughed; Poppy was always after her about eating too little.

"How did the chess game turn out?" Poppy asked, cocking her head at the chessboard that still sat on the side table.

"Oh, um . . . we never got to it," said Minerva, smiling to herself.

"You lucky girl," said Poppy.

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As the days passed, Minerva was finding the fatigue of early pregnancy to be her biggest nemesis. She had always been an energetic person, given to late nights and early mornings, but she found she just couldn't keep her eyes open much after nine anymore.

When she complained to Albus that she was getting behind with her latest journal article, he gave her a sympathetic smile and said, "I imagine this is just the first sacrifice of many you're going to have to make for your child."

She threw him a dirty look. "Yes, well, I don't see you making any sacrifices as yet," she said.

"Ah, my love, I am mourning the loss of your sunny demeanour and your firm backside," he said, giving the latter an affectionate swat.

"Albus Dumbledore, there is *nothing* wrong with my backside!" she exclaimed, craning her neck around to see if she had missed anything in the daily assessment of her figure that had become habit since she had found out about her pregnancy.

"Not yet, there isn't, but Esmeralda assures me that it will soon fall like Icarus before the sun," he teased, knowing that the merest mention of the Divination professor would make his wife cluck like an angry hen.

"If you have any intention of getting into my knickers tonight, you will leave off this line of conversation post-haste," Minerva warned, smiling in spite of herself.

"Actually, my intention was to get you into a warm bath, and then we'll see about your knickers," he said.

"A bath?" she asked, surprised.

"Yes," he said, coming up behind her and massaging her shoulders with strong hands. "I thought a long soak with a glass of wine and a good book might do you a world of good."

It suddenly sounded very appealing. "That sounds lovely. But I'm not sure I could stomach the wine at the moment."

"Ginger-root tea, then. Poppy tells me it's good for the queasy tummy," he said.

She was touched at the thought of him consulting Poppy about her morning...or rather, all-day...sickness.

"Come, let's get you squared away, then I'll get the tea," he said, taking her by the hand and leading her to the bathroom. He started the taps and opened the cabinet above the sink. He selected a phial containing some of the lavender bath salts one or the other of the staff had given her last Christmas but that she had never used, and added it to the bath. As she started to unbutton her blouse, he put up a hand to stop her.

"I'll take care of that," he said, and proceeded to undress her while she watched him, a bemused look on her face. When the tub was full, he took her hand and helped her step into it. She settled down into the water, and he said, "I'll be right back with the tea."

"Mmm," she sighed in answer, closing her eyes.

He returned a few minutes later, steaming cup in hand, and put it on the side of the tub, then he undressed and slid into the tub behind her. She leant back against him and closed her eyes again. After a moment, she felt warm water cascading down her head and neck.

"What are you doing?" she asked, opening her eyes to see a pitcher of water floating in the air next to them.

"Washing your hair, my love."

"Oh, Albus, that feels divine," she purred as he gently massaged shampoo into her scalp. When he was finished, the pitcher magically filled with more warm water as he rinsed the soap from her hair. He then took a soft flannel and began to soap her body, starting with her neck, working his way slowly down to her feet, being very careful not to put any pressure on her tender breasts. He rinsed her with more warm water from the enchanted pitcher, then Banished it. He kissed the top of her wet head and moved his hands gently over her belly, rubbing in slow circles. Moving his hands lower, he slipped two fingers between the folds of her sex, rubbing her clitoris gently, then harder, in the way he knew she liked. She began to moan and pushed her hips up to meet his hands, signalling her approval of his methods. He kissed her ear then her neck for a few minutes, moving from one side to the other as he stroked her to climax.

When she was able to think clearly again, she lifted her hand up and behind her to his cheek and stroked his beard for a moment. "Thank you, my darling. That was lovely." Feeling his erection straining against her back, she stirred to get up, saying, "Now, what can I do for you?"

He put a hand on her shoulder to still her and said, "Nothing at all, my angel. You've already done everything."

"But Albus..." she began.

"Shh," he said, moving her forward so he could climb out of the bath. "I'll be right back. Don't even think of moving." He charmed himself dry and took his bathrobe from the hook then stepped out of the room. When he returned a moment later, he was holding a slim volume in his hands. He conjured a padded stool and sat.

He began to read in his sonorous bass:

Proserpine may pull her flowers,

Wet with dew or wet with tears,

Red with anger, pale with fears;

Is it any fault of ours,

If Pluto be an amorous king

And come home nightly, laden

Under his broad bat-wing

With a gentle earthly maiden?

Is it so, Wind, is it so?

All that I and you do know

Is that we saw fly and fix

'Mongst the flowers and reeds of Styx

Yesterday,

Where the Furies made their hay

For a bed of tiger cubs,

A great fly of Beelzebub's,

The bee of hearts, which mortals name

Cupid, Love, and Fie for shame.

He read to her for the next hour, charming the bath water to stay hot, as she sipped her tea. When he was finished, he closed the book and banished it. He helped her out of the bathtub, and rather than charming her dry, wrapped her in a large bath towel, gently drying her. Then he lifted her in his arms and carried her into her bedroom, laying her gently on the bed, which had already been turned down. He slipped off his dressing gown and got into bed next to her, pulling the bedclothes up to cover them.

She thought he would make love to her then, but he just put his arms around her and held her, gently stroking her neck and back, until she fell into a deep sleep.

When she woke several hours later, it was dark, and he was gone. She was tempted to believe it had all been a lovely dream brought on by sheer exhaustion until she saw the slim volume of poetry from which he had read to her sitting on her bedside table. She turned over and slept until morning.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 19

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The days wore on, and Minerva started to feel better. Her nausea had gone, and she had regained some of her normal energy. It was summer, which meant that Albus was able to spend many nights with her in her quarters. This was an all-too-rare occurrence during term, and they both relished the chance the school holidays gave them to be together. He fussed over her, making sure she ate enough and that she didn't spend too much time on her feet. In truth, while she thought it was quite sweet of him, she quickly began to tire of it. While Albus was always considerate and kind, she was not accustomed to being treated like a delicate flower, and she couldn't help getting annoyed with his constant attentions. But she said nothing because she knew it pleased him to take care of her.

The only thing he wouldn't do for her, it seemed, was fuck her. They went to bed together, and he touched her with his hands and his mouth, and let her do the same to him, but he would not do what she really wanted. Whenever she moved to complete their joining, he would shift away and find a different part of her body to explore. Whatever he did was wonderful; it just wasn't enough.

On the fifth occasion it happened, Minerva decided to take the bull by the horns. "Albus, why won't you make love to me?" she asked, as he was kissing her thighs, moving ever upward toward her centre.

"I thought that's what I was doing, my love," he murmured.

"No, Albus, I mean properly," she said, shifting her bottom up and away from his head.

He sat up and looked at her. "Don't you like this?" Answering her question with a question again.

"Yes, of course, it's lovely. But I miss having you inside me," she answered, pulling on his shoulders to bring him up to her level so she could look at him.

He kissed her, but she knew he was trying to think of an answer.

She forced herself to ask: "Do you not want me anymore? Because of the baby?" She wasn't sure why this should be so...her body had not changed much yet...but she needed to ask.

"Gods, no, Minerva. I want you. I just wasn't sure you wanted me in that way right now."

"Of course I do," she answered, still perplexed. "Why wouldn't I?"

"I thought you might prefer to avoid anything getting too near the baby," he said, avoiding her eyes.

"As impressive as you are, Albus, you overestimate the size of your wand. It isn't big enough to get anywhere near the baby."

He ignored her gentle teasing. "I just wouldn't want to do anything to hurt you or the baby," he said.

"You won't," she said firmly. "Poppy said it was fine as long as we're careful and I'm not having any pains or bleeding."

"I'm not sure how I feel about you discussing the details of our intimate life with Poppy."

"I don't discuss the details with her," Minerva said, irritated. "She offered the information. She is, after all, my mediwitch. And yours as well, please to remember."

"And she's your friend," he added.

"Yes, but you know she would never break a confidence, either professional or personal."

"Of course not, I wasn't implying that," he replied. "I just meant that I might have a bit of trouble looking her in the eye in the next staff meeting if I knew she had heard all the details about what we get up to when we're alone," he said, smiling.

"Not to worry, Albus. I haven't shared the depths of your depravity with her," she said, no longer annoyed.

"Mine?" he said, raising an eyebrow at her.

"Of course. As everyone knows, I am a very proper witch. I simply allow you to use me to satisfy your carnal appetites." She knew he loved it when she played the stern professor with him.

"I see. And you don't enjoy it at all," he murmured, his lips against hers, pressing his body to her.

"No, not a bit," she answered, running her hands over his back and arse as he kissed her neck and moved his hands over her breasts. "Not one bit," she repeated as she reached down to stroke him, gently leading him into position at her entrance. "Not at all," she whispered in his ear as he slid into her slowly. "Not at . . . ah, Albus . . ." she moaned as he began to move slowly within her. "Yes, my love, there . . . right there is where I need you," she cried when he had filled her completely. She came thirty seconds later, when he increased his speed, putting pressure on her swollen pearl.

He continued to move in and out, and she knew he was holding back, trying to be gentle; usually by this point in their coupling, he was losing control, thrusting into her hard and fast as he approached his climax. She wanted it...his vigour often brought her to orgasm that way...and she wanted to buck her hips up to meet and encourage him, but she waited this time, knowing that he was trying to protect her and their child with this unaccustomed reserve, and she loved him for it, and for a million other things besides. She felt him still for a moment, then he thrust once more and shuddered, releasing his breath, warm and sweet, on her face.

She kissed his mouth, then he carefully shifted off of her, pulling her into the crook of his arm.

"There, that wasn't so bad, was it?" she asked.

His laugh rumbled up from deep within his chest. "No. Not so bad, Professor. How did I do?"

"A' for Acceptable, Mr Dumbledore. You need to strive for greater concision in your attack," she replied.

"I rather thought I'd hit the mark directly."

"Almost. Not to worry; there's always next term, Mr Dumbledore."

"Speaking of term . . ." he said.

"Oh, dear. I wish I hadn't mentioned it."

"We need to decide when we're going to share our news with the staff and students," he reminded her.

"Staff sooner, I should think," she answered. "We'll need to make some kind of arrangements for someone to take my classes when the baby comes. They might have some suggestions. Do you think Filius would be willing to act as Deputy again for a few weeks?"

Albus had hired Filius as Charms master and Deputy Headmaster when he rose to the Headmaster's post. Filius was effective enough but hadn't cared for the position much. It interfered with his research, he said when he approached the Headmaster about stepping down seven years after assuming the post. Albus had coerced a reluctant Minerva to take his place. She had been surprised to find she enjoyed most of the duties the post entailed. There were any number of administrative tasks, which the supremely efficient Professor McGonagall could accomplish easily, as well as more pleasant ones.

The Deputy Head was responsible for checking the names of magical children recorded in Hogwarts' roll book, and Minerva took pleasure in sending the yearly owls inviting those turning eleven to attend Hogwarts, remembering the thrill she had gotten when she received her letter. She was also in charge of the annual sorting of first-years into their Houses at the start-of-term feast. She enjoyed making private guesses as to the Sorting Hat's decisions, based on her brief observation of each child as he or she approached the stool, some eager, some frightened, some shy, but all fresh and new and full of potential. She was right about half the time, which she found to be a good reminder that first impressions aren't always the right ones. She often wondered how she had appeared all those years ago when she had marched gamely up and sat while Professor Dumbledore placed the Sorting Hat on her head. She had asked him once and was only a little disappointed when he told her he couldn't remember. She didn't remember precisely what she had first thought of him, either.

The present-day Dumbledore said, "I think Filius will be willing to help, provided he doesn't have to attend any board meetings or Ministry functions. I'll speak to him privately when he gets back, then perhaps we can inform the rest of the staff at our first staff meeting of term. Does that seem reasonable?"

"Indeed. What about the students?" Minerva asked.

"I think you should decide when you want to tell them. Just don't wait until it becomes too obvious," he said, resting a careful hand on her belly.

"Can you just imagine the rumours?" she laughed.

"On the whole, I think I'd rather not," he said, grinning.

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She had gotten up late the next morning in a pensive mood. Their exchange the previous night had awoken a faint but nagging anxiety that she couldn't shake.

She had known in theory that having a child would change many things, but thus far, all her thoughts had been on the concrete and practical. How would she manage her classes and her child? How much of her academic career would she lose to motherhood? How much of the already-scant time she had alone with Albus would go by the wayside?

What she hadn't considered, and what she was only now coming to see would be just as significant...if not more so...were the intangible changes motherhood would make in herself and in her relationships with others. In the light of morning, she suspected that Albus' reluctance to engage in intercourse had been about more than a fear of harming their baby. She was changing from wife and lover into the mother of his child...a category that was at once more and less than the sum of its parts. It was a sort of Russell's paradox, she thought.

There were other relationships to consider. Her friends...how would Amelia, for instance, react to Minerva's motherhood? Would she and Minerva remain as close as sisters, or would the new difference between them create an uncrossable gulf of unshared experience? And her colleagues, would they resent the additional strain her absence, however temporary, would place on them? Would they think her a fool for allowing her career to take second place to her child? Of course, it had always taken second place to her marriage, but since she and Albus were discreet about their personal relationship, it was easy for her and for them to pretend otherwise. A baby was different. Its immediate, physical need of her would require a public declaration of priorities and loyalties. She disliked on instinct the notion of being so easily read.

What about her students? How would they react to learning that they were not all she had? Not first...or even second...in her sight?

She was beginning to realise that her life was going to change more completely and irrevocably, and in more ways, than she had anticipated. Minerva McGonagall was not accustomed to feeling unprepared, and she didn't like it.

Not one bit.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 19

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The weekend before the fall term was to begin, they made the trip to Caithness to visit Minerva's father. Thorfinn McGonagall met them at the entrance to Castle Isleif and immediately wrapped his broad arms around his daughter, practically lifting her off her feet.

"Minerva, my lass, this is a wonderful surprise! I didn't expect to see ye until after Christmas! Hello, Albus, so good to see ye," he said, shaking Albus' hand.

"I'm sorry for the late notice, Da, we only just found the time to get away, and thought we'd make a quick stop to see you. I hope it's not an inconvenience," Minerva said as they walked into the house, Thorfinn's arm firmly around her waist.

"Nonsense! I'm always pleased to see my girl and her handsome lad," said Thorfinn. "Handsome lad" had been a running joke between Thorfinn and Albus since the time of the wedding; Thorfinn was only two years older than his daughter's husband. "We'll send your things to your room and have the house-elves unpack for ye. Are ye hungry?"

"Starving, Da, thanks," Minerva answered.

Thorfinn raised his eyebrows in surprise. "That's the first time I've ever heard ye admit to it. Ye must be keeping her awfully busy, Albus," he said in good humour.

"On the contrary, it's Minerva who keeps me running about," answered Albus.

"Of that, I have no doubt," said Thorfinn. "Ye can go wash up, and I'll have the house-elves lay out some dinner for us."

"Thanks, Da, that would be lovely," said Minerva.

After they had eaten a hearty meal, Thorfinn poured three glasses of Scapa single malt as they settled into worn leather armchairs by the fire in the library.

"So what is it ye came to tell me?" Thorfinn asked, a wry smile on his face.

"What do you mean?" Minerva asked.

"Come now, lass. I know ye didn't come all the way up here just to pay a social call on your old Da—not right before the term starts, anyway. Out with it, now," said Thorfinn.

Minerva glanced at Albus, who was intently examining the fascinating contents of his glass, trying not to smile. "We're expecting," she said.

Thorfinn clapped his big hands together, exclaiming, "That's wonderful news! About ruddy time, too, I must say," he said tossing a sideways glance at his son-in-law, who had gotten up to kiss the top of his wife's head as she sat.

"I'm so glad you're pleased, Da," said Minerva.

"Pleased? Why wouldn't I be pleased? Here I was, thinking I'd have only one grandchild to my name, and ye two come with a lovely surprise like this. Congratulations, Minerva, Albus," he said, shaking Albus' hand for the second time that evening. "Your brother will be thrilled," he told Minerva, "and so will young Morrigan. She'll finally have a wee cousin to fuss over."

The three continued to talk for the next two hours, until Minerva could no longer keep her eyes open.

"I think we'd better get you to bed, my dear," said Albus. "You look as if you're ready to drop." He stood and took her hand. "Come on, I'll take you up," he said.

"It isn't necessary, Albus, I'll go up on my own. You two stay here and talk—I know you're aching to continue your discussion about Siegfried and the dragon's blood." She kissed him and her father and left the two men alone.

Albus and Thorfinn chatted about the dragon's blood, among other things, before there was a lull in the conversation.

Thorfinn broke the silence. "How is she, Albus?"

"She's fine. She was a little sick in the beginning, but that seems to be past," he answered.

"That's fine, but I meant, is she scared?" asked Thorfinn.

"Scared?"

"Yes. Of the birth," answered Thorfinn.

"I don't really know. You know Minerva; if she is, she hasn't said."

Thorfinn frowned.

"I imagine she's nervous about it—I would imagine every woman is," Albus continued, wondering where Thorfinn was headed.

"Indeed. But not every woman has as much cause," said Thorfinn, still frowning.

"What do you mean?" asked Albus, a slight prickling of alarm rising in his heart.

"She hasn't told ye about her mother?"

"Only that she died shortly after Einar was born. What else is there?" Albus asked, the anxiety tightening around his heart.

"Albus, Minerva's mother died from a complication of childbirth," said Thorfinn, looking intently at his son-in-law.

"Yes—an infection, I thought. Sadly not uncommon in those days, but treatable now," said Albus. "Please forgive me, Thorfinn. I hadn't thought about how the news of Minerva's pregnancy might bring back painful memories—" Albus began.

"No, no," interrupted Thorfinn, "it isn't that. I made my peace with Morrigan's death years ago—if ever one can make peace with such a thing. It was the way she died. She had an infection, yes, but that was only the final insult. It probably wouldn't have killed her—hell, it wouldn't have happened at all—if she hadn't ruptured her womb during the birth."

Albus was speechless for a few moments. Then he asked, "Does Minerva know this?"

"Aye. I never believed in hiding things from my children. Besides, I daresay she can still remember the night of Einar's birth, even all these years later. It was . . . difficult. Morrigan had been labouring for nigh on two days, and finally getting near the end when it happened. This is a big house, Albus, but you could hear her in every room, I'd wager. I know Minerva heard it; she asked me afterward why Mama was screaming so, and I couldn't tell her it was because her mother's womb had split nearly in half, could I? Not at four. But she asked me a few years later, and I told her the truth.

"Einar survived because he came not two minutes after it happened. I don't know how Morrigan survived; the midwife was quick with her wits and her hands and her wand, I suppose. The bleeding stopped eventually, but Morrigan was so weak that she had no chance against the infection that set in. She never woke up. She never saw her son." There were tears running down the large man's weathered face, although his voice remained steady. Albus could see where his wife had gotten her stoicism.

"I am so very sorry, Thorfinn. I cannot imagine what that was like," Albus said, putting a hand on the man's shoulder.

"Och, it was a long time ago—almost forty years. And I had two beautiful children to raise. I didn't do too badly, either, I think," he said with pride, wiping his face with a tartan handkerchief.

"No. They are both extraordinary people," agreed Albus.

"So that is why I'm asking ye if Minerva is scared. She must be, I think," said Thorfinn.

"Thank you for telling me, Thorfinn. Minerva hasn't said anything about it—not to me, at any rate. Possibly she's told Poppy—her friend and the mediwitch who will deliver the baby," said Albus. "I'll talk to her."

"Do that, Albus," said Thorfinn.

After a moment Albus asked, "And you, Thorfinn? Are you scared?"

Thorfinn turned away from Albus to stare into the dying fire. "Yes. I'm scared for my girl. And for you. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy—watching your wife's life drain away with her blood and nothing you can do. But I'm not going to let it get in the way of being happy for ye and Minerva. You can't let fear rule ye," he said.

"No," said Albus. "You can't."

"I think I'll head in. Good night, Albus," said Thorfinn.

"Good night."

When Albus got to the bedroom, Minerva was already asleep. He got ready for bed and slipped in beside her. She stirred, and he whispered, *Shh*. It's only me, my love," and kissed her cheek. She turned over and fell asleep again immediately. He lay back against the pillows, his thoughts churning. It was several hours before he slept.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 19

The last thing Minerva McGonagall ever expected was to become a mother. But when she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant, her life with Albus changes in ways beyond anything they might have predicted.

This is the third story set in the "Epithalamium" universe.

After the short northern night, the morning dawned clear and cool. Minerva and Albus rose early and went to breakfast in the dining room, which was laid out buffet-style. After Albus had coaxed Minerva to add some eggs and lox to the toast and tea she had eaten, she went to her father's study and knocked softly.

"Come in," came Thorfinn's voice through the heavy oak door. "Ah, good morning, Minerva," he said as she crossed to the large desk to kiss his cheek.

"Good morning, Da. Albus and I thought we'd take a walk—go look at the firth—and wondered if you'd like to come along," she said.

"No, lass, but thank ye. I've still got quite a bit of this to get through before morning's end," he answered, indicating the large stack of parchment on his desk. "Ye two go on. I've a suspicion ye don't get your handsome lad to yourself that often."

She smiled at him. "All right, Da. See you at lunch then?"

"Aye."

Minerva and Albus strolled through the castle grounds to the front gate. They walked at a leisurely pace about a mile through the grassy fields until they came upon the view they were seeking. The fields suddenly opened up and gave way to a craggy cliff, shot through with the brown and tan striated stone of ages. The cliff fell in vertiginous descent to the deceptively calm, azure-blue of the Pentland Firth. Just at the horizon, they could make out the gentle sloping contours of the Orkney Islands.

Albus watched Minerva as she looked out over the water, shielding her eyes from the sun's glare. The ever-present wind had loosed a few strands of hair from her bun, which whipped around her cheeks and jaw like licks of black flame. She looked to him in that moment like the Viking she was by blood—holding vigil as her ancestresses must have done, waiting for their men to return from the North Sea and Norway beyond.

She finally noticed him looking and turned to him, taking both of his hands in hers. "Thank you for coming. It means a lot to him," she said.

"Of course. You don't get to see him often enough. I'm sorry," he said.

"No need to be. It's the way of things, with children—they grow up, leave home," she answered. "I do worry about him, though. All alone in that big house, with me at

Hogwarts and Einar in Inverness. I know Einar tries to see him as often as possible, but he's busy, too."

It always amused Albus that Minerva and her family referred to their ancestral home as a "house." It was, in fact, a castle, albeit a small, plain one. The land had belonged to the McGonagalls since their Norse forbears had first crossed the North Sea in the ninth century. The original castle had been erected in the twelfth century—long after the Vikings had been either beaten back across the firth to Orkney and beyond or intermarried with the Celts to settle in and contribute to the brackish history of the kingdom of Alba, soon to be Scotland. The edifice had been knocked down, rebuilt, and added to over the centuries, the family who eventually became the McGonagalls aided by strong magic in keeping what was theirs safe from the upheavals of broadaxe, plague, and gun.

"He's worried about you too," Albus told her.

"Me? Why?" she asked.

"He can't help thinking about what happened to your mother, Minerva," he said, looking her in the eyes.

She turned her head away toward the firth again. "I knew I shouldn't have left you two alone," she said weakly.

He took her hands again and pulled her gently toward him. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I did."

"Not everything."

"No," she said and sighed. "Not everything. I didn't intend to hide it from you—I almost never think about it, actually. Then when this happened," she said, laying a hand on her belly, "I thought it might worry you, so I just . . . didn't mention it."

"Does Poppy know?"

"Of course. She took a thorough history. It isn't something that's genetic, apparently. Sometimes, it just happens. Rarely, she says."

"Are you scared?" he asked her.

She didn't answer for a minute. "I suppose."

He knew it was a thing she would admit to no one but him.

"But I won't be ruled by fear, Albus," she said.

He smiled. "That's what Thorfinn said."

"I am, after all, my father's daughter. Sigrid Thorfinnsdóttir," she said, giving her Viking name.

He recognised it as a talisman against fear. Her mother had not been Viking; Morrigan had been Celtic through and through. Albus was not surprised that his wife tended to ally herself with the fierce magic of Odin and Thor rather than the nature-bound spirituality of her mother's people. She was a woman more inclined to bend lightning to her will than to worship its power.

"I wonder who our little one will be like?" Minerva said.

"It had better have your looks."

"And your brains? Is that what you're implying?" she asked, raising an impish eyebrow at him.

