

Much Abides

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 1

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The smell of moist, fresh earth is almost overwhelming, and for a few moments after she comes to consciousness, Minerva simply lies still and takes it in.

After years of sad experience with armed confrontations, she knows better than to show too quickly that she is awake. She isn't sure where she is ... outdoors? In the Hogwarts greenhouses? ... or how she got here, and if there's any chance that she has been felled by Death Eaters who might still be nearby, she'd best let them believe for now that she's still incapacitated.

So she lies there on the damp ground and listens to her surroundings, calling on all her cat-honed senses, but she soon concludes that she's alone. The air feels still, empty, and somehow...*unaware*...

No, no other sentient beings are nearby. She is certain of it.

She sits up slowly, glad that she's somehow managed not to be pained by the various rocks on which she'd been lying. Through the fading light (it must be just after sunset), she sees that she is indeed outside, in a patch of meadow near the border of the Forbidden Forest. She can't see the Castle from where she sits, but she is clearly within the Hogwarts grounds. As student and teacher, she's looked upon this landscape for over fifty years, and she knows the surrounding hills and crags as well as she knows her own classroom.

That much is established, then: she is within the grounds of Hogwarts, and despite what seems to have been a period of unconsciousness, she appears to be uninjured. In fact, she feels quite whole and well, free even of the mild aches and stiffness that she usually feels these days upon waking. It's age, she supposes (the years have fled past without her fully noticing, and now, somehow, she is seventy ... still middle-aged, true, but not all that far from elderly). Then, too, she's facing a great deal of stress these days: Albus's exile, and Dolores Umbridge (headmistress now, impossible as that sounds) with her absurd decrees and inspections and the very real threat she poses to the students. And looming over everything, the cloud of the coming war.

So it's no wonder that she's been feeling the strain of these past months. Still, none of these thoughts explains her current situation. If she isn't injured and doesn't appear to have been attacked, why was she lying unconscious in the grass, so far from the Castle? Did she come over faint while taking an evening stroll? But she's hardly a woman given to fainting spells...

Well. It's no good sitting here puzzling. It will be dark soon, and she needs to return to Hogwarts; the Umbridge woman shouldn't be left too long to herself.

Minerva gets to her feet, drawing her wand as she does so: one can't be too careful these days. She is not frightened, she tells herself sternly. Not at all, though she does wish she could remember how and why she came to be here. It's frustrating to have forgotten the entire evening ... the whole of this day, she realises suddenly, for she can remember nothing about it...

It occurs to her now that she might have been Obliviated. Could she have been meeting Albus out here in secret, and he cleansed her mind for some reason? If so, he'd better have a damned good explanation for removing an entire day's worth of memories.

Turning her back on the darkness of the Forbidden Forest, Minerva strides towards the path that she can now see at the edge of the meadow. A little chill washes over her, like an unexpected spell; her Muggle gran would have said that someone was walking on her grave. She resolutely ignores it, however: she's not about to start developing nerves at this stage of her life.

Still, she grips her wand a little more tightly as she reaches the path, holding it in hex-ready position. These are dangerous and desperate times, and only a fool would neglect to take precautions.

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The darkness has deepened by the time she finally rounds the last stand of trees and turns towards home. To her consternation, though, she still cannot see Hogwarts. She'd expected to see the castle's comforting black silhouette rising against the fading pearl of the sky, but instead, she sees only a high mound of earth, like a barrow, almost directly in her track.

She must have wandered farther into the grounds than she'd realised...and she still doesn't know why she's here in the first place. Could it be some trick of Dolores Umbridge's, sending her on some sort of wild-niffler chase while Dolores gets up to Merlin-knows-what? Oh, but surely the other Heads of Houses will be keeping an eye on her. Minerva considers sending a patronus, but perhaps it would be best not to alert anyone to her position until she knows more...

She hurries until she's almost running, but still she hasn't got past the earthen mound. Can it be a spell of some kind, one of those rare extension charms that can lengthen outdoor space? She's fairly sure that such advanced magic is beyond Umbridge, but perhaps it *is* Death Eaters after all, Yaxley is certainly capable, and Lucius Malfoy ...