"How about a combination of your logical mind and my creative one?"

"Creative? Is that what they're calling it now?"

"And what would you call it, Mrs Dumbledore?"

"Untidy."

His retort was to gather her in his arms and kiss her until she was gasping for breath.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 19

The last thing Minerva McGonagall ever expected was to become a mother. But when she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant, her life with Albus changes in ways beyond anything they might have predicted.

This is the third story set in the "Epithalamium" universe.

"Mr Crowley, please to remember your wand is *not* a Beater's bat; you are perfectly capable of Transfiguring that hedgehog *without* striking the poor creature about the head," Professor McGonagall said.

She sighed to herself. The fall term was only two weeks old, and she had already sent the fourth-year Hufflepuff to the infirmary three times with a variety of burns, cuts, and one alarming case of eyebrow mange. She wasn't at all sure how she would get the poor boy through his O.W.L.s, even if they were a full year and a half away.

Just as class was wrapping up, she said, "Homework is two rolls of parchment on the role of intention in inter-species Transfiguration. On my desk Thursday, no excuses. Miss Chattergee, unless you'd like to discuss the contents of that note with me over detention this evening, I suggest you wait until you are *outside* my classroom to open it."

As the students were filing out, Professor Lemmas entered the classroom. When the last student had gone, Minerva said, "Yes, Diophantus, what can I do for you?"

The Arithmancy professor looked a bit uncomfortable, which gave her an inkling of what he was there to ask.

"Minerva, do you think you could speak to Molly Prewett for me? I think she may have a . . . um . . ."

"Female problem?" asked Minerva, her eyebrow arched in amusement. Over the years, Minerva had often been called on by Professors Flitwick, Slughorn, and Lemmas, the three male Heads of House, to assist in sorting out certain problems with the females in their charge. These had ranged from helping twelve- and thirteen-year-olds navigate the onset of menstruation to older girls' boy problems, and on one particularly awful occasion, a confession from a terrified sixteen-year-old that her father had been molesting her for years.

"Yes," said Professor Lemmas.

"Of course, Diophantus. Ask her to meet me in my office after classes end for the day. Unless you think it can't wait?"

"No, no. After classes should be fine. Thank you, Minerva," he said.

She nodded, and he left in a cloud of relief.

At four-thirty came the timid knock on Minerva's office door.

"Enter," she called.

The door opened, and in walked a short, auburn-haired girl of seventeen, head down and eyes red.

"Molly, thank you for seeing me," Minerva said, using the girl's given name in an effort to put her more at ease. "Professor Lemmas seems to believe you have a problem. Can you discuss it with me?" she asked, discreetly pushing a package of tissues toward the edge of the desk.

"Oh, Professor . . ." began the girl, her hands wringing the edges of her robe. "I c . . . c . . . can't . . ." she said and started crying.

"Nonsense. Of course you can. Whatever it is, Molly, I'm here to help you, but I can't do that if you won't confide in me," said Minerva. The girl still sat sobbing, so Minerva came out from around the desk and Summoned an extra chair next to the one Molly had plopped down in. Minerva sat and took Molly's hands.

Molly's wet, red eyes looked pleadingly into Minerva's. "I think I might be . . . pregnant," she said, dropping her head again.

Minerva closed her eyes, the first pinpricks of a headache forming behind them. She had heard this confession before on a handful of occasions, of course, but she would never have expected it from this quarter. Molly Prewett was a sweet, very smart girl...one with a temper to match Minerva's...who was being raised by her two older brothers after the accidental death of her parents five years earlier. If she was indeed pregnant, the hot-headed Prewett brothers would be out for the blood of the boy responsible.

The girl's sobbing was getting louder. Minerva took her hand and helped her up. "Come, Molly. Let's go into my sitting room. You'll be more comfortable there, and we can talk." She led Molly through a door behind a bookcase that she had opened using wandless magic. It was rare for Minerva to invite a student into her private quarters, but in her experience, there were occasions when a less intimidating location than her office was called for.

She sat the weeping girl down on her settee and took a seat next to her, conjuring a tartan handkerchief and silently handing it to Molly. When the latest burst of sobs had calmed, Minerva spoke gently.

"Now, Molly. What makes you think you might be pregnant? Are you late?" she asked.

"Late?" said Molly, wrinkling her brow in confusion.

"Yes. Your period...is it late?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

"I . . . I did something," Molly said, on the verge of tears again.

"You and Mr Weasley?" coaxed Minerva.

"Y . . . yes. I'm sorry, Professor." Molly began to cry again.

"Calm down, Molly, please. What's done is done. Forgive me, but were you unsafe? Did you not use a contraceptive charm?" Minerva asked.

"A charm?" asked Molly, still confused.

"Yes. To prevent conception."

"No . . . I didn't know . . ."

Minerva sighed. Of course she didn't. The girl had no mother to tell her, and it was a near certainty her brothers hadn't bothered.

I must speak to Albus about giving some kind of talk to the girls Minerva said to herself. *Not that the Board of Governors would approve,* she thought sourly.

"How long ago did this happen, Molly?" she asked.

"Saturday night."

"But that's only two days ago. Why would you think you were pregnant after only two days?" Minerva asked, the germ of a suspicion starting.

"Because I let Arthur touch me." Molly sniffled, unable to look at her professor.

"Touch you . . . how?"

"Here," Molly said, bringing her hand to her breast.

"I see. And what else?"

"What do you mean?" asked the girl, shocked.

"I mean, Molly, did you and Arthur do anything else you think might have made you pregnant?" asked Minerva with more patience than she felt.

"No."

Minerva prevented an audible sigh from escaping her.

"Molly, it takes more than a boy putting his hand on your breast to fall pregnant," she said.

Molly just looked at her blankly.

"I think you and I need to have a talk. But I think I need some tea first. Would you like some?" Minerva asked.

"Yes, please, Professor," said Molly quietly.

Minerva put some water into a pot, and after charming it to a near-boil, she added the tea. When it had steeped, she brought it over to the tea table with a jar of milk, some sugar cubes, and some lemon. "How do you take it, Molly, dear?" she asked.

When Minerva had finished explaining the mechanics of intercourse and conception to an increasingly pink Molly Prewett, the girl sat looking at her teacher in slack-jawed amazement.

"Merlin's balls!" she exclaimed, to Minerva's amusement. What she said next nearly sent Minerva into gales of very unprofessional laughter. "Those bloody idiots!" cried Molly. "They told me . . . they told me . . . those *imbeciles*!" This was the Molly Prewett Minerva had come to know and like over the past six years.

"As you know," Minerva said, stifling her laughter, "brothers have a tendency to be overprotective when it comes to their younger sisters."

Once Molly had gotten over her initial shock, Minerva asked, "Is there anything you'd like to ask me, Molly? About what we've just talked about?"

"Just how anyone could ever *do that*," said Molly, more to herself than to Minerva. "It sounds so . . . *ugh*!"

Minerva didn't stop her gentle laugh this time. "Yes, well . . . I think you'll find in time that the idea has its appeal."

Molly just stared at the unfamiliar creature sitting in front of her. This was not a Professor McGonagall she recognised. She was not cold and imposing; this one was warm and gentle, and if Molly wasn't mistaken, entirely unfazed by the proposition of allowing a man to *do that*.

"I doubt it," replied Molly with a shudder. In years to come, Minerva would have occasion to remind Molly of her scepticism on that point.

"You'll just have to take my word for it, then. When the time is right, you'll know it," said Minerva.

"Professor, have you ever . . ." Molly started, but stopped herself before finishing the question. "I'm sorry. It's none of my business."

"No, it isn't," said Minerva. "But Molly, promise me that when you change your mind, you'll make sure of two things."

"What?"

"One, that you'll do it because you love the boy and you want to do it...not just because you think it's what ~~he~~ wants, and two, that you'll take appropriate measures to make sure you don't end up with a baby before you're ready for one."

Molly could not see how she was ever going to have a baby at all, given the requirements...even with Arthur. But she nodded her agreement at Professor McGonagall.

"Good. Now, you'd best be getting back. It's almost time for dinner."

"All right," said Molly, standing. "Thank you, Professor. For everything." The she hugged Minerva, who, after a moment, put her arms around the girl and hugged back.

"You're quite welcome, my dear."

After Molly was gone, Minerva cleared away the tea things. As she did so, she thought to herself *I just might be good at this motherhood business after all*

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 19

The last thing Minerva McGonagall ever expected was to become a mother. But when she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant, her life with Albus changes in ways beyond anything they might have predicted.

This is the third story set in the "Epithalamium" universe.

Two weeks later, Minerva was standing in front of her sixth-year N.E.W.T. students, demonstrating the technique for Transfiguring a sentient creature—in this case a newt, as it happened—into an insensible one (inkpot), when a sudden and intense wave of nausea overcame her.

Possibly the only person more astonished than her students—who watched their normally serene teacher suddenly drop the newt to the floor and run out of the room—was the fifth-year Gryffindor who was washing her hands at the sink in the girls' lavatory when Professor McGonagall came barrelling in. The professor went immediately into a cubicle and slammed the door without a word. The girl heard retching from the cubicle her teacher had occupied, and was frozen in shock. She didn't know whether to wait to see if Professor McGonagall was all right or to slink out quietly and avoid the woman's wrath at having her privacy invaded, however inadvertently. The child's Gryffindor courage failed her. She left.

Minerva washed her face and rinsed her mouth at the sink, then took a moment to smooth her hair and regain her equilibrium before returning to her classroom. Although she no longer had regular morning sickness, she did occasionally suffer from sudden bouts of nausea, although this had been the worst yet. Outside the classroom door, she took a deep breath and stepped in.

"That will do," she said sharply to the students, who had been murmuring and standing about, wondering what to do since her abrupt departure minutes ago. "Kindly take your seats; I do not recall giving anyone permission to leave them. Miss Rattigan, will you be so good as to retrieve a new newt from the box on the table?" She said

nothing about the strange interruption in the class.

Of course, Professor McGonagall's odd behaviour was the talk of the House common rooms that evening.

"Maybe she's transformed one too many times," said one Gryffindor. "Gone 'round the bend . . ."

"Yeah, or maybe she saw a mouse and just couldn't resist," quipped another.

More joking speculation ensued until Nigella Starsgaard, the fifth-year who had been in the lavatory, spoke up. "I think maybe she was just ill. I saw her in the girls' bathroom, and I think she was being sick." The others were suddenly crowded around her.

"As in, puking?" asked Ian Robinson.

"Yes, if you insist on putting it that way," answered Nigella.

"She looked fine when she came back to the classroom," said Deirdre Rattigan, she of the newt retrieval.

"Hey, maybe she's up the duff," said Ian, to the uproarious laughter of the gathered Gryffindors, with the exception of Molly Prewett, who slammed her book shut in ire.

"Ian Robinson, that is just revolting! If I ever hear you say something like that about Professor McGonagall again, I'll hex your bollocks into next year!" she yelled and stormed off into the dormitory.

"Oi, mate, what's got into your girlfriend?" Ian said to Arthur Weasley, who just shrugged.

Arthur hadn't the vaguest idea, but he thought he wouldn't ask her about it in any case. It wasn't a good idea to get Molly too upset. The girl had a temper and wasn't afraid to use her wand to back it up. Besides, he thought, he had just gotten to cop a feel of her enticing bosom after weeks of trying, and he wasn't anxious to muck things up at this delicate stage of negotiations.

The same evening, Minerva was in Albus's office discussing some scheduling matters. They had just wrapped up, and she was shutting her agenda when he said, "I hear there was a disturbance in your N.E.W.T. class this afternoon."

"Gods! Just the bloody morning sickness rearing its ugly head again. It was over quickly, but it gave my class a start," she said.

"Gave them something to talk about, as well," he said, grinning at her.

"I suppose we ought to make the announcement soon," she said, placing her hands on her middle. "I'm starting to show."

"Indeed. I think we should plan on telling the staff at Wednesday's staff meeting. That will give me a chance to speak to Filius tomorrow. Would that be acceptable to you?" he asked.

"Yes, fine. What do you plan to say?"

"Only that our lovely Transfiguration professor has found herself suddenly in the pudding club," he said merrily. He abruptly found himself covered with large white feathers, sporting a beak and a coxcomb. She let him strut and cluck around the office for three minutes before she Transfigured him back.

"My dear! A rooster, really? I thought canaries were more your specialty," he said.

"I thought cock o' the walk more appropriate to the situation," she said.

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Wednesday evening, the staff were gathered around a large table in the staff room. They had just concluded the business of the meeting when the Headmaster said, "Before we adjourn, I have just one more item to discuss."

The rest of the staff looked around nervously. Whatever it was, it wasn't on the agenda he had sent around.

Dumbledore stood and walked to stand behind his wife, putting a hand on her shoulder. "I thought you all should know that Minerva and I are expecting."

The momentary silence was broken with a hearty round of congratulations and applause. Albus was patted on the back by most of the male staff, while Minerva had to submit to Charity Burbage placing a gnarled hand on her belly and numerous assurances that she looked "radiant, dear". She caught Poppy's eye, and the mediwitch hurried over, saying, "All right, all right, don't crowd the pregnant woman, give her some air." Minerva kicked her in the ankle.

Albus recalled their attention. "Thank you all for your good wishes. Minerva and I are very pleased. I need not tell you that this is privileged information for the moment, so we would appreciate your keeping it to yourselves. We expect the baby sometime around the last week of January or first week of February. Filius has kindly agreed to take over some of Minerva's Deputy duties for a few weeks after the child is born, and I intend to find a temporary replacement to teach her first- through fifth-years. I will take her N.E.W.T. classes until she is ready to return to teaching."

Albus came to Minerva's quarters that evening rather than returning to his own after the staff meeting.

"That went rather well, I think," he said.

"*You* didn't have Charity running her spotty hand up and down your belly, though," said Minerva.

He walked over to where she stood, and parted her robes. He pulled her blouse from under the now-expanded waistband of her skirt to expose her abdomen and ran his hands gently over its newly convex surface. He knelt to kiss it, and she held his head to her for a moment, enjoying the warmth of his breath on her skin and the slight tickle of his beard.

"You do look beautiful, you know," he murmured, "with your belly full of my child."

Merlin, how she loved him at that moment.

Chapter Eight

The last thing Minerva McGonagall ever expected was to become a mother. But when she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant, her life with Albus changes in ways beyond anything they might have predicted.

This is the third story set in the "Epithalamium" universe.

Poppy Pomfrey waved the wand over her friend's bare abdomen, a satisfied smile on her face.

"Everything seems fine. Heart rate is good and steady. Do you mind?" she asked, holding her hands over Minerva's burgeoning belly.

"Of course, go ahead," said Minerva.

Poppy placed her palms gently on Minerva's abdomen, delicately probing here and there.

"Good," said Poppy. "Uterus feels firm and appears the right size for twenty-four weeks. Any contractions? Bleeding?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Are you feeling the baby kick and move?"

"Yes." Minerva said, laughing and patting her belly for emphasis.

She had felt the baby kick for the first time two weeks ago. Sitting by the fire and sipping a cup of tea with the review copy of a colleague's article for *Transfiguration Today*, she had been surprised by a sudden punch about three inches below her navel. It had come from *inside* her. Then there was another one. She laughed out loud. It didn't hurt at all; in fact, it was rather pleasant, she thought. She was about to Floo-call Albus to tell him about it when she decided against it.

"Let's just be the two of us for a bit," she had said to the child inside her. It was like having a delicious secret that might be spoiled in the sharing.

She had told Albus the following evening, and he had sat in her quarters with a hand on her belly for half an hour before he felt it. His eyes had widened in surprise, and Minerva thought he looked like a child himself in that moment.

As she held her hand out to Minerva to help her sit up, Poppy asked, "Do you want to know the sex?"

"Do you know it?" Minerva asked. She and Albus had decided they would wait until the birth, but she wasn't sure how she felt about Poppy knowing something important about their child that she herself didn't.

"No, but I could find out. It's an easy spell.

"No, thank you. We'd like to be surprised," said Minerva. Poppy grinned at her.

As Minerva pulled up her skirt and buttoned her blouse, Poppy said, "We should talk about how you want to manage your labour."

"I rather thought the baby would manage it for me," said Minerva.

Poppy knew this was Minerva's way of avoiding a conversation she didn't particularly want to have.

"Is there anything you want to know about it? I mean, that you don't already know," Poppy asked.

Uncharacteristically, Minerva had not gone to the library to pore over books about childbirth. She knew, intellectually, that she was probably just avoiding dealing with her fears, no other unusual thing for Minerva and that it probably had to do with her mother's death, but she didn't care to examine it too closely. She was too happy.

"I don't know, Poppy," Minerva said with a sigh. "How long will it take the labour, I mean?" She vaguely remembered the day and two nights her mother had been sequestered in the bedroom with the midwife and her father, ours in which Minerva had been prevented from seeing her mother. She remembered listening to the moans through the door and her father coming out later, looking worried and exhausted, then catching sight of Minerva.

"Try not to worry, lass," he had said. "It just takes time to bring a baby into the world. Time, and a lot of hard work."

Of course, that was before the moans had graduated to screams.

"It's hard to say how long," said Poppy. "First labours average between twelve and eighteen hours, more or less, but it can vary a great deal."

"And exactly how much is this twelve to eighteen hours, more or less, going to hurt?"

"It varies," said Poppy.

"Poppy . . ." said Minerva, warning in her voice.

"Well, Minerva, I've never done it myself, so I don't have any first-hand experience, but from what I've seen, it will hurt anywhere from a lot to . . . well, a lot."

"That's what I thought," said Minerva glumly.

"But there are potions I can give you to help with the pain if you want. They may not be completely effective, and there are situations in which they shouldn't be used, but they're generally safe, and most women find them quite helpful," said Poppy.

"That's good to hear." Minerva was beginning to wonder just what she had gotten into.

"I've also seen women get good pain relief with firm back massage," Poppy said. "So tell Albus to start training."

"I'll do that," said Minerva, rubbing her back, which was already starting to feel the effects of a baby pressing down on her lower spine and the extra weight she was carrying in front.

"You should also warn him that you're likely to call him all sorts of rude names once things really get going," Poppy added.

"As long as my wand isn't within my reach, Albus should come out of this relatively unscathed," said Minerva.

"You jest, but I did see an incident when I was at St Mungo's: a witch in labour managed to hex her husband in a ~~very~~ very personal spot. I won't tell you what she turned it into, but let's just say he had trouble getting trousers to fit for a long time afterwards," said Poppy. "That's why they started confiscating wands on admission."

The two women laughed at the unfortunate husband's predicament for a moment, then Minerva turned serious.

"Poppy, what if something goes wrong?"

"Then we get you to St Mungo's as fast as possible," said Poppy. "They have more skill and resources than I do here, and I've seen them work miracles in some of the worst situations. I'm not going to lie to you, Minerva. Things do happen in childbirth . . ." She lowered her voice a measure. "Things like what happened to your mother. There are no guarantees. But the really catastrophic things are rare, thank Merlin."

Minerva was silent for a moment, then asked quietly, "Poppy, do you think she would have lived? If she had been at St Mungo's?"

"It's hard to say, Minerva, without having been there. Possibly. They might have recognised what was happening earlier and been able to intervene. But I'm not sure what the state of the art was back then. The Blood-Replenishing Potions were just being developed, and there was nothing effective for the kind of massive infection your mother developed. As it was, it was too far to take her in time, from what you've told me."

After a few moments looking at her friend's contemplative face, Poppy added, "Minerva, if you think you'd rather deliver at St Mungo's, I won't be at all hurt."

"No, Poppy. I want to be here, with you. I know you can get me to St Mungo's quickly if anything goes wrong. We're not all the way up in Caithness, and it isn't 1929."

Poppy patted Minerva's hand. "No. Besides, if anything happened to you or the baby, Albus would never forgive me," she said with a smile.

"Nor me," said Minerva. She stood, fastening her skirt. "Thank you, Poppy."

"It's my pleasure. Try not to worry."

"I will, Poppy."

When Minerva had gone, Poppy thought to herself, *It must be hard to have to play the marble statue all the time*

Marble looked smooth and cold, Poppy knew, but it warmed quickly to the hand. It also cracked.

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 19

The last thing Minerva McGonagall ever expected was to become a mother. But when she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant, her life with Albus changes in ways beyond anything they might have predicted.

This is the third story set in the "Epithalamium" universe.

Minerva was at her desk, attempting to outline a lesson plan for whoever was going to take her classes when she was on leave, when she heard a knock at the door.

"Enter," she called.

The round-cheeked face of Molly Prewett peeked through the door. "I'm sorry, Professor. I can come back another time if you're busy . . ."

"Not at all, Miss Prewett. Please come in." She Banished her papers to a drawer. "What can I do for you?"

The girl reddened. "I had some questions about . . . what we talked about the other day," she said.

"I see," said Minerva. "Then perhaps we should close the door," she said, doing so with a wandless spell.

Molly had trouble beginning. She had been looking at her Transfiguration professor with increasing scrutiny since the day of their previous talk and the gossip in the common room following Professor McGonagall's hasty departure from her N.E.W.T. class. She had been watching the way her teacher walked and sat. There was nothing ungraceful about how the tall witch glided through the corridors or moved during a Transfiguration lesson, but Molly thought she had noticed Professor McGonagall taking just a moment longer than usual to rise from a chair, and she had seen her place her slender hands at the small of her back on several occasions as if it were sore.

After her embarrassing talk with Professor McGonagall, Molly had gone to the library to see what more she could find out. There was depressingly little about sex...just a slim, pink volume, *The Young Witch's Guide to Marriage and Household Management* that only advised the young witch in question to make sure she was freshly bathed and "at her most alluring" in preparation for the wedding night. There was, however, a fair amount of material dealing with the biological aspects of pregnancy and birth, although the steps one had to take to get there were frustratingly opaque.

Having devoured the information, Molly had begun to cast an appraising eye at Professor McGonagall. She wasn't sure, but she thought she had noticed a distinct change in her teacher's normally slender figure as the woman's robes moved and occasionally parted while she was giving instruction, allowing Molly fleeting glances at the body normally hidden within the voluminous, green teaching robe. Moreover, when she had hugged Professor McGonagall after their talk the other day, Molly thought she had felt something through the woman's robes.

Molly's feelings had been roiling and churning for weeks before. She had been going out with Arthur Weasley since the middle of their fourth year, and lately his company and his kisses had made her aware of feelings that she had never before experienced and didn't fully understand. Increasingly, she would arrive at the end of one of their dates feeling full and hollow at the same time, as if she had been prevented from finishing a feast placed in front of her after weeks of famine. She knew the nameless want had to do with Arthur's physical proximity to her, but she hadn't the slightest idea how to assuage it.

That was why, one Saturday night, in a quiet corner of the Astronomy tower, she had finally let Arthur move a tentative hand over her right breast as they kissed. As the hand had begun to gently squeeze, she had felt warmer than she could ever remember. When a finger brushed over the nipple that was hardening through her clothes, she felt something that was like a burst of colour *down there*, and it left her breathless with need for more. She wanted to feel his hands all over her because it felt so good the way he was touching her...oh, she wanted! . . . *something* for which she had no words. Then she had got frightened and pushed the hand away. She had been on the verge of something forbidden, something dangerous, she thought.

She had excoriated herself later, in her bed with her curtains drawn to shut out the other giggling, gossiping girls in the dormitory. What had she done? Why had she felt like that? All at once, a terrible feeling had come over her. What if she was pregnant? She didn't quite know how it was meant to happen, but her brothers, Gideon and Fabian, had warned her to watch out for boys. That if she "messed around" with them, she could find herself pregnant and in disgrace. They had never defined "messaging

around", but Molly was fairly certain that what she had done with Arthur qualified. Only something serious...something earth-shattering...could have made her feel like that, she reasoned. She was smart enough to realise she needed the help and advice of an older woman...not one of her friends, who were likely as not to give her bad advice out of the best intentions. But there was no one to turn to. She was alone.

When Professor Lemmas had found her crying in the Gryffindor common room the following Monday afternoon when she should have been in class, he knew something was quite wrong. When he was unsuccessful at persuading the girl to either stop crying or to tell him what the problem was, he had suggested perhaps she might like to speak with a *female* professor, and she agreed. Later, though, when he had given her the instruction to appear at Professor McGonagall's office that afternoon, she cursed herself bitterly. Not Professor McGonagall! The prim, stern Transfiguration professor was the last person who would understand, Molly thought. Not only that, she had reasoned, the Deputy Headmistress would probably persuade the Headmaster to expel her immediately. Worst of all, though, was the thought that Professor McGonagall would lose all respect for her...a respect Molly knew she had earned through her hard work over six years of Transfiguration classes and duelling club matches, and one she valued highly. When it had turned out that her professor's reaction was not what she expected...not at *all*...Molly had begun to reappraise both her estimation of Minerva McGonagall and her own feelings about what the older witch had told her.

As she stood now in Professor McGonagall's office, words failed her as her teacher looked at her expectantly. Finally, Molly summoned her Gryffindor courage and spoke:

"I think I might be changing my mind," she said.

"About?" enquired Professor McGonagall.

"About . . . sex. I think it sounds . . . interesting."

"Interesting," repeated Professor McGonagall. "And are we speaking theoretically, or did you have a more practical application in mind?"

Molly was afraid Professor McGonagall was mocking her, but the look on the older woman's face suggested she was serious.

"I was wondering if you could tell me what to do when . . . if I decide to . . . so I don't have a baby," said Molly.

Professor McGonagall looked at her intently for a moment, and Molly felt as if the woman were looking right into her soul

"I think, Molly, that we had best continue this conversation in my quarters," she said finally.

When they had settled into Professor McGonagall's sitting room, tea in front of them once again, the teacher looked her student in the eye and asked, "Molly, are you considering having sex with Arthur?"

"I don't know, Professor. Not right away. But I want to be ready . . . if we decide to," Molly answered.

"You realise that you and Arthur would be breaking school rules if you were to do so here?" Minerva said, her eyebrows flattening into a frown that made her look severe.

Molly blanched, and Minerva thought perhaps she had been too harsh. She also felt a twinge of guilt for her hypocrisy. True, she had been eighteen when she had embarked on her affair with Albus, but he had also been her teacher at the time and more than forty years her senior. What it had lacked in illegality, it had more than made up for in inappropriateness and risk to the both of them.

She continued more gently, "Molly, this is rather a sudden change of heart. When we last spoke, you were absolutely certain you could never '~~do that~~', as you put it. Now, you are asking me to tell you how to obtain contraception. I'm sorry, but I'm a bit confused."

"No, *I'm* sorry, Professor. I shouldn't have bothered you about this."

"It isn't a bother," Minerva said. "I am trying to understand so I can help you." She decided to begin again. "Molly, you and Arthur are very young. I know you think you love him..."

"I do love him!" shouted Molly. "Don't tell me how I feel, Professor."

Minerva was taken aback, not only at the girl's unusual outburst, but by the sudden memory of her eighteen-year-old self and how she had felt hearing the same words she had just spoken to Molly.

"I'm sorry, Molly. You are quite right," she said. "I shouldn't presume to know how you feel. I'm just concerned that you may be racing into something you are not yet ready for."

"I know, Professor, and I'm sorry for shouting. But how will I know when I'm ready . . . when Arthur is ready?"

"To be honest, I don't have an answer for you," Minerva said, a sigh escaping her.

"Then how did *you* know, Professor?" asked Molly. She was getting angry with the professor's apparent unwillingness to answer her fully.

"Molly, I don't think..."

"But you are pregnant, aren't you?" Molly asked accusingly.

Molly could almost hear her heart pounding in the silence that followed.

"Yes." Professor McGonagall was perfectly calm.

Molly was stunned that her suspicion...one she hadn't intended to voice...had been correct.

"I'm sorry, Professor," she whispered.

"Don't be. I'm not," Professor McGonagall answered pleasantly.

"Are you going to have to leave Hogwarts," asked Molly, her sudden anguish making her sound like a small child.

"No. Although I will be on leave from my duties for a few weeks after the baby is born."

"But the scandal . . . does Professor Dumbledore know?"

"Given that he is the responsible party, I rather think he does," Minerva said with some amusement. She took a not entirely benign pleasure in seeing the girl's large, brown eyes open wide with shock.

Taking pity on her, Minerva continued, "And I assure you, Molly, that there will be little scandal. Professor Dumbledore has been my husband for nearly ten years."

"Oh . . . I thought . . ." Molly let the thought trail off.

"Yes, I can see what you thought. You made an assumption and have subsequently discovered how wrong assumptions can be. Now that we've gotten that straightened out, perhaps we could turn the conversation back to the subject of *your* love life," Minerva said.

"Yes, Professor."

Minerva surprised Molly then by taking her hand, the warmth back in her voice. "Molly, I can't tell you whether or not you should go to bed with Mr Weasley. As your teacher and Deputy Headmistress of this school, it's my duty to tell you in no uncertain terms not to. As your friend"...Molly flushed at the term..."I can only tell you that you must follow your heart but that it is also imperative to let your head have a say in the decision. As for contraception, "she said, rising, "I can't give you what you seek. However . . ." she went to a bookshelf and pulled out a slim volume with various medical-looking words on the spine. "I see no reason to prevent an advanced student from accessing texts that may provide enlightenment beyond the standard curriculum." She handed the book to an astonished Molly.

"Thank you, Professor," said Molly, still in shock.

"You're quite welcome. You can thank me by making sure you read that before you come to any important decisions."

"Oh, I will," said Molly. Sensing that the bizarre interview was nearly over, Molly suddenly wanted to hold on to the warm, maternal feeling that had enveloped her in the past five minutes.

"Professor?"

"Yes, Molly?"

"Do you think I could touch it?"

Minerva started. "Touch what?"

"The baby. I mean . . . never mind. I'm sorry," Molly said, blushing.

It had been on the tip of Minerva's tongue to scold her for her impertinence, but something stopped her. Maybe it was her hormones, she thought later, or maybe it was just the girl's obvious need for mothering, but Minerva said nothing. She opened her teaching robe, took Molly's hand, and placed it over her burgeoning belly. The two women stood there, saying nothing for a few moments, until the baby inside Minerva took the opportunity to place a large kick to its mother's belly, making Molly cry, "Oh!" in surprise and delight. She looked up into her teacher's face in wonder, and the two smiled at one another.

In later years, Minerva would believe that her long friendship with Molly Weasley, née Prewett, had truly been born on that day, in that moment of shared awe.

After Molly removed her hand, saying a soft "thank you" to her professor, Minerva said, "I don't think I need to tell you that this is not to be shared with anyone else yet...not even Mr Weasley. Professor Dumbledore and I intend to inform the other students soon, but we would prefer to do it in an orderly fashion rather than by gossip and word-of-mouth. I assume we can count on your discretion?"

"Of course."

Molly thought she would walk through fire for Minerva McGonagall.

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 19

The last thing Minerva McGonagall ever expected was to become a mother. But when she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant, her life with Albus changes in ways beyond anything they might have predicted.

This is the third story set in the "Epithalamium" universe.

They were lying in bed the following Saturday, Albus spooned against Minerva's back, one of her legs thrown casually over his two. This was the position they had been using to make love lately, not so much out of deference to Minerva's growing belly...it was not yet an insurmountable obstacle...but because it was easier for Albus to control the depth of his thrusts, and he was still nervous about harming her or the baby with his customary ardour. Truth be told, it wasn't Minerva's favourite position, but she wasn't complaining. At least he was inside her, and it allowed him free access to use his hands to bring her to climax.

Which is precisely what had just happened when Minerva said, "Molly Prewett knows about the baby."

It took Albus a moment to realise that the subject had suddenly changed from her enthusiastic encouragement of his busy fingers to something more prosaic. He wasn't sure he would ever fully understand the twists and bends of his wife's mind. "Molly Prewett? The seventh-year Gryffindor?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered. "Do you mind?"

"Not exactly, but don't you think it would be wise to tell all the students at the same time?"

"Yes, but it just seemed the thing to do under the circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

"She asked me if I was pregnant."

"And in what context did the subject arise?" he asked, truly curious. It was unlike Minerva to have personal conversations with students.

"She needed some advice on a delicate personal matter," said Minerva.

"I see. I take it I shouldn't ask what matter?"

"You would probably regret it if you did," she said. It had long been Albus' experience that when Minerva told him he would regret an action, she was painfully correct.

"In any event, I think it's getting to be time to inform the students," he said, moving his hand to her belly. "Your figure, while still lovely, is now noticeably altered."

"Mmmm," she said in answer.

"What would you say to an announcement at the Halloween Feast?" he asked.

"If we must," she said, sighing.

He knew what was troubling her. She disliked being the centre of attention...other than in her classroom, of course...and this particular announcement would place her squarely in the uncomfortable spotlight. It was also a very public declaration of their relationship, which had always been, if not a secret, at least conducted with discretion, particularly where students were concerned, which suited her just fine. He knew she didn't like the students knowing too much about her private affairs; it was probably a holdover from when she had been a young teacher, anxious to exert her authority, just as the tight bun in which she always wore her hair now had been. Command and aloofness were her weapons in the classroom, and she wielded them with deadly precision. A fecund belly was a physical repudiation of those attributes. Perhaps she thought it a sign of weakness, he mused. It certainly signalled a particular kind of surrender. No wonder she was uneasy.

"You'll need to alert the Board of Governors," she said. "They won't take kindly to hearing it from the *Daily Prophet*."

"No," he said, chuckling. "I'll send an owl."

"An owl, Albus? Isn't that a bit impersonal?"

"Possibly. But they are not scheduled to meet again until December, at which point the proverbial Kneazle will be out of the bag, whether we tell them or not," he said.

As it turned out, they needn't have worried.

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Minerva glanced at the clock.

Twenty minutes of two.

The time would later become etched in her memory as the final moment of "before". It wasn't really, of course; it was just the last time she had noted the precise hour and minute, and precision was a talisman Minerva could cling to in a world of gray uncertainties.

Now, however, her concern was to finish marking the essays so she could hand them back to the class that was scheduled to report for duty at two p.m.

Her quill moved rapidly across the parchment; she did not normally leave her marking...or anything else, for that matter...until the last minute, but the previous night she had been so tired that she had found herself falling asleep mid-comment, requiring her to Vanish much of what she had written in the margins of several students' papers, so she had just given it up as a bad job and went to bed.

She had just slashed an emphatic, "No" in red ink in the margin of Ian Robinson's essay and was about to enumerate its shortcomings when she felt a tightening in her lower back. It grew in intensity and wrapped itself around to her abdomen like Devil's Snare until all she could do was breathe. She knew immediately that it was a contraction. Poppy had told her she might start having small, painless tightenings in her belly and that these were just "practice" contractions, not signalling real labour. Minerva knew this was different. It felt forceful, purposeful...and certainly not painless. She waited, her hands gripping the edge of the desk, and as the pain released her, she watched her knuckles turn from white to pink again. She sat very still, hoping that it was just a mistake, a random pang, and if only she sat perfectly still, it would not be repeated. A minute later, a second pain came, as intense as the first, this time moving from her back to grip her belly more quickly.

She knew she needed Poppy. When the pain had abated...this time not really ending, just settling to a dull cramp...she stood. She had taken three steps when a white-hot sheet of agony tore through her abdomen and lower back. She grabbed the back of a chair to keep from falling to the floor, when she felt something warm and wet on her thighs.

"Oh, no," she moaned. She knew her waters had broken and that it was too early, much too early. Fighting the pain, she gathered her robes and skirt up, not caring who might see, and looked, expecting to find a stream of clear amniotic fluid wetting her legs. But what she saw was blood. For a brief moment, she did not believe her eyes, but as she watched, another rivulet of scarlet trickled its way down her thigh and onto her calf.

Poppy.

She had to get to Poppy. Dropping her skirt, she made it two more steps before she doubled over with another contraction, this one accompanied by the knife-pain clawing its way through her belly. Her wand...where was her wand? She couldn't walk, but maybe she could send her Patronus for the mediwitch. She felt for it in her robe pocket, but it wasn't there. She looked up and saw it lying on her desk.

She Summoned her wand but couldn't focus enough to conjure a Patronus. She gathered her strength and yelled, "Help, somebody!" to the empty room and corridor beyond, but nobody answered. It was still at least fifteen minutes before classes were due to resume, and if any of the other teachers were in their classrooms on this corridor, they would not hear her; the rooms had been magically soundproofed so that the noise from one classroom would not disrupt another.

She moved slowly toward her desk but stopped when she felt a pop, followed by a gush of fluid she now knew was blood mixed with amnion. She was almost hypnotised, watching it run over her shoe to form a small pool on the classroom floor. She began to see white spots of light in front of her eyes. Then the room shifted oddly and went dark.

When the first two students arrived at the Transfiguration classroom twelve minutes later, they were surprised to find it empty. Professor McGonagall was usually seated at her desk when they arrived, or else using her wand to write an assignment on the board at the front of the room.

"Where is she?" asked Amos Diggory, taking the opportunity to regasp Nigella Starsgaard's hand, which he had released just prior to entering Professor McGonagall's domain.

"Beats me," said Nigella, shrugging. She had taken a few steps toward her seat near the front of the classroom when she saw Professor McGonagall on the floor between the first row and her desk.

"Oh, my god, Amos!" Nigella said as both teens rushed to their fallen teacher.

"Professor?" Nigella asked, tentatively taking the prostrate woman's hand. "Professor, wake up!" She turned to the boy, who was frozen with shock. "Amos, we need to get help...go get someone...a teacher...hurry!"

Diggory shot out of the classroom and seconds later ran into...or through...Professor Binns.

"Diggle, my boy!" the ghost said, starting to remonstrate with him, but Amos interrupted him.

"Professor, you need to come . . . it's Professor McGonagall . . . something's happened to her!" Diggory said, panting.

"Where?" asked Binns.

"Her classroom."

"Diggle, go get Professor Flitwick; he's probably in his classroom," Binns instructed. He knew that there wouldn't be much he could do if Professor McGonagall were seriously injured. He could perform no magic, nor could he transport her.

Sending Amos sprinting down the corridor, Binns floated rapidly to his colleague's classroom. When he arrived, he saw Nigella bending over Minerva, who was heaped in a pool of green robes on the floor. He knew immediately that Professor McGonagall needed the hospital wing, and needed it now.

A moment later, other students began to arrive for class, along with Amos Diggory and Filius Flitwick, who pushed through the legs of the astonished children at the doorway. Flitwick bent to Minerva, calling her name softly. Like Binns, he knew at first glance that she needed more aid than he could provide. Her pallor told him so.

"Mr Diggory, run ahead to the infirmary and tell Madam Pomfrey we are bringing Professor McGonagall. Cuthbert, find Albus and tell him to meet us at there." Diggory and Binns set on their errands immediately, while the increasing number of students filling the room crowded closer to the scene.

"Back away!" Flitwick commanded in a voice louder and sharper than anyone had ever heard him use. Nigella backed up a few inches but still clung to her teacher's hand. Flitwick waved his wand to Levitate Minerva; when she had risen a few feet from the floor, everyone gasped. Where she had lain, there was a thick smear of blood. As the hem of her robe left the floor, blood began to drip from the saturated material in thick, Knut-sized blots.

"Where is it coming from?" asked one boy. There were no obvious injuries.

"I don't know," snapped Flitwick. "Now get out of the way. Miss Starsgaard, you need to let go of her hand so I can transport her." He Levitated Minerva as quickly as he could out of the classroom and down the corridor toward the hospital wing. The assembled students stayed where they were, murmuring in shock. All except Nigella, who walked quickly behind Flitwick and Professor McGonagall, following the droplet-trail left by her professor's blood.

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"I need to see the Headmaster at once," said Professor Binns to the stone gargoyle.

"Password?" enquired the creature.

"You know I don't have it. Only the Deputy Headmistress does, and she's the one I'm here about," said Binns. He knew the castle's enchantments would prevent him from merely floating through the door to the Headmaster's office as he could with other, less important rooms.

"I will alert the Headmaster," said the impassive gargoyle, closing its eyes. A few moments later, the stone doors rumbled open, and Binns floated up the spiral staircase and into the office, the inner door of which stood open for him.

"Cuthbert, what brings you here?" said Dumbledore in surprise. It was highly unusual for the History of Magic professor to seek him out anywhere, let alone in his office. Binns normally seemed concerned only with the past that he inhabited.

"Headmaster, you need to go to the infirmary immediately. Professor Flitwick is taking Professor McGonagall there; she seems to have taken ill," said Binns.

Dumbledore's face lost its colour under the gray-streaked, auburn beard. "Thank you, Cuthbert," he said, his concern evident only in the haste with which he swept past the ghost.

He had been prepared to find Minerva ill, upset...possibly even weeping, which would have been shocking enough...but nothing could have prepared him for the scene that greeted him when he reached the infirmary.

Minerva was lying on an exam table, nude from the waist down. A blanket haphazardly covered the top half of her torso. Filius Flitwick was standing on a tall stool, holding one of her legs at a ninety-degree angle. Her other leg was held by a student whose name escaped Albus in his shock. Poppy Pomfrey was standing at the end of the table, one hand inside Minerva's vagina, the other passing her wand back and forth over the unconscious woman's torso while she murmured words Albus could not make out. None of this shocked him as much as the blood. So much of it! Dripping in stringy tributaries from the edge of the table. Spilling from his wife's body, the flow surging and ebbing with each beat of her heart.

Flitwick, whose head was turned away from the table...whether to avoid the horror on it or to preserve his colleague's privacy, he himself didn't know...caught Albus' eye, pulling him out of his petrification.

"Poppy, what's happening?" Albus asked as he approached the table.

"I don't know yet, Albus . . . that's what I'm trying to find out," she said without looking at him.

He knew she was concentrating, but he could help himself. "Is it her womb?" he whispered.

"I don't think so...her uterus feels firm," said Poppy, totally professional and in command in this moment of crisis.

After a moment, she withdrew her hand from Minerva's body. "I think she may be abruting. She needs to go to St Mungo's right now. Filius, wrap her warmly. Nigella, thank you, you can put her leg down now." The young girl gently let her professor's leg slide to the table but made no other move.

"Nigella, go to your dormitory. Now!" said Dumbledore. The girl was startled out of her stupor, both by the Headmaster's unusually harsh tone and by his use of her given name. She stepped back, then raced from the room. She would spend the rest of the afternoon and into the evening weeping into her pillow. She would also, several days later, receive a note from the Headmaster himself, apologising for his rudeness and thanking her for her help.

When Filius moved to get the blankets, Albus took them from him wordlessly and wrapped Minerva in them. Having Scourgified her hands, Poppy said, "Floo, Albus. I'll follow right behind."

Albus scooped his wife from the table, went to the fireplace opposite, and stepped in. Poppy took a pinch of Floo powder from the tin on the mantel and looked at Albus, who gave a nod. As she tossed the powder into the fireplace, he said in a clear voice, "St Mungo's," and they were gone. Poppy waited a few moments then took another pinch of powder and stepped into the fireplace to follow them.

Stepping out of the fireplace into the St Mungo's reception area, Albus Dumbledore let ring the full power of a voice toned by decades of public speaking and teaching: "I need Healers! My wife is bleeding!"

Ordinarily, a bleeding patient was not so unusual as to draw the immediate attention of the St Mungo's staff, but the combination of Dumbledore's voice, his imposing stature, and the warm crackle of ambient magical power that ricocheted around him in his distress brought green-robed Healers and mediwitches and mediwizards running to him. As they began to pepper him with questions and move the blanket to see what he was holding, Poppy Pomfrey stepped from the fireplace.

She grabbed the nearest Healer, saying, "This is my patient. She's a forty-two-year-old pregnant witch, twenty-six weeks, gravida-one, para-nil. Haemorrhaging badly. I suspect an abruption."

The Healer sprang into action. "We need a room . . . this way, now!" He ran down the hall, Albus still holding Minerva, and Poppy, along with several other St Mungo's medical staff, rushing along behind. When the Healer had blasted open the third door with his wand and found the room empty, he said, "Here!"

The people who had been in the reception area were left in nervous surprise, quiet until a voice said, "Was that *Albus Dumbledore*?"

Someone else said, "I think so. Did he say *his wife*?"

There followed a flurry of speculation as to the identity of the bundle of blankets the putative Dumbledore had been holding. Nobody had caught a glimpse of the face inside. The name Minerva McGonagall was never mentioned.

Albus laid Minerva gently down on the exam table and was brusquely pushed aside by a Healer who immediately began unwrapping the blankets concealing the patient. Others were waving wands or gathering supplies. The Healer who appeared to be in charge gestured to Poppy to come over to where he was standing at Minerva's head. "How long has she been bleeding?" he asked.

"I don't know. For at least a few minutes before she got to me...she was already unconscious," answered Poppy.

"Do you know the condition of the foetus?"

Poppy glanced at Albus, who was staring intently at the figure on the table, apparently hearing nothing of the conversation. She shook her head. "No heart tones."

The Healer nodded curtly, making a note in his chart. He didn't use a Quick-Quotes Quill, for which Poppy was grateful.

"What's this?" came a voice from the end of the table. The Healer standing between Minerva's legs...now held in place by metal stirrups...was holding a wad of blood-soaked material.

Poppy went to him and said quietly, "Gauze. I packed her vagina to try to stop the bleeding. It's a Muggle technique. Nothing else was working."

"*Pfft*," scoffed the Healer. "Fat lot of good that'll do for an abruption."

Poppy was about to explain that she had done it on the chance that the patient's bleeding was from a cervical tear, when she realised it didn't matter. She held her tongue and let the rude Healer do his work.

"Poppy," said a voice from behind her. It was Albus. "What's happening? Is it her womb? Has it ruptured?" She had never heard his voice sound so small, so child-like.

"No." When she heard his sigh of relief, she knew she had to make him understand the gravity of the situation. She owed him the truth. "I think she's suffered a placental abruption. It's when the placenta comes away from the uterus, and it causes bleeding...sometimes severe." When he said nothing, she put her hand on his arm. "It's a catastrophic complication, Albus. You need to know that."

He looked at her then, his sea-blue eyes unfocused as she had never seen them, and whispered, "Will she live?"

"I . . . I don't know," answered Poppy. "But Albus, the baby..."

He interrupted her, "Will she *live*?" His voice was hoarse with desperation, his eyes now focused intently on Poppy's face. He was begging her to lie to him, they both knew it, and it pained her unutterably to see it.

"Maybe, Albus. We have to hope." It was the best she could do for him.

At that moment, a mediwizard approached them. "Professor Dumbledore?" he said gently. "I need to get some information from you, if you could just step out with me for a few moments."

"No."

"Please, sir, it's..."

"I'm not leaving her." His voice was calm, but the ambient magic crackled again, causing everyone to look up from their tasks for a second.

The mediwizard looked to Poppy for help, but she just shook her head.

"All right, sir. I can take the information here."

Albus nodded, not taking his eyes off the table.

"What is the patient's name?"

"Minerva Sigrid Aithne McGonagall Dumbledore."

Several sets of eyes looked up, but nobody stopped working.

"Date of birth?"

"Fourth of October, 1925."

"Place of birth?"

"Caithness, Scotland."

"Place of residence?"

"Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"Place of employment, if any?"

"Same."

"Occupation?"

"Professor of Transfiguration."

"Next of kin?"

At this, Dumbledore finally looked at his inquisitor, who had the good grace to look back down at his parchment.

"Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore."

"Relation to patient?"

"I'm her husband." The great man's voice broke on the final word.

Chapter Eleven

Chapter 11 of 19

The last thing Minerva McGonagall ever expected was to become a mother. But when she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant, her life with Albus changes in ways beyond anything they might have predicted.

This is the third story set in the "Epithalamium" universe.

"Professor Dumbledore?" The head Healer had come to where Albus and Poppy were standing. "I'm Galeneus Pye. I'm head of the team that's taking care of your wife."

Dumbledore nodded. "What's happening? How is she?"

"She's reasonably stable. We've slowed the bleeding and managed to get some Blood Replenishing Potion into her, and it's helping. She's had what's called a placental abruption. That means her..."

"I know what it means," Dumbledore said.

The Healer glanced at Poppy, then continued. "Good. The thing is, we need to deliver her immediately. The haemorrhaging won't fully stop until the placenta is out and her arteries are sealed off."

"Do it."

"Sir, I need to tell you that the foetus . . . the baby . . . has not survived. I'm very sorry."

Albus wiped his hands over his face. He didn't notice the smear of blood that stained his beard when his saturated sleeve brushed against it.

"When will she wake up?" he asked.

"Well, we want to wake her up now, if possible, so she can help deliver the baby. In cases like these, where the baby has already passed, it's safest for the mother to deliver vaginally when she's already lost so much blood. It will be faster if she's able to push."

"What do you mean you'll wake her 'if possible'?"

"Well, sir, she's lost so much blood, it's possible she can't wake up."