She is definitely running now, fear lending such wings to her feet that the run seems easy and effortless; she can hardly feel herself breathing. She's not the praying sort, but she finds herself whispering a little plea that when she finally clears the trees, she won't see a Dark Mark profaning the sky.

At last the end of the mound looms before her. She can't believe she's never noticed it before: it's grass-covered and more than head-high.

And there appears to be a human-made door leading into it.

Minerva stops dead, memory slamming into her with the force of a Bludger. She can hear Albus's voice from an Order meeting at Grimmauld Place last summer: "I have created an enchanted safe-house at Hogwarts. It is invisible, but in the event of a catastrophic emergency, it will appear to those who need it."

"Albus!" she'd said, amazed. "The level of magic required ... "

"Indeed," he'd replied, nodding. "It took quite some magical ability, but I know you'll indulge me, Minerva, if I am so boastful as to say that I'm capable of it." He'd looked over at her then, twinkling and smiling, and she could tell how much fun he'd had creating the safe house. She was glad he'd enjoyed himself; he didn't have much opportunity for pleasure in these tense days. None of them did.

Now here it is, an unexpected door in a large mound that, despite all her many excursions into the Castle grounds, she's never seen before. It has to be the safe house.

Which means that there has been a "catastrophic emergency."

Fear grips her ... have Death Eaters attacked the Castle? Has Albus been injured, or Severus, or...Potter?

Closing her eyes, Minerva wills herself into calmness. She'll be of no use to anyone if she panics, and in any case, she makes a point of not being the panicky sort.

Wand out, she stands to one side and mutters a spell to open the door. She has a quick glimpse of a torch-lit corridor before she shifts to her cat form.

Or rather, tries to shift to her cat form. But, for almost the first time since she became an animagus, she finds herself unable to transform.

She tries again immediately. An animagus change is a mental shift before it's a physical one, but over-thinking is never helpful. The steps have long been automatic to her... *see...smell...feel...BE...*

Nothing. She is still her human self.

Minerva fights down a wave of nausea. She feels almost as if she has been splinched, as if she's left a vital part of herself behind somewhere. Her ability to transform has been such a solid part of her identity for so long that she is incomplete without it.

Perhaps she *has* been wounded in a DE attack. She feels physically fine ... better than usual, in fact ... but there's the mysterious matter of finding herself unconscious and alone in a field. She still has no recollection of how she got there, and though she hasn't wanted to admit it, the fact is that she has no recollection of her immediate past at all. The last thing she clearly remembers is Albus leaving Hogwarts, and the unspeakable Dolores Umbridge taking over as headmistress...

Well, she'll have to worry about these questions later. If the safe house has revealed itself, it must be because she needs it. She'd best get inside.

She slips quietly over the doorsill, pointing her wand before her. No sooner is she inside than the door seems to seal itself behind her, and when she turns back, she can see only an unbroken stone wall. If she didn't know better, she might even think herself in Hogwarts.

Gathering her nerve, she turns back to the main corridor and steps cautiously along it. It is empty, just a seemingly-endless stretch of closed doors broken at intervals by torches in brackets. She can't see its end...Merlin, it must reach all the way to the Castle itself. How on earth did anyone ... even Albus ... create anything this extensive?

No one seems to be about, but Minerva does not relax her guard. This safe house must have manifested itself for a reason, and if there is even the slightest chance that Death Eaters have breached this sanctuary, she must remain wary.

She passes at least a dozen closed, carved wooden doors before she spots another hallway branching off to her left, but before she can decide whether to follow it, a shape comes around the corner, and suddenly Severus Snape is standing before her.

"Minerva!" His shock shows clearly on his face, followed, just briefly, by a flash of something ... sadness? pleasure? (with Severus, one can't always tell the difference) ... and Minerva is surprised. Except for his calculated sneer, Severus usually keeps his face as stony as the wall at his back; despite the fact that they have become something like friends over the years, he rarely allows her or anyone else a glimpse into his real feelings.

The strangeness of it, added to the fear and anxiety of this night, are all at once too much for Minerva, and she channels them into anger.