The greatest wizard of the age just looked at the Healer as if he couldn't comprehend the words emerging from the young man's mouth. The Healer looked again at Poppy for help.

"Albus," she said, taking his arm, "you need to consent to the immediate delivery."

"Yes."

"Thank you, sir," said the Healer, nodding his head at Poppy in thanks. He hurried back to the group gathered at the table.

After a few minutes of bustling activity, Albus and Poppy heard a weak groan from the exam table. Albus moved to go over to her, but Poppy took his arm.

"Wait, Albus. You've got . . . I need to . . ." She took her wand, pointed it at his beard, and said, *Scourgify*." The blood smear disappeared.

Albus pulled away from her and went to his wife.

"Minerva."

"Albus?" came the reply. She sounded far away.

"I'm here, my angel." He gently stroked her hair and leant down to touch his forehead to hers.

"What's happening?"

"You got sick. You're in St Mungo's. These people are going to help you."

"Albus, the baby..."

"*Shh*. Don't worry about that now. Just . . . get better."

The head Healer came over to her and knelt down. "Mrs Dumbledore, we need to deliver the baby now. I'm going to do something to help move things along, and I wanted to warn you first so you aren't surprised."

Incredibly, she smiled, her eyes still closed.

"Minerva . . . ?" enquired Albus, slightly alarmed.

"Nobody calls me that . . . 'Mrs Dumbledore'."

"It's your name," he said, kissing her forehead.

"Yes. Ohhh!" Her face contorted in pain, and Albus looked up desperately at the Healer.

"It's all right, sir. She's just contracting. We cast a spell to help her cervix dilate faster. It should be over shortly."

"Ahhh!" Minerva cried.

Albus grabbed her hand. "Squeeze my hand, my love, when it hurts." She did, and he was surprised at the strength of her grip.

They went on for the next ten minutes, moaning and squeezing, until the Healer at the foot of the table said, "All right, Mrs Dumbledore. At the next pain, I want you to give me a good push. Professor Dumbledore, maybe you could help support her back."

Albus came around to behind Minerva's head, and Poppy took his place at her side, taking her hand.

"Poppy?"

"Yes, love, I'm here. You're doing fine," said Poppy.

"How is the baby?" Minerva asked.

"You'll see the baby in a few minutes," said Poppy. She couldn't bring herself to tell her friend the entire truth, Merlin help her.

"Ahhh!" moaned Minerva with another contraction.

"All right, Mrs Dumbledore, push."

Minerva closed her eyes, gritted her teeth, and began to bear down. Poppy gave Albus a nudge, and he supported his wife's back behind the pillow, lifting her head and shoulders from the table.

"Good, keep going, keep going . . ." said the Healer.

Minerva let out a gasp, and opened her eyes, panting.

"Now come right back and give me another, right down here in your bottom . . ." the Healer instructed.

"*Unnnnh* . . ." She grunted with the effort.

When the contraction waned, the Healer said, "Okay, relax. That was very good, Mrs Dumbledore."

Albus let the pillow gently back down to the table. He was perspiring heavily. Great rivulets of sweat ran down his face to wet his beard. He gently stroked Minerva's forehead, which was damp with beads of perspiration. Poppy moved a strand of Minerva's hair from her eyes, and felt how cold her friend's skin was despite her exertions. Poppy realised it was due to the massive blood loss Minerva had suffered. Her body simply didn't have enough resources to produce heat.

"Oh, gods!" gasped Minerva as the next pain started to build.

"All right, give me another push, just like the last one," said the Healer.

Minerva's moan cut off as she bore down, all her strength focused on the space between her legs. After a minute, she let her head fall back against the pillow, gasping for breath.

"Right back at it, Mrs. Dumbledore, come on . . ." urged the Healer.

"I can't!"

"Yes, you can, love . . . you are," said Poppy. She looked at Albus, willing him to say something.

"You can do this, my angel," he said, looking into her eyes. "You're my Viking warrior queen, after all," he said, forcing himself to smile at her. It was a reference to a long-ago conversation, one in which he had conceded his weakness to her strength. She had laughed at the epithet then, and agreed to what he had asked of her.

So she pushed again, and as she did, she felt a deep burning sensation between her legs that made her cry out.

"All right, Mrs Dumbledore, relax for just a minute...try not to push."

"It hurts!"

"I know, love . . . it will be just another minute, then it'll all be over," said Poppy.

"All right, one last push...not too hard, come on . . ." said the Healer.

Minerva held her breath and bore down once more. As she felt the burning increase, she released her breath and screamed...a ragged, desperate sound...then she felt something slide from her body, and just like that, most of the pain was blessedly gone.

Albus saw the Healer hand a bloody, towel-wrapped bundle into another pair of hands that took it away across the room. He knew it was their child, and for a moment he was torn...stay with Minerva or follow the bundle? Then he remembered that, great wizard though he was, there was nothing he could do for the tiny being that was part of him, part of her, so he stayed with his wife.

"The baby, Albus . . . ?" she asked, craning her neck up to try to see what was happening. "Albus?"

He couldn't say anything, so he just sat caressing her hair, as if by staying silent he could undo it all.

"Albus?"

It was Poppy who spoke. "Minerva, love . . . the baby has died. I'm so, so sorry." Her voice trembled, and tears spilled from her eyes despite her effort to keep them at bay.

Minerva said nothing; she just closed her eyes in order to be alone with her agony. She had known, of course, from the moment she saw the blood pooling on the classroom floor; she was wise...the wisest witch of her age, some said...and had enough experience of life to know that merely not speaking a thing didn't make it less true. But now she knew other things, as well. That *grief*, for instance, was an utterly inadequate word for so complete a void. It was a lesson she would have cause to revisit years later, in the course of two wars. But for now, it was new and raw information.

She felt Albus' beard on her face, felt his kisses alight gently on her eyes, her cheeks, her forehead . . . heard him murmuring, "Oh, my love . . . my darling . . . my love . . ." as intimate as if they were alone in her bedroom making love rather than in this cold, sterile room surrounded by strangers who behaved as if wearing green robes stained with her blood were the most normal thing in the world.

She reached up and pulled his head to her, running her fingers through his hair as if to reassure herself that he was still there, still tangible, still hers.

Poppy stepped away, not wanting to intrude on their grief. She saw the Healer coming toward them, and put up a hand to stop him. "They know," she said. The Healer nodded, then returned to the foot of the table to examine her. It seemed cruel, thought Poppy, but she knew it was essential. Minerva's life was still in jeopardy. Her bleeding had left her dangerously low on resources; if she were to continue haemorrhaging or suffer a new bleed, the result could easily be fatal. Poppy had seen it happen.

"Mrs Dumbledore," the Healer said gently, "I need to make your uterus contract some more to seal off the blood vessels. It may be uncomfortable. I'm sorry."

She didn't react, so Albus nodded.

The Healer waved his wand over Minerva's abdomen, and she screamed. Albus took her head between his hands and kissed her forehead, his eyes squeezed shut, just as hers were.

It was repeated several more times, and Poppy could feel the sweat trickling down her chest and back under her robes, even though the room was almost uncomfortably cool. She saw the Healer lower his wand, frowning, and she felt a chill.

Minerva and Albus were unaware of the danger. "What is it?" Minerva whispered. "The baby . . . a boy or a girl?"

"I don't know," Albus answered. "I'll find out." Poppy put a hand up again, gesturing him to stay with Minerva, and moved down to where the Healer was still frowning at the foot of the table. "Mr Pye, can you tell me the sex of the baby? The parents would like to know."

"It's a boy."

When Poppy had relayed the information, she saw Minerva look at Albus. "Oh, Albus . . . your son . . ." she said. "Our son, my love," he answered. "He's our son." His tears fell on her face and he wiped them gently away. She took his hand before he could move it away, and held it tightly to her chest.

Poppy had moved back to where Healer Pye was standing. He was looking at a table of numbers he had drawn in the air with his wand, still frowning. "Can you tell me what's happening?" Poppy asked. When the Healer hesitated, she added, "Mrs Dumbledore was originally my patient, and I'm her regular mediwitch. And her friend."

Pye nodded. He spoke in a whisper. "She still has some bleeding. I'm not very happy with these values," he said, indicating the numbers.

"Why?"

"See this?" he said, indicating one of the numbers with his wand. "Platelets less than fifty, and this," pointing to another, "Eighteen-second prothrombin time, and this one, fibrinogen, is zero-point-three-six."

"DIC?" asked Poppy.

Pye looked at her, impressed. It was unusual in his experience for a general mediwitch to know about the coagulopathy that was now threatening their patient. "That's what I'm thinking," he answered.

"Gods! What can you do?" she asked.

"Keep replenishing her blood, keep her volume up and hope it stops," he answered. "Madam . . . ?"

"Pomfrey," Poppy said. "Could she be retaining part of the placenta?"

"Madam Pomfrey, she had a complete abruption. The whole thing came out practically on top of the foetus."

Poppy let out a breath. "If only I'd known sooner..." she began.

"You did exactly right," the Healer said. "There's no way of knowing until it starts, and you identified the problem and got her here as fast as you could. You probably saved her life."

"But now you're telling me she could die anyway," said Poppy, almost putting her head in her hands but remembering she was still within sight of Minerva and Albus. She settled for kneading the hem of her robe.

"It's a possibility."

"Thank you for your directness, Mr Pye. Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

The Healer nodded.

Poppy went to where the others had taken the baby after its birth. A mediwitch was gently washing him. Poppy wordlessly handed a clean towel to the other woman to dry the baby when she had finished. Somehow, they both knew without speaking that using magic to tend to this tiny, extinguished life, so recently filled with its own magic, would be wrong. Some things had to be done by the touch of human hands. When they were finished, the St Mungo's mediwitch asked, "Do the parents want to see him?"

"I'll ask," Poppy said and went to her friends. "Minerva . . . Albus . . . would you like to hold him?"

The couple looked at one another for a moment, then Minerva whispered, "Yes, please." Albus looked at her as if to ask if she were sure, then said, "Yes. I'd like to see my son. Thank you, Poppy."

It was Poppy who brought the tiny bundle to Minerva. She put him gently into her friend's hands and left the room to give the family their privacy.

Minerva carefully unwrapped the green blanket that concealed her son from her. He was perfect. Tiny and perfect. She held him easily with one hand and gently touched the top of his head, so finely dusted with black fuzz. His eyes were closed, so she did not know their colour. She wondered if anyone would be able to tell her. She touched the nose, no larger than a ladybird, and his chest, its skin nearly translucent. He had not yet developed the fat that characterised healthy, full-term infants, and she could see his ribs like delicate piano keys lining his body. She lifted a hand with her index finger...so perfectly formed and so impossibly small.

She bent to smell his head. He smelt of soap and a deeper, meatier scent she recognised as blood. She kissed him, desperately trying to commit to memory the feel of the soft fuzz on her lips and the waxy texture of his skin against her cheek.

Albus knelt down beside them. "He's beautiful, isn't he?" she asked.

"Yes. He has your hair."

"They all do at this stage, I think," she answered. "You should hold him, Albus."

"No, you." He was afraid...absurdly, he realised...of injuring the child with his large hands. But he reached out to stroke a finger along the boy's cheek.

They sat like that, the three of them...Minerva nuzzling the small head, Albus stroking the baby's cheek...until the St Mungo's mediwitch approached.

"Mr and Mrs Dumbledore, I need to take a footprint. I can do it here, if you like, while you hold him." Her voice was kind. She had tended to bereaved parents more often than she would have liked, but she knew she was good at it and was glad to be able to offer whatever small comfort she could. "I'll take one for you to keep as well."

Minerva nodded, and the mediwitch Summoned two pieces of parchment and an ink pad. "May I?" she asked, waiting for Minerva's nod of assent before gingerly lifting a tiny foot, pressing the ink pad to it, then making the imprint on each piece of parchment. She Banished the ink pad and parchment to a table, then conjured a damp cloth and tenderly cleaned the baby's foot of ink.

"Would you like a photograph?"

"I don't know . . ." said Minerva, faltering.

"Why don't I take one, and you can decide later if you want it."

"Yes," said Albus.

The mediwitch took a camera she had at the ready from a counter and held it up. "On the count of three: one, two, three . . ." and the flash went off. "Just so you know, this will be a Muggle-style photo; it won't move. Most parents prefer it that way."

Albus nodded.

"Thank you," said Minerva.

They were allowed a few more minutes with the baby until Healer Pye came back into the room followed by the kind mediwitch.

"Mr and Mrs Dumbledore, it's time," he said. "We'll take good care of him, I promise."

Minerva looked stricken.

"Come, my love," said Albus. "Come." Minerva allowed the mediwitch to take the baby. As soon as he left her arms, she let out a low, keening wail that Albus knew was her heart breaking. His bones ached with it. He put his arms around her as she broke and sobbed into his shoulder, stroking her hair, crooning, "Now, love . . . now, love . . . now, love . . ." his own tears wetting her hair.

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 of 19

The last thing Minerva McGonagall ever expected was to become a mother. But when she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant, her life with Albus changes in ways beyond anything they might have predicted.

This is the third story set in the "Epithalamium" universe.

Poppy stood in the corridor outside the room, clutching a handkerchief. She had broken down the moment she got out of the room, and it had taken a few minutes to get herself under control again. She had just seen the mediwitch emerge from the room with some parchment and what looked like a camera when she heard a voice she recognised as the rude Healer's growing closer as he walked down the corridor, talking to a colleague. The pair stopped at a desk a few feet from where Poppy was standing.

" . . . shame, though. Can you just imagine the kind of magic that kid would have had? With parents like those? I didn't really see much of him at school, but her! She scared the boogies out of me back then. Gave me quite a shock to see her on the table when I got in there, I can tell you. Never would've believed it, though, if I hadn't seen it for myself."

"You think they're really married? I never heard it," said the colleague.

"Oh, I reckon so. He gave it for the records, and it would be easy to check. 'Course that's no guarantee he's really the father. Be just like him to marry her if she were up the duff with someone else's bastard . . ."

Poppy whirled around to snarl at the Healer, brandishing her wand dangerously. "I would hold my filthy tongue if I were you. Even if I don't manage to hex your bollocks so far up your arse that it'll take every long-fingered Healer in this building to retrieve them for you, Dumbledore will make sure you find yourself scraping Kneazle guts off the bottom of the Knight Bus for a living when he finds out you're gossiping about a patient that happens to be his wife."

The Healer paled visibly. "Sorry," he managed to mumble before he and the colleague scurried off down the corridor.

Poppy sagged against the desk. She thought briefly about trying to find Jean-Baptiste but quickly rejected the idea, as appealing as it was. She needed to be here and to focus on Minerva.

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Healer Pye had moved into a corner of the treatment room while Minerva and Albus cried. He pretended to be busy with his charts and phials until he heard her sobbing ebb. He turned back to the couple, saying, "We're going to move you to a ward shortly, Mrs Dumbledore. You'll be more comfortable there, and we can keep a better eye on you. Can you tell me how you're feeling? Are you having any pain?"

Minerva looked around for something to wipe her eyes on, and Pye handed her a clean towel. "I'm sore. I feel a little nauseated."

Pye nodded his understanding. "I'll get you something for the pain. The nausea should get better in a few hours as you get your strength back. Do you feel at all light-headed?"

"A bit, I suppose," she answered listlessly.

Pye removed his wand from his pocket and waved it slowly across her torso. "Just checking your vital signs. It's routine," he said to reassure them.

In truth, he was still concerned about her...very concerned. She was still bleeding more than he liked, and her blood pressure was low and her pulse high, both indicators of hypovolemic shock. If she was indeed in the early stages of DIC, he would have to be very cautious. Treating it was always a precarious balancing act. She needed greater blood volume, but the strongest Blood-Replenishing Potions could, conversely, tip her over the edge into fulminant DIC by introducing fresh clotting factors that

might encourage the formation of tiny blood clots in her organs. If these became widespread, organ failure and death were a likely result. Moreover, the clots themselves could cause a subsequent depletion of essential platelets and clotting factors, leading to uncontrolled haemorrhaging.

When Minerva had been moved to a room on the fourth floor...private, in deference to Albus Dumbledore's position...Poppy peeked her head in.

Minerva was sleeping, Albus sitting in a chair pushed next to her bedside. He looked up as Poppy approached.

"How is she?" Poppy asked.

"As well as can be expected. She's exhausted." He stood and gestured for Poppy to move into the corner of the room so as not to disturb the sleeping woman.

"And how are you, Albus?" Poppy asked, taking his large hand between her small ones.

"I don't know. It's all hard to take in," he said. "Poppy, I want to thank you for everything you did."

"Oh, Albus. I'm just so sorry it wasn't enough."

He shook his head. "No, you did everything possible. I heard the Healer tell you so."

Poppy blanched, realising he had heard the conversation she had had with Healer Pye.

"Can you tell me, Poppy . . . how sick is she?"

Once again, it took all Poppy's strength to be honest with him. "Pye thinks she might be developing DIC."

"What is that?"

"Disseminated intravascular coagulation. It's a condition that sometimes results from heavy bleeding. It's a problem with the balance of clotting factors in the blood. It can be very serious," she said.

Seeing him look back at Minerva, she added, "Pye seems very good, and he's watching her very closely. She's in the best possible hands."

He just stood there, watching Minerva sleep.

"Would you like me to get you something to eat?" Poppy asked after a minute. She knew he would never leave Minerva's bedside.

"No, thank you."

She hesitated to speak, afraid to overstep her bounds, but the man seemed, for the first time since she had known him, to be unable to think. "I should go back to Hogwarts for a little bit. The others will be wondering...I'm sure they're very worried."

He didn't look at her. "Yes."

"Albus, what would you like me to tell them?"

Now he looked at her. "The truth."

Poppy nodded. "I'll be back later this evening to check on you both. Is there anything you'd like me to bring?"

"No, thank you."

As she turned, he called her back, "Wait, Poppy. Would you be so kind as to bring me the book that is on my desk? Filius will be able to let you into my office; he's acting Head when Minerva and I are away from Hogwarts."

"Of course."

When she Flooded back to Hogwarts, she immediately sent messages to all the staff, asking them to attend an emergency meeting in half an hour.

By the time she arrived in the staff room, everyone was already assembled and obviously quite anxious for news. The moment she opened the door, she was assaulted by questions about Minerva's condition and that of the baby.

"Will everyone please just quiet down and let me speak? I only want to tell this once."

When the murmurs had died away, she took a breath and began. "I wish...I truly wish...I had better news. I'm sorry to have to tell you that Minerva has lost her baby."

There were gasps and murmurs of "Oh, no!"

She waited for the initial hubbub to quiet, then continued: "She suffered a major complication of pregnancy, and she is very sick. The Headmaster is, of course, with her, and I would anticipate him being away from the school for at least some days. He informs me that you, Filius, are acting Head during his and Minerva's absence." Flitwick nodded.

"I plan to return to St Mungo's every few hours to check on Minerva. Please know that she is in very good hands, and I know she and Albus appreciate your good wishes."

Flitwick spoke up. "Thank you for informing us, Poppy. I'm very sorry that things have turned out as they have; I know you provided the very best care you could under the circumstances."

Poppy bowed her head in thanks.

Filius said, "One thing we should decide now is what to tell the students. It's certain that Minerva's sudden illness is the topic of discussion in every House, given that she was originally taken ill in the classroom."

"Gods, I had forgotten!" said Poppy. "What is your opinion, Filius?"

"Do you have a sense of what Minerva and Albus would like to tell them?"

"No," said Poppy. "None of them were aware of her pregnancy, as far as I know."

"But the Starsgaard girl surely knows now," said Filius, "as she was in the infirmary when you were first treating Minerva."

"True," said Poppy. "I expect the Kneazle's out of the bag, then. I don't see Nigella as a gossip, but this kind of thing is probably too juicy to resist. I will ask Albus what his preference is when I go back to St Mungo's. If you don't mind, Filius, I can stop by your quarters when I get back so you can prepare something for tomorrow."

The quicker of the staff noticed Poppy's omission of Minerva from the decision-making and realised it meant her condition was likely worse than Madam Pomfrey was

letting on.

"Oh, Filius," she added as the group started to file sombrely out, "do you think you could let me into Albus' office? He asked me to bring him something."

"Of course."

When Poppy returned to St Mungo's, she found Albus still sitting quietly by Minerva's bedside. She handed him the book.

"Thank you, Poppy. Did you tell the staff?"

"Yes. They asked me to convey their condolences and their love to you and Minerva."

"Thank you."

"Filius was wondering what you would like us to tell the students. It's likely that some of them know about Minerva's pregnancy now, but I don't want to say anything without your permission."

Albus sighed deeply. Having the students find out about the pregnancy, and consequently their marriage, in this fashion would add insult to grievous injury and would make Minerva extremely uncomfortable. Provided, of course, she survived to feel uncomfortable, he could not help adding to himself. He slammed the door shut hard on that thought.

"Perhaps it would be best to tell them only the basic facts...that Minerva has suddenly become quite ill and that we will be away from the school for some time. Minerva can decide what more to tell them when she returns. Or I will."

His last words raised a squeezing pain in Poppy's chest. "All right, Albus." She privately thought it inadvisable to allow the inevitable gossip to flourish until the Headmaster could return to quell it, but she was not about to argue with him about it now.

She slipped out of the room and went to hunt down Healer Pye. She found him coming out of another room and asked, "Mr Pye, do you have a moment?"

"Of course, Madam Pomfrey. I expect you want to know how Mrs Dumbledore is getting on?"

"Yes, please. Has there been any change?"

"Nothing significant," he said, sighing. "She's still bleeding more than most post-partum patients, but her blood values are holding constant. Nothing to do, really, but watch and wait. I know that's very hard, but it's the best thing we can do right now. If we intervene too aggressively, it might make things worse."

"I understand, Mr Pye. Thank you. I need to return to Hogwarts tonight, but would you mind having someone Floo-call me if there's any change in Mrs Dumbledore's condition?"

"Of course."

When she got back to the school, she went immediately to Filius Flitwick's chambers and knocked quietly on the door. When he let her in, she told him what Albus had said, and he frowned. He obviously shared her opinion of the announcement he was going to be asked to make.

"Well, Poppy, we must abide by Albus' wishes in this. How is Minerva?"

"About the same, no better, no worse."

"Poor Albus. He must be beside himself."

"I think he's still in shock. I'm a little worried about him as well."

"He'll muddle through," said Filius. "Unless, of course . . ." He let the thought dangle unsaid. The unthinkable was also unspeakable.

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Albus sat at Minerva's bedside watching the steady rise and fall of her chest as she slept. He suspected the pain potion she had been given also had something in it to help her sleep. He knew she needed the rest, and he was glad for her to get a respite from the awful grief that was consuming her, but he was afraid as she slept so deeply that he would never hear her voice or see the brown-flecked green of her open eyes again. So he kept vigil, as if the act of watching her breathe could ensure that it would keep occurring.

In the middle of the night, Healer Pye came back into the room. He was surprised to find Dumbledore in the same position in which he had left him hours ago.

"I need to examine her and run a few tests. It will take just a few minutes," he said quietly.

Dumbledore said nothing.

Pye crossed to the foot of the bed and lifted the covers. Albus couldn't see what the man was doing, nor did he want to. Minerva didn't wake, but she stirred a bit as Pye used his wand to change the now blood-soaked pad underneath his patient for a clean one. He quickly Banished the soiled pad to a counter across the room. He would need to use it to estimate her blood loss. He replaced the covers and went to side of her bed, passing his wand slowly back and forth over the sleeping woman's torso.

When he used his wand to measure the volume of blood from the pad, he realised she was in trouble, even without looking at the results of the other tests he had just done. The additional five hundred millilitres of blood she had lost over the past few hours, when added to the significant blood loss that had accompanied the delivery...not to mention what she had lost before getting to him...was setting up a dangerous situation. He quickly looked over the blood values he had measured with his wand, and they confirmed the ugly clinical picture. The woman needed blood, but more importantly, she needed to stop bleeding.

Pye left the room swiftly without speaking to Dumbledore. He ran down the corridor until he found his colleague Cressida Burgess making notes outside a patient's room. She was St Mungo's most knowledgeable Healer in the field of haematology, and he desperately needed her expertise if he wanted to save his patient.

"Cressida, I have a post-partum patient...she had a full abruption, massive blood loss. She's still bleeding and it looks like she's developed DIC." He quickly waved his wand to show his colleague the results of the latest tests he had made.

Healer Burgess frowned and asked, "What have you given her so far?"

"Ninety millilitres of Replenishing Potion Number Seven. I didn't dare to give anything stronger, but it's looking like I'm going to have to. What do you think?" he asked.

"Before you do that, you might want to consider removing the uterus," she answered.

Pye was shocked. Removing an organ was almost unheard of in wizarding medicine; it was considered a barbaric practice best left to Muggle butchers with their sharp knives.

Burgess understood his hesitation. "Look, Galeneus, your options are limited. You've got a patient who is bleeding to death, slowly but surely. If you overload her with fresh

clotting factor from a strong potion, you're going to thrombose her and shut down her other organs. If you remove the uterus, you remove the source of the bleed and eliminate a source of procoagulant release into her bloodstream. If you're lucky, she survives the procedure, and you can safely replace her volume and red cells with a stronger potion."

Pye let out a breath. "Will you help me? I haven't removed an organ since my internship days."

"Of course. If you can get the patient consented and prepped, I'll meet you in, say twenty minutes?"

Pye nodded.

"What room?"

"Four-twenty."

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 19

The last thing Minerva McGonagall ever expected was to become a mother. But when she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant, her life with Albus changes in ways beyond anything they might have predicted.

This is the third story set in the "Epithalamium" universe.

Poppy was dozing fitfully in the cot she had moved close to the infirmary fireplace, when she heard a voice calling her name.

"Madam Pomfrey?"

She startled awake and saw Healer Pye's head talking to her from the fire.

"I'm sorry I startled you. I thought you might want to come."

"Why, what's happening?" asked Poppy, suddenly alert.

"Mrs Dumbledore has become critically ill. We're preparing for an emergency procedure, and Professor Dumbledore asked me to call you. He's agreed to allow us to remove her uterus."

"I'll be right there," said Poppy, reaching for her outer robes.

The head disappeared, and after a minute, Poppy stepped into the fireplace and Flooed back to St Mungo's, afraid of what she would find when she got there. She was trembling as she headed to Minerva's room.

There was a hum of quiet, intense activity inside the room. Several mediwitches were measuring phials of potions, and a Healer Poppy didn't recognise was moving a wand in slow circles over Minerva's chest, murmuring things to a Quick-Quotes Quill that was taking notes on a piece of parchment hovering next to him. Healer Pye was in the corner, quietly talking to an older Healer Poppy recognised as Cressida Burgess, who had been on St Mungo's staff back when Poppy had worked there.

Poppy approached Albus, who was standing quietly at his post beside Minerva's bed. When he saw her, he beckoned her away.

"What have I done, Poppy?" he asked.

"Only what you had to do to save Minerva's life," said Poppy, hoping her voice wasn't shaking as much as she feared it was.

"They said she might die if I didn't consent," he said, his voice breaking.

"I know." She put her arms around the tall man and let him cry into her shoulder.

"She will never forgive me," he said.

"Of course she will. She'll know you agreed because you had no other choice."

"This is all my fault."

"Of course it isn't, you didn't cause this," said Poppy, alarmed at his despair.

"If she hadn't gotten pregnant, if I hadn't agreed to keep the baby . . ."

"Albus, she wanted it. You know that," said Poppy.

"I should never have allowed it. Not after I found out what happened to her mother," he said.

"Nonsense! Her mother's death had nothing to do with this. What happened to Minerva's mother was a one in ten thousand chance. We had no reason to believe it would happen to Minerva, and it didn't. What happened to her was different. Unfortunately, she experienced a very bad complication, and nobody is at fault for it . . . unless you want to place the blame on Brigid, or Hera, or Eileithyia . . ."

But Albus wasn't listening. Instead, he was replaying in his head the conversation he had had with Thorfinn McGonagall. One particular phrase kept repeating: " . . . *watching your wife's life drain away with her blood and nothing you can do.*"

Thorfinn. What would he tell Thorfinn if Minerva died?

He pulled away from Poppy and went back to Minerva's bedside. Kneeling down, he took her limp hand, as if he could pass his life force to her through the medium of skin. He put her cold hand to his warm, wet cheek, whispering, "Please, Minerva . . . please, my love . . . don't leave me."

After a few minutes, Healer Pye approached him. "Sir, we're ready to begin. If you could step out . . ."

"I'm not leaving. Do what you have to do, but I stay here." The tone was low and dangerous and would brook no dissent.

After a moment, Pye said, "All right. But I must ask you to move aside so we have room to work."

Albus nodded and moved back to where Poppy was standing. "Do you want me to go?" she asked.

He said nothing but grabbed her hand and held it tightly.

The older Healer approached them, and when she looked for the first time at the drawn face of the man, she gasped in spite of herself. "Albus Dumbledore!"

"Cressida?" he asked in surprise.

"Yes."

"I didn't know you were at St Mungo's," he said softly.

"Yes, almost twenty-two years now. I'm so sorry about your loss, Albus," she said, pressing his free hand.

"Thank you."

"We're going to do everything we can for Mrs Dumbledore. Or . . ." she faltered.

"Yes. Minerva is my wife," he answered.

She nodded at him and said, "I'm going to begin now, Albus. It shouldn't take terribly long."

"All right. Thank you."

When Healer Burgess walked away, Albus said, before Poppy could ask, "We knew each other years ago. We were both alchemy students of Nicolas Flamel."

"She must be very smart," said Poppy.

"Yes, she is," he said. Poppy stopped herself from wondering if there was a deeper history there.

As Healer Burgess had predicted, it didn't take long. From where Poppy stood, it appeared that the Healer only waved her wand over Minerva's abdomen for several minutes, murmuring a series of spells in Latin, Greek, and another language Poppy suspected was Arabic. Healer Pye occasionally touched his wand to Minerva's abdomen when Burgess nodded at him. Nevertheless, when he put down his wand and came to talk to Albus and Poppy, he was perspiring.

"It's done," he told them. "She seems to have tolerated the procedure well."

"Thank Merlin," said Poppy.

"Is she out of danger?" asked Albus.

"We won't know for a bit," said Pye. "The bleeding from her uterus is obviously stopped, but we still need to increase her volume and resolve the DIC."

"When will she wake?" Albus asked.

"I'm not certain. It may be hours, or days, or . . ." He didn't finish, but Poppy and Albus both knew what the last "or" signified.

Healer Burgess joined them. "It went as well as we could have hoped," she said. "I was able to remove the top portion of the uterus without touching the cervix or ovaries." When Albus looked at her questioningly, she said, "That helps preserve normal function...except she will no longer menstruate, and of course, she will be unable to bear more children."

Albus gave a small nod.

Healer Pye said, "For the moment, I'd just like her to sleep. I'll be monitoring her constantly, and we'll run some more tests in an hour or so. If things look good, we'll go ahead with more Blood Replenishing Potion."

After the Healers and mediwitches had gone, Poppy said, "You should get some rest, Albus. I can stay with her. I promise I'll alert you the moment anything changes."

"No!" Then he said more gently, "I'm sorry. No, Poppy. I really need to stay. I wouldn't rest, in any event. You go. I'll see you in the morning."

"All right," said Poppy. "But promise me you'll have them get you something to eat. The last thing Minerva needs is for you to get sick."

"I will."

When Poppy had left, Albus pulled up a chair next to Minerva's bedside once again. He was too exhausted and spent to use even the simple magic that would have moved the chair into place. He took from his large robe pocket the slim volume of poetry Poppy had brought him, and opened it, hoping the special magic of Tennyson might penetrate whatever darkness was gripping Minerva and provide some thread of luminescence for her to cling to. He would drag her back to him with words.

"Come into the garden, Maud,

For the black bat, Night, has flown,

Come into the garden, Maud,

I am here at the gate alone;

And the woodbine spices are wafted abroad,

And the musk of the roses blown.

"For a breeze of morning moves,

And the planet of Love is on high,

Beginning to faint in the light that she loves

On a bed of daffodil sky,

To faint in the light of the sun she loves,

To faint in his light, and to die."

It was not until he had finished reading the poem that he realised he had recently discovered, all too intimately, the truth of the poet's famous phrase: *Nature, red in tooth and claw*".

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When the students arrived in the Great Hall for breakfast the following morning, they were immediately aware that something was wrong and that it was serious. It was evident both from the empty Headmaster's chair and its smaller twin immediately to its right, where Professor McGonagall normally sat. The ashen faces of many of the other professors was another signal that something was terribly amiss.

Most, if not all, were aware that Professor McGonagall had been taken away unconscious and bleeding, and there had been a great deal of speculation as to the cause. Contrary to Madam Pomfrey's assumption that Nigella Starsgaard would have told someone about Minerva's condition, she had said nothing to anyone. In fact, she had refused to speak to any of her dorm-mates and didn't come down for breakfast.

Some of the students were of the opinion that the professor's sudden illness was related to her getting sick during class some weeks back, although nobody had made the suggestion of pregnancy as a cause since Ian Robinson made the joke in the Gryffindor common room. And everyone had recognised it as a joke. Few would have seriously considered the idea that priggish, uptight Professor McGonagall was capable of the action required to result pregnancy, in any event.

Another faction was adamant that the professor's illness was a result of some kind of accident, or even an attack. The lurid descriptions of the blood on the Transfiguration classroom floor certainly suggested some kind of awful curse.

Whatever the cause, the collected students realised they were about to hear some news when Professor Flitwick mounted a tall stool and used his wand to amplify his voice to address the assembly.

"As some of you know, Professor McGonagall became suddenly ill yesterday afternoon. She has been transferred to St Mungo's, and Professor Dumbledore is with her. I am sorry to say that her illness appears to be serious." A ripple of murmurs arose in the hall. Professor Flitwick signalled to the students to quiet down.

"Madam Pomfrey assures me, however, that Professor McGonagall is receiving the very best of care and that we may be hopeful that she will eventually make a full recovery. I do not know when she or the Headmaster will be able to return to their duties. In the interim, Transfiguration classes will be cancelled until further notice. Please be assured that, should it become necessary, we will make arrangements for another teacher to take Professor McGonagall's classes so that none of you falls behind in your studies. During Professor Dumbledore's absence, I will act as Head, and I trust you will all do what you can to help the staff and one another during this difficult time."

When it became clear that there was to be no further information on the cause of Professor McGonagall's sudden illness, the students turned to their tablemates, and much hushed discussion ensued, punctuated by the clink of silverware on plates. One question that was on everyone's lips was: why did Professor Dumbledore need to stay at St Mungo's? The curse-theory faction all nodded sagely at one another. Obviously, the Headmaster was trying to figure out who had cursed Professor McGonagall so terribly. Ian Robinson posited the idea that it was a Slytherin, out for revenge against McGonagall for taking House points or giving too much homework. The other Gryffindors laughed him down. Bad as McGonagall was, surely nobody would curse her for it.

Poppy had just left the Great Hall and was walking quickly toward the infirmary, intending to Floo directly back to St Mungo's, when a voice called out to her from behind.

"Madam Pomfrey, please wait!"

Poppy turned to see Molly Prewett hurrying down the corridor toward her.

"Madam Pomfrey, please, can you tell me how Professor McGonagall is?" asked the girl, and Poppy was surprised to see tears glistening in her eyes.

"As Professor Flitwick said, she's quite ill but getting very good care," said Poppy.

Molly lowered her voice to a whisper. "What about the baby?"

Poppy was stunned. She quickly scanned the corridor to make sure they were alone. She spoke carefully. "What do you mean, Molly?"

"I know Professor McGonagall is pregnant. She told me."

Poppy stared at the girl. Why on earth would Minerva have shared that information with a student? Or was the child lying for some reason? "Molly, when did Professor McGonagall tell you this?"

"About two weeks ago." Molly could tell Madam Pomfrey was considering whether or not to believe her, so she added: "I guessed, Madam Pomfrey. I asked her, and she told me the truth."

That was just like Minerva, Poppy thought. She'd rather bite off her tongue than lie to a student. She said quietly, "Professor McGonagall lost the baby."

"Oh, no!" cried Molly, prompting Poppy to hush her. The girl started sobbing loudly, so Poppy quickly cast a Silencing Charm around them. She put her arms around Molly.

"Poor Professor McGonagall . . . Poor Professor Dumbledore . . ." Molly said. Poppy was startled again when she realised Molly also knew about Albus. Of course, she thought, Minerva would have told the girl about their marriage. She would certainly not have allowed a student to believe she was an unwed mother.

"What happened?" asked Molly when her sobbing had ebbed. Poppy explained, in very basic terms, the abruption. "It's a rare and unforeseeable complication," she told the girl.

"When will she be back?" asked Molly.

"I don't know, Molly. She's still quite sick."

The girl looked stricken. "Will she be all right?" she whispered.

"I don't know. I hope so."

"Will you please tell her . . . tell her that I'm sorry and that I love her?" asked the girl. She added, "And Professor Dumbledore too?"

Now the tears came to Poppy's eyes. "Of course, Molly. She'll be pleased to know you're thinking of her."

Molly nodded.

"You'd best be getting to class," said Poppy. The girl was trying hard not to cry again. "Or, if you need some time to collect yourself, I could write a note explaining that you felt ill this morning and came to see me." Molly nodded gratefully.

Poppy conjured a bit of parchment and a quill and quickly scribbled a note, handing it to the girl.

"Thank you," whispered Molly.

As the girl walked away down the corridor, Poppy thought to herself how nice it was to be able to do something concrete for someone. Her last twenty-four hours had been altogether too full of "nothing to be done".

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 19

The last thing Minerva McGonagall ever expected was to become a mother. But when she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant, her life with Albus changes in ways beyond anything they might have predicted.

This is the third story set in the "Epithalamium" universe.

He was walking down a long, dark corridor.

He thought at first he was in the dungeons at Hogwarts, but that couldn't be right because none of the doors would open to him, and he was Headmaster. Wasn't he? Actually, he wasn't sure. He knew he was searching for something or someone, but what it was, he couldn't quite recall. It was essential, though, that he find it, or him, or her . . . yes, her . . . that felt right. It was a woman he was seeking, then. Or a girl. He wasn't sure which.

He proceeded down the corridor, trying each door, both with his hands and his wand, but none would open until he came to the last. This one was old wood and covered with cobwebs. It would not open to his wand, but when he tried the rusty iron handle, it swung inward to reveal a dingy room that felt familiar, although he couldn't quite place it. There was a double bed with a brass frame, covered with a threadbare cotton blanket. There were bedside tables on either side, one bearing an old-looking ceramic lantern with a black candle, half-melted. There was a moth-eaten wool carpet on the dirty wood floor, its pattern indecipherable with wear.

He thought he was alone, but a voice made him turn around.

"Albus?"

It was Minerva. She was dressed as she had been at their wedding...her simple dress of white silk overlaid with lace, with a tartan rosette and sash falling from shoulder to hip. Other than her dress, however, she didn't look as he remembered her from their wedding day. Her face, for example. It was as it had been when he had first loved her: open, fresh, and unlined with care at eighteen, and her long hair was worn tied back with a green silk ribbon, as it had been when she was a schoolgirl. As he looked, he realised she was clearly several months pregnant.

She gestured for him to lie down with her on the bed, so he did. When he went to take her in his arms, however, he found that she was hard where he remembered softness, and she didn't return his embrace. He lifted his head to look at her and was surprised to find she was merely a doll-Minerva. How had he been so mistaken? He sat up and found the doll had vanished. In its place was a spreading pool of blood.

"Clean up your mess, Albus," came another voice, this one male and gruff.

"Aberforth, I didn't mean to . . ."

"I'll not have her blood on my bed. You made the mess, now clean it up, as Mother taught you," said his brother.

He tried to Scourgify the stain, but it remained accusingly crimson on the bedclothes.

He turned to Aberforth. "I can't, I don't know why, but I can't." He was crying now.

"Are ye daft, lad?" came yet another voice. He recognised it as Thorfinn McGonagall's, but the face was still Aberforth's and filled with his brother's habitual contempt. "Tha's not the way . . ."

Thorfinn-Aberforth waved his wand, and the blood disappeared from the bed. "Here," he said, holding out a phial to Albus. "She'll be needing this. Take it to her."

He took the phial of blood and said, "I don't know where she is. I've looked and looked, but I can't find her . . ."

But the figure was gone. All at once, he heard Minerva singing:

*"Now in her green mantle blythe Nature arrays,
And listens the lambkins that bleat o'er the braes,
While birds warble welcomes in ilka green shaw,
But to me it's delightless...my Nanie's awa."*

"Albus . . ."

*"The snawdrap and primrose our woodlands adorn,
And violates bathe in the weet o' the morn . . ."*

"Albus . . ."

"They pain my sad bosom sae sweetly they blaw."

"Albus . . ."

"They mind me o' Nanie . . ."

"Albus . . ."

He opened his eyes, and it took him a moment before he recognised the face of Cressida Burgess looking down at him in the dim light of the hospital room.

"I'm sorry to wake you, but I thought you could use something to eat." She motioned to a small table on which sat a plate bearing a sandwich and a glass of milk.

"It's ham and cheese...not your favourite, as I recall, but I'm afraid that's all that was left in the staff room," she said. When he waved his hands, she added, "No arguments, Albus, you need to eat."

"Is everything all right? How is she," he asked, his voice papery with recent sleep.

"She's holding her own," replied Cressida. "The same cannot be said for you, however. Please eat." She Summoned the table so it sat in front of him, and a napkin appeared magically on his lap.

"Still as bossy as ever, I see," he said.

"More so. Eat."

She sat quietly with him until he had finished most of the sandwich and drank the milk.

"There. I've done what you asked. Now you can do me a favour," he said quietly.

"What is it?"

"Tell me the truth. Will she live?" His eyes were red, and very, very wide, but his voice was even.

"I hope so . . . I think so."

He said nothing, just looked back at the figure lying prone on the bed.

"You love her very much," said Cressida. It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

"I'm glad. She must be an extraordinary woman."

"Yes, she is."

"How long have you been married?"

"It will be ten years this December." His gaze hadn't shifted from the bed.

"She's a teacher at your school, I believe," said Cressida.

"Yes. Transfiguration."

"Yes, I've read some of her work...quite brilliant, some of it," she said. "Is that how you met?"

"Yes and no. I met her when she was a student . . ." He stopped, suddenly self-conscious, and looked back at his interlocutor.

Cressida sensed his discomfort. "It's all right, it's really none of my business."

"No, it's just that I didn't want it to sound like . . ." He stopped again. Like what? Like what it, in fact, had been?

"No, I wasn't thinking that you had taken up with a student, Albus," said Cressida quickly. "It's been a long time, but I think I still know you better than that. Besides, I suspect she's been out of school for more than ten years."

"We married the year after she began teaching at Hogwarts."

"That must be nice, to work in the same place," said Cressida. "Otherwise it's hard to manage two careers and a marriage."

"Yes, it has its benefits," he said. "And its difficulties."

"One of those being that you need to keep it a secret."

"Not a secret, exactly."

"No? Everyone here seemed quite surprised to hear you were married."

"We haven't broadcast it, but our friends are certainly aware of it, and, of course, our colleagues, and some of the Ministry . . ."

"I'm sorry Albus," she said. "I didn't mean to sound like I was accusing you of hiding your marriage. It was just a surprise, that's all. Your name is in the *Daily Prophet* often enough; it's just odd that they never mention a wife."

"Minerva is a private person," he said carefully. "We both feel that it's better for the school if we keep our relationship strictly professional during term. I suppose it just became habit."

"I see. Probably wise." She didn't mention the obvious fact that a pregnancy and a baby would have changed that dramatically.

"And you, Cressida," he said, "are you married? Children?" He wasn't especially interested in small talk at the moment, but he felt the need to steer the conversation away from his relationship with Minerva.

"Heavens, no," she replied. "I never found anyone who wanted to compete with my work. Or maybe nobody felt I was worth the bother." She immediately regretted this last; it sounded like she was asking him to disagree.

"I doubt that," he said. "Too many men do find it a competition, I think . . . a wife with an independent career. A very successful career, I might add. It's their loss."

"Maybe," she said.

They were both glad of the interruption when Healer Pye came quietly into the room.

"Oh, hello, Cressida. I didn't realise you were here," he said.

"It's all right Galeneus. I was just bringing Albus something to eat. We're old acquaintances," she said.

"Oh?" said Pye.

"Yes. We studied together for a time," said Albus.

"Well . . ." said Pye, unsure of the appropriate response. "I need to run some tests, if you don't mind," he said, approaching the bed.

"Of course," said Albus.

"I'll check in on you, Albus," said Cressida, making to leave. "Galeneus, let me know if you need anything," she added.

"Thank you, I will," Pye answered, already examining the under sheet to see if there was any bleeding. He next waved his wand over Minerva several times then examined the numbers his wand revealed.

"How is she?" asked Albus anxiously.

"Her bleeding is almost stopped, which is very good news indeed. Some of her blood values are improved, but I'd still like to see her fibrinogen levels a bit higher. I'll come back in another hour and give her some more Blood Replenishing Potion," said Pye then left quietly.

"I'd best be going, too," said Cressida, who had waited as Pye made his tests. "I won't tell you not to worry, Albus. But she seems a strong witch, and I'd say she's got a better than average chance of recovering. Don't wear yourself out; she'll need your strength as she heals."

"Thank you, Cressida. And thank you for the sandwich," Albus replied. She patted his hand and went.

When Poppy Pomfrey arrived three hours later, Albus was sitting exactly where she had left him the evening before, simply watching Minerva.

"How was her night?" she asked.

"All right. Pye seems to think she's better. She hasn't woken, though."

"That's probably to be expected," Poppy said. Privately, however, it worried her. Minerva's body had been through a lot in the previous day and night, and she was depleted and exhausted, but Poppy had hoped she might show some signs of consciousness before this. "Albus, have you slept at all?" she asked, gently chiding.

"Yes, actually, I dozed a bit," he said, remembering his disturbing dream. What had it meant? He didn't ordinarily attribute much meaning to dreams, other than as the effluvia of the mind's daily life, but this had seemed different. Or was it just his heightened emotional state that made it seem so? It did, however, remind him of something he had to do.

"Poppy, I wonder if you could procure some parchment, some ink, and a quill for me? I don't feel quite up to conjuring them myself," he asked apologetically.

"Of course."

She took out her wand and quickly conjured the requested items, setting them on the small table on which Albus' dinner had been set the previous night. She thought he might want privacy for the letter she suspected he was going to write, so she excused herself to find Healer Pye.

Albus dipped the quill into the ink, and wrote:

20 October 1967

My dear Thorfinn,

I write with a heavy heart and deep regret that I must impart my news to you in writing rather than in person, but I believe you will understand the necessity when you read what I have to say.

Yesterday afternoon, Minerva was taken suddenly ill. Our matron, Madam Pomfrey, was quick to recognise the problem as a complication of her pregnancy and transported her to St Mungo's immediately, where she gave birth to a son. I am very sorry to tell you that the child was stillborn. Minerva is still very ill, although the Healers in charge of her care are hopeful that she will recover.

I am with her and will alert you to any change in her condition, and of course, I will let you know when she is ready to receive visitors. For the moment, however, I don't believe there is anything to be gained by you coming down to London, although if you feel you would like to, I will certainly understand.

I'm sorry.

Yours,

Albus

He reread the letter several times to be sure it was not overly alarming, but that it also struck the correct note of gravity. He didn't want to frighten Thorfinn needlessly, but just in case she didn't . . . no. He wouldn't think of that. He hoped Thorfinn would remain in Caithness until Minerva awoke, but he recognised that if the situation were reversed, he himself would not take kindly to an admonition to stay away.

He folded the note, addressed it, and put it in his pocket. He would ask Poppy to send it by owl post when she returned to Hogwarts.

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Poppy found Healer Pye at a desk in the corridor. He had dark circles under his eyes and looked exhausted.

"Healer Pye?"

"Oh, Madam Pomfrey," he said, looking up. "Did you get some rest?"

"Yes, thank you, although I suspect you did not," she answered.

"It's part of the job," he said, unable to hide the weariness in his voice. "I grabbed a quick nap in the call room. I expect you'd like to know how Mrs Dumbledore is doing?"

"Yes, please."

Pye told her about what he had found overnight and his ongoing concerns. "The Blood Replenishing Potion seems to be helping, but it's not bringing her fibrinogen up fast enough.

"What can you do about it?" asked Poppy.

"Not much, except hope it comes up soon," replied Pye. "I don't dare give her more potion at this point; it might overload her volume or iron, but I don't have any other way of replacing her fibrinogen."

Not much.

Poppy was sick to death of hearing those words. Fatigue, worry, and frustration were building up in her to a boiling point.

Not much.

If she heard those two words again, she thought, she might scream aloud. She fought her anger and managed a cordial, "Thank you, Healer Pye."

She went back to Minerva's room to check...on Albus more than Minerva, really...and he asked her to send the letter he had written. She told him about the morning's announcements and about Molly Weasley's message. He did not act surprised, so Poppy assumed Minerva had told him about Molly.

She Flooed back to Hogwarts and took Albus' letter to the Owlery. As she was walking back to the infirmary, something started to tickle at the back of her mind. By the time she arrived at her destination, the tickle had grown to a persistent prodding. She decided to look to see if there was anything in her extensive collection of medical texts that could be of use.

Two hours later, she had nearly exhausted her resources on blood, blood components, Blood Replenishing Potions, spells, and charms, and even had even cracked open her book on dealing with Dark Magic injuries, *Cursed: A Healer's Guide to Dark Spells, Potions, and Other Nasty Things* hoping for something...anything...that might help her help her friend. She had thumbed through the chapter on Blood Magic and was about to snap the unpleasant book shut when an illustration caught her eye. It was a still engraving of a man in medieval dress who was holding what looked to be a knife over the wrist of another, obviously ailing man. The knife-wielder was holding a basin under the other man's arm, presumably to catch the blood.

The caption read:

Muggle doctors (called "barbers") often let blood as part of their "healing" rituals. Wizards and witches should not be alarmed if they encounter this practice in Muggle hospitals, as Muggle blood does not possess the same magical properties as wizarding blood, so the Dark Magical effects do not apply.

Silly prejudices, thought Poppy with irritation. *Muggles haven't used blood-letting as a medical practice in more than a hundred years*! In fact, she thought, some of the Muggle medical practices she had talked about with Jean-Baptiste seemed more advanced and promising than those typically employed by wizarding Healers.

Suddenly, she sat up straight. A conversation she had had with Jean-Baptiste had just popped into her head. They had been discussing the differences between Muggle and wizarding approaches to triaging trauma, and Poppy had remarked that Muggles were terribly hampered by the inability to use spells to instantly stanch minor blood flow, close superficial wounds, or replenish blood in the field. Jean-Baptiste had replied that the Muggles did quite well, considering, and that they had come up with the ingenious idea of transfusing blood from one to another as a way of preventing death from blood loss. While initial experiments were not entirely successful, Jean-Baptiste had told her, once the Muggles had figured out that there were different blood groups with differing antigenic properties, they had become quite adept at using the technique. It was a wonder the wizarding world had not picked up the technique prior to the advent of Blood Replenishing Potions, he said, as it was actually less complicated than in the Muggle world, since the relatively homogenous wizarding gene pool carried only one blood group. Moreover, Jean-Baptiste had continued admiringly, Muggle scientists had developed the capacity to separate blood components, allowing doctors to tailor treatments to their patients' needs, whereas Blood Replenishing Potions simply helped the body create more whole blood quickly. Useful, to be sure, but not without drawbacks.

It was this last bit of the conversation that Poppy thought about now. If they could give Minerva just the blood component with the highest fibrinogen concentration, maybe that would stop the overconsumption of clotting factors without risking volume or iron overload.

She immediately Banished the many texts she had spread out around her back to the shelves, ran to the fireplace, and Flooed to St Mungo's. She didn't, however, stop at Minerva's room. She headed instead to basement laboratories. She had to speak with Jean-Baptiste.

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter 15 of 19

The last thing Minerva McGonagall ever expected was to become a mother. But when she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant, her life with Albus changes in ways beyond anything they might have predicted.

This is the third story set in the "Epithalamium" universe.

"Muggles 'ave been transfusing blood for more 'zan one hundred years, quite successfully," Jean-Baptiste was saying. "It is only experimental to us because we look down on Muggle medicine, even when it 'as proved successful."

Poppy admired the calm way he had been explaining the rationale for the unorthodox procedure she hoped might save Minerva's life. His calmness was one of the things that attracted her to this wizard; he always made her feel that everything was under control, even when all outward signs pointed to the opposite conclusion. After the explosive relationship she had had with Marek, her former husband, calmness and control were attributes she very much appreciated.

When she and Jean-Baptiste had first suggested blood transfusion to Pye and Burgess...whom Pye had called in to consult once again...the Healers were more than sceptical, but to their credit, Poppy thought, they were willing to listen. Pye, especially, did not seem to hold Muggle medicine in the automatic contempt that so many Healers seemed to.

"Yes, but magical blood has properties that don't exist in Muggle blood," Healer Burgess said. "We just don't know what negative effects such a procedure might have, especially given that the patient comes from a pure-blood family."

"True," replied Jean-Baptiste. "But 'zose properties are related to 'ze individual's magic, not to 'ze physiological functions of blood. Any effects would probably be limited to 'ze patient's magical abilities."

"That could have profound effects on the patient," said Pye.

"Of course," said Poppy, "but dying has even profounder effects." She immediately regretted her tone, but she was so drained by the events of the past days she was having trouble keeping her emotions in check.

"Perhaps it would be best at this point to bring Albus...Professor Dumbledore...into the discussion. Not only is it his wife we are talking about, but he has more experience of Dark Magic than any of us does, and that is, after all, what we are talking about when we talk about the exchange of magical blood," said Healer Burgess. She did not like skirting around what she considered the central issue.

"I think that's wise," said Poppy.

The group filed quietly into Minerva's room, where they found Albus sitting at his post, holding one of his wife's hands in his.

Poppy leant down to him and whispered, "Albus, there's something we'd like to discuss with you."

The exhausted wizard stood and joined the small group that had gathered in the corner of the room.

"Professor Dumbledore," Pye started, feeling that as Minerva's chief Healer, he should lead the discussion, "Madam Pomfrey and Mr . . ." he searched for the name for a moment, ". . . Martel have come up with an idea for treating Mrs Dumbledore. It might allow us to bring up her fibrinogen levels...which she desperately needs...without overloading her with blood components that could worsen her condition."

"Yes, go on," said Albus, his impatience evident in his voice.

"It is somewhat . . . unorthodox. So we wanted your opinion on the matter before deciding whether or not to proceed," Pye said.

"My opinion? I am no Healer," said Albus.

"Albus," Cressida said, "we are considering transfusing blood into Minerva from another person."

Albus looked from one face to another in confusion. "I'm not sure I understand."

Jean-Baptiste decided it was time for him to speak. "It is actually quite simple, Professor Dumbledore. We simply take a certain amount of blood from one person, separate out 'ze components Mrs Dumbledore needs, and convey 'zose components into 'er bloodstream."

Albus looked at the man for the first time. "I don't mean to be rude, but who the hell are you?"

"Ah, forgive me, Professor," Jean-Baptiste said. "My name is Jean-Baptiste Martel. I am a 'ealer. I normally live and practice in Paris, but I am 'ere at St Mungo's on a fellowship. I am studying long-term cell damage in jinx victims. Madam Pomfrey is a friend and told me about Mrs. Dumbledore's condition. She thought I might 'ave some ideas."

Dumbledore looked at Poppy, who held his gaze. When he turned his regard to Galeneus Pye, however, the young Healer wilted under it and looked down at his fingers rather than meeting it. Finally, Albus turned his attention to Cressida Burgess.

"Do you agree with this idea, Cressida?"

She spoke cautiously. "It has potential. Apparently, it has been used with great success among the Muggle population for a century." Jean-Baptiste nodded in agreement, and she continued: "I am concerned that we don't know what kind of side-effects it might have when applied to magical blood."

"Side-effects?" asked Albus.

"Yes. I don't need to tell you that exchanges of blood have been used in Dark Magic because of the apparent ability of blood to strengthen the magical properties of a spell. We don't know how or why this happens, so we cannot predict what the effects will be if we infuse a much larger volume of blood than is used in most Dark rituals directly into a patient."

Albus was silent for a few moments. Then he asked, "What will happen if we don't follow this course of action?"

Pye said, "We can't be sure. She may begin to produce enough fibrinogen on her own, or she may not."

"If she does not?"

"Her blood will refuse to clot properly. She could bleed to death," said Pye.

"And do you have any prediction as to which is likely to happen?" Dumbledore asked.

"About fifty percent of patients in Mrs Dumbledore's condition die," said Cressida.

Albus looked at the older Healer, stricken.

"Have you ever done it before? Among wizards?" he whispered.

Burgess glanced at Pye before answering, "No."

"Albus, Jean-Baptiste saw it done several times when he was in the last Muggle war in France," said Poppy.

"Many times, actually," said Jean-Baptiste.

"You were in the war? The Muggle war?" asked Albus.

"Yes. My mother was a Muggle, and I chose to fight to free my country from 'ze tyranny of 'ze Muggle dictator," he said. "My mother's family was Jewish."

"I see," said Albus, looking at the man intently. "We are both veterans of war, then."

Martel nodded. It was a failure of wizarding education, he thought, that nobody but Dumbledore seemed to understand the significance of his mother's heritage.

"How does this . . . blood exchange work, Mr Martel?" Albus asked.

"It isn't really an exchange," answered Jean-Baptiste. "We would simply remove a few litres of blood from 'ze donor, separate 'ze components, and transfer it into Mrs Dumbledore slowly, over a matter of hours."

"Then do it," said Albus.

Poppy gave a sigh of relief.

"What equipment do you need, Mr Martel?" asked Pye.

"I will need to procure 'ze equipment from a Muggle 'ospital. It should not take long; I 'ave a friend at ze Royal Free. I will go to 'im now."

As Martel turned to go, Albus took him forcefully by the upper arm, and said, "Save my wife, Mr Martel."

Martel gave a terse nod and disappeared through the door.

Pye cleared his throat, as if to reassert his authority, and said, "We need to decide on a donor."

"We will use my blood," said Albus.

Pye said, "It might be advisable to use someone younger; we don't know what effect the drain will have..."

"No. It must be me," Albus said.

"Mr Pye, Professor Dumbledore is quite healthy and very strong, I can assure you," Poppy said, knowing that Albus would never back down on this.

Pye looked at Poppy for a few moments, then acquiesced. "All right." He crossed back to Minerva's bed and passed his wand over her, running more tests.

Albus spoke quietly to Poppy: "Do you believe this is the right thing to do?"

Poppy was taken aback; it was unlike Albus to ask for opinions about any decision he had already taken. She thought for a few moments before answering, asking herself if her inclination to proceed with the transfusion was the result of a rational weighing of the risks and benefits or if it had been born primarily of her desire to do *something*. It was both, she decided, and she answered him accordingly: "Yes, Albus. I do."

Albus moved back to his chair by Minerva's bed. He was a man accustomed to making decisions...often grave decisions...and rarely second-guessed himself. He was thorough in weighing all factors before deciding on a course of action, but once taken, he did not tend to re-examine it, except, perhaps, much later, when all the ramifications had become clear.

But the essential decisions Albus Dumbledore was accustomed to making generally had to do with the Greater Good, even when they involved the lives of individuals. He did not make them easily, but he never wavered in his duty to do so. He now found himself at sea, confronting, as he was, a series of choices that were so personally consequential. The decision to allow the Healers to remove Minerva's uterus, and now, to allow them to put his blood in her veins, were too personal, too *specific* to his love for her to allow him to feel any sort of comfort at having made them.

After a little more than an hour, Martel returned with the equipment they needed. Poppy alerted Healers Pye and Burgess, and the small group gathered to begin the procedure.

Martel took a large glass bottle, added a small amount of fluid to it from a phial, and connected a rubber tube to a valve at the bottle's neck. He then attached a large needle to the other end of the tube.

"Please 'ave a seat, Professor Dumbledore," he said, indicating a chair next to him. When Dumbledore was seated, Martel instructed, "Please roll up 'ze sleeve of your robe. I need to look at your vessels." Dumbledore did so, and Martel took his arm, gently prodding the large, blue veins near the crook of the older wizard's elbow with the pads of his fingers.

"I am going to puncture a vessel with this needle," Martel told him, "then I will tape the needle to your arm. It will speed things along if we Levitate your chair to allow the blood to flow down into the bottle."

Dumbledore said, "Proceed, Healer Martel."

The French wizard cleaned a spot on Dumbledore's arm with a gauze sponge saturated with a brownish-looking liquid, and then held the arm steady with one hand while sliding the needle into the vein with the other. After a moment, the tube filled with blood, which then began to trickle into the bottle in a thin, crimson stream. Martel nodded in satisfaction, then taped the needle to Dumbledore's arm. He took his wand and Levitated the chair about four feet from the ground.

"Ow are you feeling, Professor?" he asked.

"Fine, thank you," answered Dumbledore.

"You will let me know if you begin to feel dizzy, yes?"

"Yes."

Albus closed his eyes. He was not worried about the associations blood had with Dark Magic; he knew that intention, not medium, was the deciding factor in whether a spell was Dark or Light, and he hoped the same would be true of non-magical healing arts. All his intention was focused on strength and healing for Minerva. He visualised her as the bright, vibrant girl she had been when he first knew her, and as the confident, powerful woman she had become in the years since. He thought about the power he had sensed in her the first time she attempted a spell in his Transfiguration class, and the way it seemed to produce a hum inside his head as he stood near her while she cast. He willed his power into his blood, hoping it would sustain and nourish hers.

An hour later, Martel had removed six hundred millilitres of blood to two bottles. Albus was made to lie down on a bed conjured next to Minerva's, and Pye gave him a dose of strong Blood-Replenishing Potion. Meanwhile, Martel set about separating the blood using a curious instrument he had brought with him. He performed only two magical spells: the first to enlarge the machine, and the second to power it. Once he was satisfied that the plasma was separated from the red cells, he, Poppy, and Healer Burgess...the two witches working under his direction...transferred the yellowish fluid from the phials in which it had been contained into two new glass bottles.

He approached Dumbledore, saying, "Professor, I am going to begin the infusion now."

Albus rose from his bed and took his previous seat next to Minerva's. Martel conjured a large pole with a hook at the top and set it on the other side of the bed. He then attached another rubber tube to the flange on the bottle and clamped it to prevent the precious fluid from leaking out. He removed a small syringe...a very curious-looking item, the others thought...from his robe pocket and screwed a large needle to the end, then he nodded at Poppy. She gently took Minerva's arm and cleaned it with the brown fluid, as she had seen Jean-Baptiste do with Albus. Martel inserted the needle into Minerva's arm and drew back on the plunger of the syringe until he saw the flash of bright-red blood in the chamber. He quickly unscrewed the needle from the syringe, holding it in place in Minerva's arm, and took the end of the rubber tube, screwing it onto the needle in place of the syringe. He stood and hung the bottle of plasma on the conjured pole.

"How long will it be until we know if it has worked?" asked Albus.

"The infusion will take about two hours. After that, it will depend upon how quickly 'er body begins to clot properly. We should know in a few hours after the infusion," replied Martel.

"May I touch her?" Albus asked, making Poppy's heart constrict painfully.

"Yes, of course," said Martel. He gestured to the others, and said, "We will leave you in peace for the moment. I will be back to check on 'er in fifteen minutes." Albus nodded, and the four others left the room.

Albus sat, Minerva's hand resting on his, his thumb making soft circles on the back of it. He watched as the plasma slowly drained from the bottle, willing it to provide his beloved with strength and life. He said nothing when Jean-Baptiste and Pye returned periodically to check on Minerva, nor when they changed the now-empty bottle for the second one.

When the second bottle had emptied its contents into Minerva's veins, Martel removed the needle from her arm and cast a quick spell to seal the puncture. Pye ran a series of diagnostic spells while Martel worked.

"Her fibrinogen is up, which is very good news," the young Healer said. "Hopefully, it will allow her to begin to clot enough to stop the cascade effect of the DIC, and she will continue to produce clotting factors on her own. I'll check again in an hour."

Shortly after that, Poppy came into the room with a tray of food.

"It's steak-and-kidney pie," she said, moving a small table next to Albus' chair. "You need to eat. You also need to rest soon," she said, putting a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Why don't you have a lie-down on the bed again. You'll hear Minerva if she wakes, I'm sure."

"Thank you, Poppy," Albus said. "For everything." He added, "Your Mr Martel seems most competent. I should like to get to know him better when all this is over."

"He's quite an extraordinary man. I'm sure he would welcome the chance to become better acquainted with you and Minerva. He's heard a great deal about you both, after all," she said. "I'm going to Floo back to Hogwarts for a bit. I'll check back here in a few hours, unless something changes before then. I've asked Healer Pye to have me called if that's the case."

After Poppy left, Albus slowly consumed the pastry she had brought, without really tasting it. When he had finished, he Banished the tray to a side table and retook Minerva's hand. He brought his lips down to kiss the pale, cold skin of her forehead and took up his vigil once again.

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter 16 of 19

The last thing Minerva McGonagall ever expected was to become a mother. But when she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant, her life with Albus changes in ways beyond anything they might have predicted.

This is the third story set in the "Epithalamium" universe.

Albus must have dozed off still holding Minerva's hand in his, because he was awakened by the feeling of her fingers moving. His eyes opened, and before he could adjust to the low light in the hospital room, he heard a rasping cough.

"Minerva?" he said, thinking he must still be dreaming.

He was answered by another cough, then a croaking sound. "Albus?"

He shifted so that she could see his face just above hers. "I'm here, my love."

"What . . . where . . . oh!" she rasped, suddenly recalling where she was and why she was there.

"Shall I get the Healer? Do you hurt?" he asked anxiously.

"No, I'm just . . . dry throat," she croaked.

"I'll get you some water. I'll need to check with the Healer first, though," he said, glad for the semi-darkness that hid his tears from her. He rose and was about to step out to find Pye when the man himself bustled into the room and over to the bed.

"Mrs Dumbledore, hello," he said. "Do you remember where you are?"

"St Mungo's," she whispered. "Water?"

"Certainly," said Pye. He Summoned a glass from the counter and filled it with an *Aguamenti*. He conjured a straw and held it to her lips, saying, "Stay lying down for the moment. Take small sips, or you might get sick."

She stretched her neck and took a few sips then let her head fall back to the pillow. Pye silently handed the glass to Dumbledore.

"How do you feel?" the young Healer enquired.

"Tired," she answered. "Belly hurts a bit."

"I'll get you something for it," said Pye. He looked at Dumbledore, hesitating, then said, "Mrs Dumbledore, we did a procedure. It was necessary. That may be why your abdomen is tender."

"Procedure?"

Dumbledore stepped in. "Minerva, I . . ." He didn't know how to finish and looked at Pye.

The Healer continued: "We . . . that is, my colleagues and I, we had to remove your uterus. You were bleeding, and it was the only recourse."

She squeezed her eyes shut for a few moments, then said, "I see." She was too tired to think about it now.

Pye noticed her fatigue and said, "We can talk more about it when you're more rested. I'm sure you'll have questions for me."

"I'm sure. Thank you, Mr . . . ?" she asked.

"Pye. I'm going to run some tests now, if that's all right." She nodded. "You don't need to move, Mrs Dumbledore." He passed his wand over her torso, then cast the numbers in the air, reading them carefully. "Good. Much better," he said. "I should also do a quick physical exam to make sure there's no residual bleeding." He moved to the foot of her bed, and asked, "Do you think you can move your legs up?" She slid them up the bed to allow Pye to make his exam. He lifted the bedclothes with a wandless spell and made a quick assessment of her blood loss and perineum. "Good," he said, lowering the bedclothes. "Do you still have any soreness down here?" he

asked.

"Some. Not much," she answered.

"Fine," said Pye. "The potion for your belly will also take care of that. Do you need to use the loo?"

"No, I don't think so," she answered.

"All right. When you feel you need to, just press this button"...he gestured to a small, green knob on the rail of the bed..."and one of the staff will come to assist you. I don't want you getting up just yet."

He stopped to make a few notes in his chart, then said, "Try to rest as much as you can. Mr Dumbledore, you should rest too."

Albus just nodded curtly, and as Pye left, he called after him, "Mr Pye? Would you mind alerting Madam Pomfrey that Mrs Dumbledore is awake? I believe you can just call her via the Floo to the Hogwarts infirmary."

"Of course," Pye said and left them alone.

Albus leant down and kissed Minerva's forehead, murmuring, "Oh, my love. I'm so sorry. So very, very sorry."

She didn't ask why; she didn't have the strength to deal with his self-imposed guilt at the moment. She simply said, "Just sit with me."

"Of course." After a few minutes, Pye returned and gave Minerva the pain potion. He checked her vital signs, then left again quietly.

Albus watched Minerva's face relax. He was afraid when she closed her eyes again...he had thought for a terrifying time that he might never see them open again...but he knew that she needed rest, and this gentle slumber seemed different than the deep, unreachable sleep that had consumed her earlier.

Several minutes later, he heard the door open. Poppy put her hand on Albus' shoulder and whispered, "Pye said Minerva woke."

"Yes," said Albus. "Thank Merlin. She was alert, and we spoke. She's just resting now."

"I'm so glad, Albus. So glad. Pye says she's doing much, much better."

"Yes. Thanks to you and your gentleman friend," replied Albus. "I cannot find the words to thank you properly."

"No need for thanks, Albus," said Poppy. "I'm just glad she's better."

They both stayed still, looking at Minerva's sleeping form for a few moments. Poppy broke the silence, saying, "Would you like to take a break? I can sit with her."

"No, thank you. I want to be here when she wakes again," said Albus.

"Then do you mind if I stay for a bit?" asked Poppy. "I'd like to see her awake, if that's all right with you."

"Of course," said Albus. "You'll need to conjure your own chair, though, my dear. I'm afraid I'm too worn out even for that at the moment."

Poppy did so, and the two sat watching Minerva doze. They were interrupted a few minutes later by a harried-looking mediwitch, who bustled in, saying, "There's a gentleman here who would like to see the patient. He says he's her father."

Albus stood and told the woman, "I'll talk to him first. Is he outside?"

"He's in the reception area, sir. Shall I bring him up?" she asked.

"Yes, please," said Albus. When she had gone, he told Poppy, "I wrote to Thorfinn. I think I should prepare him before he sees her, though."

"Yes, good idea," said Poppy, nodding. "Let me know if you need me to help explain anything. Otherwise, I'll just stay here."

Thorfinn McGonagall outpaced the young mediwitch as soon as he saw Albus standing in the corridor outside Minerva's room. He strode up to the tall wizard and pulled him wordlessly into a tight embrace.

"Albus," he said when they broke. "How is she?" The man's anguish was plainly visible on the weathered landscape of his face.

"Better, Thorfinn. Much better, thank Merlin. She woke just a few minutes ago. She's sleeping again, but the Healer says she's going to recover." Pye hadn't said that, exactly, but Albus felt entitled to polish the truth a bit for Minerva's father.

"I'm sorry, Albus," said Thorfinn. "About the baby."

Albus nodded. "Thank you. I am too." The two men were quiet for a moment, then Albus said, "Before you see Minerva, there are a few things I should tell you."

"Yes?" said Thorfinn, his brow furrowing again.

"The Healers had to do some . . . unorthodox things to save her life."

"Such as?" asked Thorfinn. He was as direct as his daughter.

"They . . . I allowed them to remove her womb."

"I see," was all Thorfinn said. It reminded Albus of Minerva's stoical reaction. "Anything else?"

"She received some of my blood. It was . . . she was . . . things were desperate," Albus said, his voice hitching.

"Your blood?" Thorfinn was obviously shocked this time.

"Yes. It's a Muggle technique. The potions were inadequate," said Albus, willing the man to understand. When McGonagall didn't say anything, he added, "She was dying, Thorfinn." His voice broke and he sobbed.

Thorfinn McGonagall said nothing but put a warm hand on Albus' shoulder as the taller man tried to regain his composure.

When Albus had regained control of himself, he pulled away from Thorfinn, saying, "I'm sorry."

"It's all right, Albus. I've been in your shoes; I ken," Thorfinn said softly. "I'd like to see my daughter now, if I may."

"Of course. She's still sleeping, though," said Albus as he opened the door to the room. Poppy looked up and stood as the two men entered.

"Poppy," whispered Albus, "This is Thorfinn McGonagall, Minerva's father. Thorfinn, this is our school matron, Poppy Pomfrey."

McGonagall tore his eyes from his daughter to look at Poppy, who said quickly, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr McGonagall. Of course, I wish it were under better circumstances. She's doing much better, as I'm sure Albus has told you."

"Aye," replied Thorfinn. "Can ye tell me, Madam Pomfrey, what happened to Minerva?"

Poppy glanced at Albus, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

"She had what is called a placental abruption," said Poppy, and she explained in short what that meant. "It's not so very rare, but the severity of what happened to Minerva is," she finished.

Albus added, "Madam Pomfrey was instrumental in saving Minerva's life. The Healer in charge said that without her quick thinking, Minerva would almost certainly have died."

"Sounds like we both owe ye a debt of gratitude, Madam Pomfrey," said Thorfinn thickly.

"Not at all, Mr McGonagall. It's my job. And Minerva is very dear to me."

"Aye, she's written to me of what a good friend you've been to her," said Thorfinn. If the light had been brighter, he would have seen Poppy flush.

After a moment, she said, "It looks as if Minerva is well cared for. I'll head back to Hogwarts and let you have some privacy. I'll check back in tomorrow morning, if it's all right, Albus."

"Of course, thank you, Poppy," replied Albus.

When she had gone, Thorfinn said, "Thanks for your letter, Albus. I was away from the house when it arrived, or I would have come sooner."

Dumbledore was privately glad for Thorfinn's delay. It was much easier to face Minerva's father now that the acute crisis had passed.

"Thorfinn, I am sorry," he said quietly.

"Sorry?"

"Yes. About all this."

"You've no call to be sorry, Albus. None."

"It's my fault," said Albus.

"How?" asked Thorfinn sharply, reminding Albus yet again of Minerva. Then Thorfinn's voice softened, and he continued: "Albus, I think I ken some of what you're feeling. After Morrigan died, I felt for a time as if I had killed her. But it wasn't rational...not that feelings are meant to be so. People fall in love and have babies, either intentionally or by accident. Been doing it for millennia, and women have been dying of it for just as long. It's just the first risk we take when we create life. Life and death...they're intimately connected, Albus. Ye know that as well as anyone. So does Minerva. Learned it far too young, she did, and for a time, I figured that was my fault, too. But it wasn't; it's just the way of things. But life goes on. Ye canna be afraid of it just because death is part of it. 'Tis the only sure thing about living."

Albus whispered, "But I was afraid, Thorfinn. I am still. I've never feared my own death...or at least, no more than any man...but Minerva . . . I can't bear the thought of it. After what you told me of her mother's death, I couldn't help thinking that I'd put her in danger."

Thorfinn put his hand on the taller wizard's shoulder. "You've been a good husband to her, Albus. But eventually, one of ye will die. My Galleons are on ye first, lad, since you've got a fair few years on her, but it could be either one of ye. My advice is to forget about it and enjoy life while it's yours. Minerva will mend, and you'll go on. Give her joy, Albus, and take some yourself. Ye have in the past, but if ye let fear and guilty feelings get hold of ye, you'll lose the knack for it."

"Thank you, Thorfinn. I'll try to remember," said Albus.

"Now, lad, go and get something to eat and have a rest. I'll stay here with her. Go on, now," said Thorfinn.

Albus didn't want to leave; he wanted to be there when Minerva woke again, but he thought Thorfinn might want some time alone with his daughter. It was the least he could do for the man, he thought. "All right. I'll be back soon, though."

Thorfinn just nodded, then sat in the chair Albus had occupied for so many hours.

Minerva stirred and woke about an half an hour later. She blinked several times, then asked, "Da?"

"Yes, Minerva, it's me," he said, smiling and kissing her forehead.

"When did you come?"

"A little while ago. Albus owled me about what happened. I'm so sorry, Minerva," he said.

"I'm sorry too, Da," she said softly, as tears came upon her again suddenly. She held on to her father's shoulders and wept as he hadn't seen her do since the day they had thought Albus killed in his duel with Gellert Grindelwald. When her shoulders stopped shaking, he conjured a tartan handkerchief for her.

She dried her eyes and blew her nose, then asked, "Where's Albus?"

"I sent your handsome lad to get something to eat. I understand he's been by your side since ye took ill," he said.

"How is he?" she asked, knowing her father would tell her the truth.

"He's hurting, lass. He's blaming himself, of course. But I think he'll be fine now he knows you're going to be all right," her father answered. "But how are ye, Minerva? Do ye need for anything?"

"No, I'm all right, Da. Just so very tired. Would you mind getting me some water?"

As Thorfinn was lifting the straw to her lips, Albus returned.

"Hello, my angel," he said, coming to stand just by Thorfinn's chair. "How are you feeling?"

"All right. I think I might need to call the attendant, though," she answered. She pushed the button Pye had shown her, and in another minute, a green-robed mediwitch bustled in.

"Yes, what did you need, dear?" said the middle-aged woman.

"I need to use the loo," said Minerva, "and my Healer said I'm not to get up." She flushed and felt the tears sting her eyes again. She had never felt so helpless, but as much as she hated it, she knew she couldn't stand on her own. She didn't have pain when she was still, but movement still hurt her belly.

"Certainly, dear," said the mediwitch. "All right, gents, you heard the lady . . . out!" she said, shooing Albus and Thorfinn out the door. When they were alone, the witch asked, "Bladder or bowels?"

"Bladder," answered Minerva. The woman's brisk efficiency soothed Minerva like a tonic, perhaps because it was a stance she recognised and could appreciate.

The mediwitch Summoned a beaker from the cabinet and drew Minerva's bedclothes down. "We measure everything that goes in and everything that comes out," said the woman, indicating the beaker. "Gives us something to do," she said, winking at Minerva. "Now, I'm just going to use a spell to empty your bladder. You should just feel a little warmth and maybe some tingling, all right?"

Minerva nodded, and the mediwitch drew her wand, pointed at Minerva's belly, and said, *Evacuate Vesicam*." Minerva felt her lower belly grow warm, then felt her bladder begin to relax.

When she felt the warmth evaporate, the other woman gave a satisfied nod at the now-partially filled beaker and asked, "Better?"

"Yes, thank you." It hadn't been nearly as humiliating as Minerva had feared.

"Now, you've recently given birth," said the mediwitch gently. She knew, of course, that her patient had lost her baby, and long experience had taught her not to say 'had a baby' in such circumstances. "The first time you move your bowels might be a touch painful, so I'm going to give you something to take just before, all right? To make things easier. Then when you feel the urge you just give me a ring, and I'll be right in to help you."

Minerva flushed again, and the mediwitch said, "Ah, no need to be embarrassed, dear. I've given birth four times, and trust me when I tell you you'll be glad of the potion and the company when the time comes." She took a phial from her pocket and put it on the bedside table. "Just swallow the lot when you think you're ready, and it'll do the trick, all right?" Minerva nodded. "Good girl. By the way, my name's Dorcas Diggle. I'm on duty all night."

"Thank you, Madam Diggle," said Minerva.

"Dorcas is just fine. And you're welcome, dear," the witch said and bustled out again.

Albus and Thorfinn came back in, and all at once, Minerva wanted desperately to be alone.

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Three days later, Minerva was up and about, although moving slowly and carefully. She was able to eat solid food and felt stronger.

Although her father had gone home to Caithness, Albus was still with her most of every day, despite her urging him not to neglect his duty to the school. Poppy came to see her daily too, and she brought Pomona Sprout one afternoon. With her two friends, Minerva found herself laughing for the first time since her ordeal had begun, and although it ached her sore belly, she was glad to find she still could. The pleasure, however, was followed immediately by a sharp stab of pain that was not physical. How could she laugh when her baby, her child, could not and would never?

Poppy and Pomona both noticed the abrupt change in Minerva's countenance and responded in their own typical ways: Ravenclaw Poppy spoke soothing words, while Pomona's Hufflepuffian comfort was a wordless pat on the hand followed by a gentle hug. Later, Minerva reflected on the fact that while she could not claim a large circle of friends...her natural reserve precluded it...she was fortunate to have such dear ones.

Nevertheless, she felt cut off from them. If she had worried during her pregnancy that becoming a mother might create a gulf between herself and her childless friends, she now realised that it was nothing compared with the invisible wall of pain that now separated her from her friends and, indeed, from everyone else.

Even Albus, who she knew was grieving the loss of their child in his own way, occupied a different kind of grief. He had loved their child, no doubt, but he had not carried it within him, attuning himself as she had to the baby's daily habits...when he woke and slept; when he was restless; when he tickled her from the inside with his hiccoughs...learning to love them even before she had ever seen her baby's face.

Grief and loss, they were an island, Minerva found, and every day, every moment, she paced its perimeter, memorising its brutal landscape.

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter 17 of 19

The last thing Minerva McGonagall ever expected was to become a mother. But when she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant, her life with Albus changes in ways beyond anything they might have predicted.

This is the third story set in the "Epithalamium" universe.

Minerva was released from St Mungo's three days later. She was still terribly weak, but each day she felt a bit stronger, and Healer Pye sent her home with some strong vitamin potions and instructions to try to do a little more physical activity each day.

She felt humiliated by her frailty; Albus had to carry her as they Flooed back to the Hogwarts infirmary, and she could not manage the walk all the way to her office to use the magical door that led to her quarters. Poppy Levitated a chair, and Albus pushed her through the halls. She was thankful that the students were in class so few were around to see her in this state.

When they arrived in her quarters, she was stunned by the number of cards and floral arrangements that occupied every flat surface of her sitting room.

"Albus, what is all this?" she asked.

"Just expressions of concern from your students and the staff."

"But so many!" she said with genuine surprise.

"Don't you know how much the students love you?" he asked.

She couldn't answer for the sudden tears choking off her voice. Albus helped her out of the chair and held her for a few minutes as the tears fell. He then handed her a handkerchief to dry her eyes and nose and helped her onto the settee by the fireplace, sitting down next to her.

"It's nice to be home," she said with a sigh. "I can't imagine how much work I have waiting for me, though."

"Don't worry, my love. Filius, Horace, Pomona, and I were able to take care of most of it between us. Your N.E.W.T. students may need to do some catching up, but other than that, I think you'll find things more or less in order," he told her.

"Thank you, Albus," she said quietly.

He smiled at her and kissed her forehead. "I don't want you to worry about anything for the moment. Just rest and get your strength back," he said.

She was surprised to find that he had moved several of his things into her quarters and intended to spend his nights there until she was fully recovered; they did not normally spend nights together while the students were in residence.

It was during one of these nights that she found out about the blood transfusion. Neither the Healers nor Poppy had mentioned it, at Albus' request. He felt she had enough to think about without adding a new worry into the mix. Poppy disagreed...she knew Minerva would be livid if she found out something was being kept from her...but didn't feel entitled to object too strenuously.

Minerva was itching to give her magic a workout...she had been prohibited from doing any since her illness...and had pestered both Poppy and Albus about it for days. At her daily check-up one afternoon a few days after she'd returned to Hogwarts, Poppy finally gave her blessing and spent a watchful hour with Minerva as she Levitated this and that, grinning like any first-year.

"I think that's enough for now," Poppy said. "How do you feel now?"

"Fine. Levitation is hardly strenuous," replied Minerva.

"No, not usually, but your body has been through a lot. It takes time to regain your strength, both physical and magical. You know that."

"I suppose so," said Minerva. "In any event, thank you for indulging me today. I feel much more myself."

"Good," said Poppy as she gathered her notes and equipment. Embracing Minerva at the door, she said, "I know you won't pay any attention if I tell you no more magic today, but at least promise me you'll wait until Albus is with you to try any more."

"Witch's honour," said Minerva, returning Poppy's hug. "Thank you."

When Albus came through the door that evening, Minerva was smiling like a woman with a secret.

"Well, it's nice to be greeted with such a smile," he said, kissing her quickly. "I would hope it's the joy of seeing me, but somehow, I suspect there's a bit more to it."

"Of course I'm glad to see you, but you're correct, there is an additional reason for my smile this evening," she replied.

"Oh?"

"Watch," she said, withdrawing her wand from her pocket and pointing it at Albus. *Wingardium Leviosa!* His long beard rose from his chest to stick out at a ninety-degree angle.

"Well! I take it Poppy gave you the go-ahead to begin using your magic again. That must feel good."

"It does."

She pointed her wand at him, saying, *Finite*, and his beard floated back down to rest against his chest.

"Did you eat?" he enquired.

"Yes, Quinsy brought me a tray about an hour ago," she replied. "But I didn't eat the pudding; I thought we could have dessert together."

"A lovely idea. Although I'll admit that I did sample the trifle in the Great Hall this evening," he said, taking her hand and moving toward the table with her.

"No matter," she said. "I'm sure you won't object to an extra sweet."

"I shall force myself for you, my love," he said.

When they had finished their chocolate mousse, Minerva stood and said, "Poppy said I might try some more magic as long as you were with me."

"Are you sure you feel up to it Minerva?" Albus asked, a slight crease of worry forming between his brows.

"Indeed. I'm itching for it. You have no idea how frustrating it is not to use magic!"

"All right, but don't try too much all at once. I don't want you to tire yourself."

Minerva took up her wand and began to Levitate various objects. When she had exhausted the possibilities on her mantel, she said, "See? No trouble at all. I'm going to move on to a few Transfigurations now. Nothing too challenging, don't worry!" she added when she saw Albus' look of concern.

She moved toward the table and fixed her wand on the shaker of salt. With a murmured *Mutatio Poculum*, the shaker instantly became a teacup. Her smile broadening, she then changed the cup into candleholder, the candleholder into a napkin, the book into a pillow, and finally, the pillow into a copy of *War and Peace*, which was, perhaps, a bit more strenuous than she should have attempted, but she couldn't help herself. She had always liked to show off for Albus. Quickly Transfiguring the tome back into the salt shaker it had originally been, she looked up at Albus with a grin. "See? No trouble at... Albus, what's the matter?"

He had a queer look on his face, and she didn't recognise it.

"Nothing, my dear, nothing. Can you do that again? Transfigure the salt shaker?"

"Of course. What do you want me to make of it?"

"Anything at all."

She looked at him for another moment, trying to determine what he was thinking, then gave up, turned her wand back at the salt shaker, and said *Mutatio Citream*. A small, potted lemon tree, ripe with fruit, sat where the shaker had been. It was a nice...no, an *amazing*...bit of Transfiguration, but Albus hardly noticed.

Minerva looked back at him; he looked as if he had been slapped. She was alarmed and asked, "Albus, what's the matter? You're frightening me."

He seemed to come back to himself at that and grasped her hand reassuringly. "Nothing's the matter, Minerva. It's just that when you did the Transfiguration . . . I felt it."

"Well, of course you did. It's a difficult spell, so you felt the magic in the air," she said, but he cut her off.

"No. I mean, I felt it . . . inside. In my magic," he said, thumping himself on the chest.

One could always feel strong magic when a spell passed close by, and a talented or well-trained witch or wizard could generally sense the strong magical signature of another if he or she were paying attention, but these were largely passive sensations. This had felt different. Albus had felt oddly pushed and pulled by the whisper of Minerva's magic, felt it not on his skin or in his head, but somewhere deeper inside him...felt it within his soul, if he had one. Or perhaps in his blood.

"I don't understand," Minerva said.

"Neither do I, not completely." Taking her hand again, he drew her toward the settee, saying, "Sit down, Minerva. I need to discuss something with you, but promise you'll hear me out before you say anything."

Now she was frightened, and he saw it. "Don't be worried, my sweet, it's nothing terrible, but you may find it surprising, is all. All right?"

She nodded, and he began. He told her about the desperate hours he, Poppy, and the Healers had spent while she hovered on the precipice between life and death; he told her of Poppy's quest to find something that would help her friend and of Jean-Baptiste's experiences with Muggle medicine. He explained about the transfusion...what he understood of it, anyway...and how they had decided to take the chance to save her life. When he finished, she was quiet.

"So I have your blood in me."

"Yes."

"You used Dark Magic to save my life?"

"No!" he said too loudly. "Not Dark. Yes, I know blood is usually only used in Dark rituals, but this wasn't a ritual, and there was no magic involved, except my love and desire to see you well again."

"Albus..." she began, but he cut her off again.

"I believe, I firmly believe, Minerva, that intent matters when determining if a spell is Dark or Light. My intent...*our* intent...was only to help you."

"But what about the spells people have used to try to bring back the dead?" she asked, her voice rising slightly in her apprehension. "Surely the intent is benign, but the results are terribly, terribly Dark. What have you done?" This last was more of a wail than an actual question.

"It isn't the same!" he cried. "You weren't dead...we weren't trying to cheat Death or reanimate someone who had passed beyond the veil...we were only trying to prevent it. Just like any other form of medicine."

She turned away, and he pressed on: "Minerva, please listen: transfusion has been used in Muggle medicine for almost a hundred years, according to Poppy. It's worked miracles for them, and the only reason we haven't used it is because of silly prejudice."

"No," she said forcefully, turning back to face him. "Muggles don't have magic; of course exchanging blood has no magical effect on them. Our magic is intimately connected to our blood, Albus. You know that."

"Yes, but we don't fully understand how, do we? Who's to say if exchanging blood between magical beings is bad, good, or indifferent? In this case, it saved your life, so I cannot believe it was a bad thing. It was risky, I know that, but I took the risk because I couldn't bear to lose you, whatever the effects. Please understand that, Minerva. Please."

The tears that stood in his eyes were matched by her own. "I know that, Albus. I do. I just don't know what to think . . . how to feel about it."

"I know," he said. "And I'm sorry we couldn't consult you before doing it. I understand that you might feel . . . violated."

"No, it isn't that," she said, reaching for his hands. "I know that whatever you did, you did for me. I'm just concerned, I suppose, about what it means . . . what effect it will have."

"I think, my love, that we may just have discovered one of the side-effects."

"You feeling my magic."

"Yes. I think, perhaps, the exchange of blood bound us in some way. More than we had been before. Bound our magic."

"It's strange that the effect should be on you, though, isn't it?" she asked.

"We don't know that it is only on me," he replied. "I didn't feel anything, or didn't notice anything, when you cast the Levitation charms. That's among the simplest of spells and doesn't require much magical energy. It was only when you began doing Transfigurations that I felt something, and it was strongest when you Transfigured the lemon tree. That was a fairly advanced bit of magic. You haven't felt anything over the past few days? Anything unusual in your magic" he asked.

"No, I've noticed nothing."

"I haven't cast any particularly advanced spells recently, at least, not when I've been close to you. It may be that proximity makes a difference."

He stood, withdrew his wand from his pocket, and went over to the table where the lemon tree still sat. "May I?" he asked, indicating the tree.

"Please," she answered, moving to stand next to him.

He fixed his wand on the tree and, without uttering any incantation at all, Transfigured it into a blue budgerigar in an ornate brass cage. When he turned to Minerva, her eyes were wide.

"Did you feel that?"

"Yes," she whispered. "It was . . . it was like ice and fire, both together, running through my magic."

"I'm sorry. I should have used a simpler spell. I didn't mean to hurt you . . ."

"No, it didn't hurt at all. It was just odd. Try something easier now. I want to see how that feels."

He changed the platter on which their dessert had been served into a stack of parchment.

"How was that?" he asked.

"Not as strong, definitely, but still there. Levitate it," she ordered.

He did so and looked at her.

"Nothing," she said.

"Most intriguing," he said. "But I think that's enough for tonight. I don't want to tire you. We can investigate this phenomenon further later. At the moment, I don't think it's anything we need worry about. It seems benign."

"But what if there are other effects?" she said.

"Then we'll worry about them when they arise. But now," he said putting his hands on her shoulders and steering her toward the bedroom, "rest."

She allowed him to manoeuvre her into her bedroom and took herself into the bathroom to clean her teeth and get ready for bed.

Albus sat on the edge of the bed with a weary sigh and bent to remove his boots. He was relieved that she now knew about the transfusion...he had been dreading telling her and hadn't quite worked out how to bring it up...and that the only effect thus far seemed harmless. Of course, as she had said, they might discover further effects later, but he hadn't the energy to worry about it at the moment. For now, the fact that Minerva was alive and getting stronger was enough.

When she emerged from the bathroom, he stood to take his turn, and as he passed her, she stopped him, putting her hands on his shoulders. "I didn't ever thank you," she whispered.

"For what?"

"For saving my life."

"I didn't. That was Poppy and the others," he said.

"But you made the decision. You gave me your blood."

He told her softly, "I would give you my life, you know that."

"I know," she said, and pulled him down to kiss him. When they broke, she said, "I love you."

"And I love you."

She released him then, and later, when they were both settled in her bed, she thought about the blood-bond that had apparently been created between them and wondered if either of them would ever have cause to regret it.

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter 18 of 19

The last thing Minerva McGonagall ever expected was to become a mother. But when she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant, her life with Albus changes in ways beyond anything they might have predicted.

This is the third story set in the "Epithalamium" universe.

Minerva returned to teaching in the first week of December. She left breakfast early to prepare her classroom, and when she reached it, she hesitated a few moments before opening the door. The last time she'd gone through it, she'd been nearly six months pregnant, with nothing but petty troubles, it now seemed to her.

Now she was . . . what?

Funny, she thought, *they have a word for a woman who's lost a husband, but there's no word for a woman who's lost a child.*

Maybe there wasn't any language adequate to describe that sort of misery.

She went to her desk, careful to step over the stain that was still barely visible on the stone floor. As she sat, she found her eyes drawn back to the dark patch where she had fallen . . . where her son had first begun to die inside her.

The pain that would never fully disappear washed over her, and she panicked. She would never be able to teach like this, not with the agony of her grief clutching at her chest and making her breath come in fast, shallow sobs. She tried emptying her mind, to no avail. In desperation, she transformed. In her feline form, her emotions were blunted, and physical sensation came to the fore. Extending her claws, she dug them into the wood of the desk, kneading at it almost viciously. She focussed on the resistance of the mahogany, the satisfying give when her claw sank into it, and the tug at the unequal crests of her claws when she retracted them. It hurt and felt good at the same time, and the combination of the rhythmic motion and the sensation soothed her. When she felt more in control of herself, she changed back and withdrew her wand to cast a Disillusionment spell on the stained patch of floor. The mark would still be visible to anyone sitting close to it, but it no longer drew her eye, and she was able to turn her attention to looking over the notes Albus had left her.

The students began to arrive, but she didn't speak and continued to review her notes as they came in and got settled. Suddenly aware of the unnatural quiet, she looked up. Seven young faces were looking at her. No one was fidgeting, no one was giggling, no one was passing a note . . . there was complete silence. It was unnerving.

What were they expecting to see?

Then a quiet voice piped up...Molly Prewett's...saying, "Welcome back, Professor."

Minerva opened her mouth to thank Molly when the other students began to applaud. Overwhelmed at the display of affection from her students, Minerva couldn't speak. When she found her voice, she said, "Thank you. It's very good to be here."

She stood but didn't come around from behind her desk as she normally did.

She said, "I understand Professor Dumbledore has taken you through the rudiments of inter-species Transfiguration, but you will need to master it if you hope to pass your N.E.W.T., so please take out your wands and prepare to show me that you can change a black beetle to a common ladybird."

By the end of the class period, four of the students had managed it, and the other three had made progress.

After the students filed out, Minerva went to each desk, carefully stepping around the Disillusioned spot, to collect the insects and Transfigure them back to their original form. She had dropped the last one into her basket when she saw Molly standing in the doorway, clutching her books to her chest.

"Yes, Miss Prewett, did you forget something?"

"No, Professor. I just wanted to say I'm glad you're all right. I mean, I knew you would be, but . . ." After a moment's hesitation, she drew a deep breath and said, "I'm very sorry. About what happened."

"Thank you, Molly."

The girl seemed to want to say something else, but Minerva averted it, saying, "You'd better be getting on. Professor Flitwick won't appreciate your coming in late and interrupting his lesson."

"Yes, Professor. I wish . . . well . . . as long as you're all right . . ."

"I am fine, as you see."

Molly flushed and nodded. Then she left.

Minerva went to the door and shut it.

She returned to her desk and sat, retrieving her notes to review for a minute or two before her next class arrived.

To the empty room, she said again, "I'm fine."

She wondered how long it would take before it wasn't a lie.

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Amelia Bones owed Minerva to ask her to come down to London to do a bit of Christmas shopping. Minerva suspected Albus had put her up to it. She hadn't spoken to her dear friend since her illness, and in truth, she still didn't feel much like socialising, but Amelia was family...if only by marriage...and the prospect of facing Diagon Alley at Christmastime on her own was daunting. Amelia could be counted upon to distract Minerva from her troubles and help get the shopping done in short order.

They met in the Leaky Cauldron, and Amelia pulled Minerva into a tight hug, saying, "You look better than I expected, McGonagall."

"Thank you, I think," Minerva replied.

"Come on. Let's get out of this place. Too many damn people in here," Amelia said, grasping Minerva's hand and pulling her to the door.

They spent two and a half hours on their shopping, until Amelia declared herself exhausted, which Minerva didn't believe for a second. Amelia was no doubt under orders not to allow Minerva to tire herself out, but Minerva couldn't bring herself to object. She acquiesced to a cup of tea at Amelia's flat, both because she was very tired and because she wanted to talk with her friend privately.

She was surprised to find that Amelia's partner, Marlene McKinnon, was there. Marlene came out of the kitchen carrying a tray of biscuits, and Minerva had the distinct feeling that she'd been set up. Albus seemed to think that she needed to "get out and see people," as he put it. As if people were a potion that could cure what ailed her, when they really were a burden, what with their curiosity and their pity. At least Amelia wouldn't inflict much of either on her, which was the primary reason she'd agreed to the outing.

"Minerva," Marlene said, stepping forward to embrace her and kiss her on both cheeks. "It's nice to see you up and about. I'm so very sorry about the baby."

Minerva gave her a tight smile and sat across from Amelia, who was pouring out the tea.

"Thank you, Marlene."

"How are you feeling?"

"Much better."

"I'm sorry I didn't visit you at Mungo's, but I was away when you were admitted. I didn't even hear about it until we got Albus' note."

"It's all right. I wasn't fit company for visitors, in any event," said Minerva.

"Even so," said Marlene, "I'm sorry I wasn't there. Not that I could have done much...it's not my area. But you were in very good hands; Pye is one of the more talented of the youngsters, and Cressida Burgess is probably the smartest Healer we've got. She takes all the most difficult cases of magical illness."

"Cressida Burgess?"

The name felt like a kick in the belly. She hadn't ever seen the woman during her stay at St Mungo's, but she remembered the name well enough. Cressida Burgess been Albus' date to a Ministry ball long ago, and the cause of the worst jealousy Minerva had ever experienced. She remembered reading in the *Daily Prophet's* report of the ball that "Albus Dumbledore's beautiful companion" was also a well-known Healer. Much later, Albus had admitted to Minerva that he and Madam Burgess had been lovers long ago.

"Yes, she did your sur..." Marlene stopped herself, glancing at Amelia.

"It's all right, you can speak in front of Amelia," said Minerva, who was still reeling from the discovery that Albus' former paramour had treated her while she lay unconscious.

"Lena hasn't told me anything, Minerva," said Amelia. "She wouldn't."

"I imagine you have other ways of finding things out if you want to," said Minerva.

"Yeah, but I didn't," said Amelia. "I thought I'd let you decide how much to tell me."

Minerva nodded her gratitude, a lump constricting her throat. Amelia knew her very well indeed.

Marlene jumped in. "I hope you don't think I was prying, Minerva. I heard the case being discussed, but I had no idea it was you until Amelia told me about what happened and I put two and two together. I just wanted to make certain you were all right."

"I imagine some of what you heard was troubling," said Minerva.

"Well, unusual," said Marlene.

"Unusual how?" asked Amelia.

Minerva then told her the story of the surgery and the blood transfusion.

Amelia's brow wrinkled, and she turned to Marlene, asking, "And is that normal?"

"I wouldn't say normal, but hysterectomy...removing the womb...is occasionally done in cases when they can't stop the bleeding. You don't hear about it often because not many Healers know how to do it properly. Sometimes they have to transfer the patient to a Muggle hospital, if there's time. I understand Cressida's done it before, though. It was lucky she was there."

"Yes, but the other...giving someone else's blood...that isn't regular, is it?" asked Amelia.

"What's regular is that the patient dies," said Marlene, her cheeks growing pink with emotion. "I see it with bite wounds too bloody often; some gormless git has his arm off after messing about with a dragon, and we pour half a gallon of Blood Replenishing Potion into him, but we can't save him because the potion can't replace it fast enough, and he's hypovolemic as hell. I think it's brilliant that Minerva's mediwitch came up with the idea of the transfer or whatever it's called."

"Poppy was the one who thought to use it for me," said Minerva, "but it was really her friend that gave her the idea. He's a Healer, and he'd seen it done in Muggles."

"I hope he's going to write it up. Because if he doesn't, Cressida will, you can be sure," said Marlene.

Minerva made a mental note to mention it to Poppy. She didn't want Cressida Burgess to take the credit for the idea that saved her life.

She sipped her tea for a few moments, debating whether to bring up the subject she wanted to discuss. Minerva liked and trusted Marlene, but she wasn't as close to her as she was to Amelia, and the topic of the peculiar side-effect to the blood transfusion felt terribly personal and intimate. Then again, as a Healer, Marlene might know something of the effects of blood magic, although her specialty was in creature-induced injuries.

Minerva asked, "What do you...either of you...know about blood magic?"

She noticed the way Amelia's eyes darted over to her partner and back again.

"You probably know as much as I do about it," said Amelia. "We've had a few people accused of using it, of course, but I wasn't directly involved in those cases. We do a unit on it during Auror training now. Dumbledore's friend...that blind bloke you introduced me to...put the materials together when we rewrote the curriculum on Dark Magic. Most of the focus was on recognising it."

"What kinds of things do you look for?"

Amelia shrugged. "Mostly unexplained changes to someone's magical power. People make all kinds of claims, but it's hard to suss out what's an accident and what might be the result of a Dark attack, so our materials focus on the forensics...identifying a Dark source of a magical drain. One thing we look for is signs of ritual bloodletting. There are sometimes marks on the body, and they may take certain patterns...Healers can usually tell us if someone's been cut in a major vessel, even if the signs of it have been covered."

"And what kinds of things does the victim experience?" asked Minerva.

"Difficulty with their magic. It's pretty broad. I remember one case...this was about eight years ago...the wizard couldn't cast in the presence of another mage. It was excruciatingly painful, he said. Turned out he'd been trying to set blood wards to keep his wife from leaving the house. Thought she was cheating on him. So he tried to use his blood and hers to lock her in...keep her from Apparating out or letting anyone else in without him. He must have screwed up the spells, because it ended up draining almost all his wife's magic, and he was left with that strange affliction. Too much magic, or something. His thaumaturgical system got overwhelmed and rejected it. At least, that was the theory, according to the Healer who worked the case for us."

Minerva's mouth went dry. She took another sip of her tea before asking, "What happened to him?"

"We didn't prosecute him. I thought we should have, but Clearwater said since he was good as a Squib, he wasn't a danger to anyone anymore, so there was no point." Amelia snorted. "As if the only way to harm anyone is with magic."

"So he never regained the ability to do magic in front of other wizards or witches?" asked Minerva.

"Not as far as I know."

"What happened to his wife? Did she ever get her magic back?"

"Not while I was paying attention to the case," said Amelia. "She left the bastard after that and disappeared. That's as much as I heard."

After a moment, Amelia said, "Are you going to tell me why you're interested, or are we going to keep dancing around it?"

Minerva paused before speaking.

"If I tell you, you need to swear to me that you won't mention it to anyone."

"Do you want us to take a Fidelius Oath?" asked Amelia.

"No, of course not. I trust you. Both of you."

Marlene gave a small smile. "I appreciate that, Minerva, but if you'd rather speak to Amelia alone, I can make myself scarce for a bit."

"That isn't necessary. In fact, I'd like to get your opinion as a Healer," said Minerva.

"Is something wrong with your magic?"

"No, not exactly," said Minerva. She explained about the strange connection between herself and Albus, and when she was done, she was disheartened to see the frown that creased Amelia's brow.

Marlene, however, wore a thoughtful expression, as if she were trying to work out a puzzle.

"What do you think?" Minerva asked her.

"It's not really my area of expertise...a spell-damage specialist could probably tell you more...but in my area we do see trait drift from bites sometimes."

"Trait drift?" said Amelia.

"When the victim appears to take on some traits of the attacking organism. Everyone knows about werewolves and vampires, but it happens with other creatures too, to a lesser degree. You see it with Vipertooth bites . . . Erklings . . . It's thought to be related to reverse genetic transcription...RNA from the Erklings or whatever copies itself into the victim's DNA...but we don't really know. I'm sure I'm not explaining it quite right; actually, it's probably your line more than it is mine," she said, looking at Minerva.

"Yes, but what does that have to do with what's happening to Minerva?" Amelia asked.

"Maybe nothing. But with most creature bites, there's no intention to transfer traits...usually, there's no magical intent involved at all. It's just the creature doing what it does to protect itself or to feed. There is arguably intent with vampires and werewolves, so that may be why the effects are so profound with those bites. And with blood magic...if I understand it at all...there's magical intent to effect a change on one or both participants, or maybe on their environment."

"And?" said Amelia.

"And it seems like there was no intent here," said Marlene. "Other than an intense desire to save Minerva's life. So any other effects...in the DNA or not...are apt to be random, as they are with lesser creature bites, and probably minor, or even transitory."

"But how will it affect our magic?" asked Minerva.

"I don't know. It may be that the shared sensation is all there is. Or there may be a change in power. But if it were significant, I think you'd have noticed it by now."

"I haven't done much intensive magic since . . . since my illness," said Minerva.

"Has Albus?"

"I don't know. Not that I'm aware of," said Minerva.

"Do you think the transfer or whatever could have drained some of Minerva's magic?" asked Amelia.

"I'm not sure," said Marlene. "It's possible. But I think it's equally likely that she took on some of Albus' power. She received his blood, but he didn't get any of hers."

Minerva asked, "Why would he be feeling the effects, then?"

"It's possible that magical sensitisation had already happened in other ways. The transfer might simply have potentiated it."

"What do you mean?"

"Not to get too personal, but you and Albus have each been exposed to the other's bodily fluids. If that included blood...even a tiny amount you weren't aware of...there's a small chance that..."

"He was sensitised to my magic via my blood," said Minerva. "And the act of giving me his blood to save my life worked like magical intent, even without a spell."

"Right," said Marlene. "It made the existing physical and thaumaturgical connection between you stronger. Strong enough that you can feel it in your magic. That's my guess, anyway."

The three witches sat without speaking for a few moments.

"Are we bound now, do you think?" asked Minerva.

"You mean like a marriage bond?" said Marlene.

"Yes."

"I have no idea. I'm afraid I've exhausted my knowledge of blood magic. And I've engaged in far too much speculation." Marlene gave a nervous laugh.

"You could test it," Amelia said to Minerva. "See if you're bound that way."

"How?"

"Well, I doubt you'd want to challenge the fidelity aspect of it, but you could try hexing one another. Don't most of the magical bindings prevent one partner's magic from being used against the other?"

"I think so," said Minerva.

"If it's an accidental binding, it might not be that strong, though," said Marlene. "A hex might not work, but a curse could. But you're not going to curse Albus."

"No," said Minerva. "I'm not."

She returned to the castle with her thoughts roiling. Part of her was anxious about the extent of the binding, if that's what it was. Not that she planned to be unfaithful to Albus, or to curse him, but the idea that she *couldn't*...that perhaps neither of them could...was disturbing. And who knew what other effects there might be?

Another part of her was intrigued. If there really was an unintentional transfer of magical power through their blood, it would make a fascinating case study. Not Transfiguration per se, but related. Most of Minerva's research had examined the molecular and genetic effects of Transfiguration on animals. If Marlene's explanation of the hypothesis about genetic transposition occurring in creature bites was accurate, it might be applicable . . . and the ramifications for the understanding of magical genetics were significant. If she could prove that such an effect had taken place *without* the use of a spell to direct and focus the intent, it might pave the way for research that could unravel the mysteries of magical power and how it passed from one generation to another...maybe even solve the question of where Muggle-born mages and Squibs came from.

You're getting ahead of yourself, she thought.

But for the first time since her illness, a flicker of interest in something outside herself lit in her breast, and when she saw Albus at dinner that evening, he remarked on how much better she looked for having gone out.

"I told you seeing some friends would do you good," he said, squeezing her knee under the table.

"Indeed," she said, and cut into her roast beef.

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter 19 of 19

The last thing Minerva McGonagall ever expected was to become a mother. But when she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant, her life with Albus changes in ways beyond anything they might have predicted.

This is the third story set in the "Epithalamium" universe.

Minerva was sitting in her office, making notes from a series of books and journals spread out across her desk, when she felt the brush of lips and the tickle of a moustache at the nape of her neck.

"Happy anniversary, my love."

She turned in her chair in time to see Albus shimmer into being.

"You think you're very clever, but one day we'll be caught," she said.

"That's what memory charms are for."

"I understand that it's considered very bad form for a Headmaster to Oblivate the students in his care."

"Oh, very," he said, coming around the chair to look at her desk. "You've been in here all day. Working on something in particular?"

"Just some background research for a project I've been kicking around."

He leant over and picked up a slim volume, opening it to the bookmarked page. "'Determinants for Regulation and Initiation of Expression of Tryptophan Genes' You're looking at Muggle articles?" he asked, dropping the book back on the desk.

"They've done a lot more in genetics than we have."

"So your project has to do with genetics?"

"Something like that."

He smiled at her over his glasses. "Which means you don't want to discuss it with me."

"Not yet. Maybe when I'm a bit further along."

He kissed the top of her head. "Do you think you'll be ready to leave off soon? I thought we could have dinner in your rooms, just the two of us."

"I'd like that. I'll just be a few more minutes here," she said.

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Dinner turned out to be a surprise. Albus had arranged for them to have the same menu they had had the evening of their wedding: roast saddle of venison with wild mushrooms and mashed parsnips, finishing up with Topsy Laird made with Old Pulteney and topped with Monorgan pears, both brought in specially. Albus had had the head Hogwarts kitchen elf send to the elf in charge of the McGonagall kitchen for the recipes.

As they sipped the last of the 1957 Latour he'd gotten to go with the meal, he said, "Not a stellar vintage, but I couldn't get hold of any of the 'forty-five...your father didn't have any more, and it's not to be had for less than a small fortune anywhere else...so I thought the 'fifty-seven might be appropriate, for sentiment's sake."

"It's wonderful," Minerva said, finishing hers and holding out her glass for more.

He poured, then held up his glass in a toast. "Ten years, Madam Dumbledore, and you are twice as beautiful as on the day I married you."

"And you, Mr Dumbledore, are twice as blind," she said.

When they'd finished their pudding, Minerva said, "You must have gone to a great deal of trouble to come up with this meal. It was lovely, thank you."

"You are lovely." He kissed her forehead. When he made to step back, she caught him by the front of his robe and pulled him close again, standing on tip-toe to reach him. Kissing him gently at first, when his arms came around her, she pressed her tongue against his lips and into his mouth. She felt him hesitate, but then he yielded and met her tongue with his.

He pulled away after a minute and looked at her. She let her head fall forward to rest against his chest.

"Will you stay tonight?" she asked.

He didn't answer immediately, and her heart began to pound as she listened to him breathe.

Caressing the back of her head, he said, "Is that what you want?"

"I asked, didn't I?"

He lifted her chin with his fingers and kissed her again, then said, "You did."

They went into her bedroom, and Albus disappeared into the bathroom to ready himself for bed. When he emerged in his dressing gown, she went in. The door closed behind her, and she began to undress. She slipped off her dress and underthings with her back to the mirror and pulled on her dressing gown. After cleaning her teeth, she spat into the sink and rinsed her mouth with water. Then she stood for a few moments to look at herself in the mirror, something she'd avoided doing since her illness, other than to make the most perfunctory checks of her appearance before leaving her quarters each morning.

She was still a trifle pale...even more so than she normally was...and her eyes were still slightly sunken and underscored with purple rings of fatigue. Not especially attractive, she thought, despite Albus' earlier assessment of her charms. Empty compliments about her appearance annoyed her, but she appreciated the sentiment behind

her beloved's effusiveness. She'd never been vain or insecure about her looks, but she had to admit that her recent experience had shaken her confidence. Her body had always been strong and obedient to her will...other than a bout of Mumblemumps when she was seven, she'd never had a serious illness. And she'd recovered "indecently fast," as her father had put it, from the injury she'd sustained as an Auror-trainee in the war. The frailty she'd experienced after the loss of her son had been like a double-betrayal. Not only had her traitorous body failed at something most women seemed to be able to do with ease, but it had rendered her weak and dependant and feeling as if she were someone else.

She steeled herself, then undid the tie to her dressing gown and let it fall open. Telling herself not to be foolish and vain, she opened it wider and looked at herself.

The first thing she noticed was her pubic hair. They'd removed it prior to the operation, Dorcas-the-mediwitch had informed her when she'd gotten up the nerve to inquire, but it had grown back in and looked a little unruly; she wished she'd thought to bring her wand into the bathroom with her to neaten things up a bit. The dark line that had run from her umbilicus to her pubis was still visible, although faded, and her navel looked much as it always had.

She turned to the side and regarded her figure. Her belly was only slightly rounded now, and her breasts had almost gone back down to their usual size. She turned back to face the mirror. Her nipples were still enlarged...about the circumference of a Galleon...and she wondered if they'd ever return to their normal state. She ran her hands over her breasts, remembering how they had grown hard and painful and leaked milk in the weeks immediately following the birth. The day she'd returned to Hogwarts, she'd awakened in the middle of the night to find the front of her nightdress soaked, and Albus had been helpless to console her as she wept. The next day, Poppy had given her cabbage leaves, charmed to remain very cold, to press against her breasts to help coax them to stop producing milk. She'd felt ridiculous putting them under her bra, but they had been soothing.

There had been no leaking for several weeks now, but Minerva hoped Albus wouldn't attempt to touch her breasts, just in case. She didn't think she could bear another reminder of what had happened. Not tonight.

She closed her dressing gown, and giving her appearance one last look, she pinched her cheeks a few times to try to bring some more colour to them.

She was about to return to the bedroom when a thought occurred to her. She considered for a moment, then closed her eyes, and placing a hand at her sex, she whispered, "*Lubricus*." She felt herself grow wet.

Albus was thumbing through a book when she came back into the bedroom, and he looked up and smiled at her. She felt strangely self-conscious about removing her dressing gown in front of him...more so when he removed his and she saw that he was wearing a nightshirt. He normally didn't bother with one until after they'd made love, and then only if he were chilly.

Shrugging off her dressing gown, she let it fall to the ground rather than hang it up and got quickly into bed. She used her wand to douse the candles and laid it on the bedside table.

He lay facing her, and she turned to him, reaching out to touch his chest, slipping her hand into the vee of his shirt to touch his warm skin. Finding his nipple, she rubbed it between her thumb and forefinger, feeling it harden under her touch. Still, he didn't move, and she wriggled closer to him, expecting to feel his erection against her belly, but there was nothing.

He rubbed her arm and said, "We can sleep together without doing anything else."

Minerva removed her hand.

"I see," she said.

"You see what?"

"No, nothing. You're right, of course. We shouldn't rush things." She turned away from him, saying, "Anyway, I'm tired."

"Minerva," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder, "I don't know what you're thinking, but I simply want to be certain that you're ready."

"Poppy says I'm fully healed."

"Yes, but do you want to?"

"I want *you*."

"You've been through a great deal."

"If you don't want to, just say so. I understand," she said, pulling away from him again.

"Minerva," he said, putting a hand back on her shoulder to get her to turn back to him. "I don't think you do understand. I want you. So much. But I don't want to hurt you...physically or otherwise. I don't want you to do this just because you think you should. I can wait."

"But I can't," she said. "I need you now."

Gods help her, she did. She hadn't realised it until just now. She'd wanted to be close to him again, to find a way back to some semblance of the way things had been before, but she hadn't thought she felt any physical desire...in fact, the idea of anyone, even Albus, touching her intimately had made her cringe. But the nearness of him, his scent and the solid feel of him, the taste of his mouth, had lit a half-remembered spark in her centre, and she found herself reaching for him blindly.

She was afraid, but aching with want of him, much as she had been the first time they'd been together...the first time she'd ever been with anyone...so long ago now, but still vivid in her memory. She wanted to tell him to just do it, for Merlin's sake, to stop worrying so goddamn much about how fragile he thought she was, but she held her tongue and made her mute request with her hands, pulling at his nightshirt and burying her face in his neck.

He stroked her hair for a moment, and she was startled when he sat up. She thought for a desperate moment that he was going to get up and leave, but he removed his shirt in a single, fluid motion and deposited it on the floor.

He lay back down and pulled her into his arms.

"Gods, Minerva, but I love you so. I came so close to losing you . . . so close . . ." She heard his breath hitch, and his lips descended on hers to light gentle kisses against them, then on her cheeks and eyelids. When he lifted his head again, she could feel moisture on her face where his tears had fallen. She brushed her thumbs gently over his eyes.

"I'm still here . . . right here . . ." she whispered.

His hands moved over her body, and she didn't stop him when his fingers played over her nipples, sending electric sparks to her centre. When he reached tentatively between her legs, she opened them and pulled his head down to kiss him fiercely. His fingers found her clitoris and began to rub it in firm circles as she pressed herself into his hand.

He touched her until she came with a mewling cry. She lay floating on her euphoria for a few moments, then he moved over her, supporting his upper body with his arms, and looked down at her, his face hardly more than a shadow in the moonlight coming through the window, but close and comforting.

"Now, my love?" he said. "You're sure?"

"Yes."

He reached down to rub the tip of his cock against her opening, spreading her moisture, before sliding slowly into her. Expecting pain, she tensed, but there was none...just the welcome and familiar feeling of him filling her.

It was heavenly, and she gasped.

He mistook the meaning of her gasp and withdrew quickly, but she pulled on his arse to urge him down again.

"It's good," she said. "You feel good. More, please."

So he pushed into her again and began to move, with slow, smooth strokes.

She brought her hands to the sides of his face and leant up to kiss him, feeling him relax down into her body.

He was gentle and careful, and it took longer than it usually did until he began to speed up, pressing into her more forcefully. He moaned her name as he climaxed, and she stroked his back as she felt him shudder.

He opened his eyes and looked down at her. "All right?"

"Better than all right."

"I didn't hurt you?"

"Not at all." After a moment's hesitation, she asked, "Was it different?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did it . . . did it feel any different?"

"No. Did it feel different for you?"

She thought about it for a moment before answering, "No. I thought it might, but it didn't."

He shifted off of her and pulled her close to him.

As she lay with her head on his chest, sleepy and more settled than she'd felt since before her ordeal, she became aware of an odd noise, almost like a soft buzzing. She lifted her head to see if she could pinpoint it, thinking for a moment that it was sound reverberating in her body.

"What's the matter, my love?" a sleepy Albus asked.

"Nothing." She put her head back down. The buzzing...more of a hum, really, when she focussed on it...was still there, and now it seemed less like a sound and more like a sensation, pulsing gently...something like a heartbeat, but less definite and not from her chest. This seemed to be coming from the whole of her.

Slightly alarmed now, she said, "Do you feel something?"

"What?"

"I don't know . . . it's like a sort of humming. It's . . . this sounds mad . . . but I think it's coming from inside me."

His hand tightened on her shoulder. "Stay still for a moment."

After a few seconds, he said, "I feel it too. But I can't tell if it's coming from you or from me."

She shifted off of him and lay on her back, trying to locate the sensation.

"Me, I think," she said. "I can still feel it."

"So can I," he said.

"What is it, do you think?"

"I don't know. Stay here...I want to try something."

He lit a candle with the wave of a hand and got up, then, without bothering with his nightshirt or dressing gown, he went out the door into her sitting room.

After a moment, he called in, "Do you still feel it?"

"Yes," she said.

He reappeared in the doorway, and said, "So do I."

As he joined her in the bed again, she said, "It's the bond, isn't it?"

"I suspect so, yes."

"Does this normally happen with a blood bond?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"We're feeling one another's magic."

"Yes. I don't know if it was happening before, and we've only just realised it because we haven't been this close, or if the sex triggered it somehow."

Remembering what Marlene had told her, Minerva said, "The latter, I think." After another moment, a thought occurred to her, and she added, "Do you think it will get stronger every time we make love?"

"I don't know." He turned to her and kissed her gently. "But try to get some sleep. I'll look into it more in the morning, and we can discuss it again before the Christmas Feast."

She let him wrap his arm around her waist. As she closed her eyes, she focused on the humming. It was soothing, actually, and despite her roiling thoughts, she fell into a

deep sleep, uninterrupted until she felt him stir in the early-morning light. She fell back to sleep and didn't wake again until Quinsy, the house-elf who served the Deputy Headmistress, brought her a tray and informed her she had missed Christmas breakfast.

Author's Note: *The article Minerva was looking at is: Margolin, Paul, and Ronald H. Bauerle. "Determinants for regulation and initiation of expression of tryptophan genes." In Cold Spring Harbor symposia on quantitative biology, vol. 31, pp. 311-320. Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 1966.*