"What has happened, Severus?" she demands. "Why has the safe house appeared, and why wasn't I told?"

"The safe house?"

"Yes, Albus said the house would appear in an emergency, and here it is, isn't it? What is going on? Tell me!"

"And when exactly am I supposed to do that? In those rare half-seconds when you stop to take a breath?"

The sarcasm reassures Minerva slightly; things can't be too dire if Severus is taking time to indulge his temper. And she supposes she *has* been rather rude. Still, her anxiety won't let her drop her interrogation.

"Has the castle been attacked? Is it Death Eaters? Or is it our dear High Inquisitor and headmistress in action again?"

Severus is looking at her strangely, almost pityingly, and her heart plummets.

"It's Albus, isn't it?" she whispers. "Something has happened to Albus. Or Harry."

He shakes his head. "No, Potter is thriving. And Albus, too...in his own way." All trace of mockery has left his voice, and he is still looking at her with that oddly-soft expression.

"What is it, then?" Her anger has left her, leaving only the worry, and, at the same time, a sense of having come into a safe harbour. For all their bickering and competition and initial mutual distrust, she and Severus have come to respect and rely on each other. Even like each other. He will tell her the truth. "I want to know."

Severus considers her for a moment, then nods. "All right. I'll show you," he says, and motions for her to precede him down the long, door-filled corridor before falling into step beside her.

Their shadows loom large as they pass the first torch, but before they have reached the second, Severus stops and raps sharply on one of the doors. It contains a small, engraved plate that Minerva is about to read when the door is flung open to reveal Albus Dumbledore.

He's wearing a particularly flamboyant robe: purple velvet adorned with shimmering sprays of falling stars that flare gold and silver and then fade before flaring again. His cap is long and tasselled and absurd, and she has never been so glad to see him.

"Albus! You're safe! Oh, thank Merlin!"

"Minerva!" He clearly had not expected to see her. "Minerva," he says again, more quietly, almost as if he's identifying her to himself rather than speaking a greeting. Then he envelopes her in a hug as tight as a vise hex. She is amazed; Albus has been her dear friend these many years, but he has never been one for hugging.

After a moment, she has to extricate herself from the voluminous velvet folds of his robe; she doesn't know how she is managing to breathe.

"Heavens, Albus. Have you been taking hugging lessons from Hagrid?" she asks, turning aside to hide the fact that she is blinking away unexpected tears. She isn't certain why she is so touched; after all, it's been only a matter of a few weeks since the Ministry had the temerity to sack him. It's not as if he's been gone for years.

Yet that's how she feels ... as if she and Albus have been apart for ages. And Severus, too: somehow it seems as if she hasn't seen either of them for years. She tries to clear her mind, to put things in their proper perspective, but the more she concentrates, the murkier her memory becomes. It's worrying.

"I found Minerva here in the passage," Severus is saying. "She'd only just arrived." He gives Albus a warning look. "She doesn't know what's happened and wants me to explain. I thought we could help her understand."

As pleased as she is to see them, Minerva is losing patience again. "Severus, I'm not blind. I saw you tip Albus the nod. Now I want you both to stop all this mystery and tell me frankly what is happening here. Obviously there has been an attack, or I wouldn't have found myself unconscious in the forest. So tell me the rest."

Typically, Albus answers her questions with his own. "You were unconscious in the forest? How did you come to be there?"

"I don't know. I simply woke up in a meadow at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. I haven't been ill, and I'm not the fainting type. So I must have been ambushed, hit with a Stunning spell or something, although I don't seem to be wounded. I feel quite fit, actually, except that I am not able to transform."

"She thinks it might have been Death Eaters," puts in Severus. "Or Headmistress Umbridge and her Ministry henchmen."

"Headmistress Umbridge?" says Albus, stroking his beard and frowning. Then he nods. "Ah. Yes. Yes, I see where we are. Thank you, Severus. What is the last thing you remember, Minerva?"

"I just told you," she snaps. "Waking up in the forest."

"No, before that. Please," he says, putting up his hand to forestall any further interruption. "I know you're concerned, Minerva, but please just bear with me for a few minutes longer."

Minerva sighs. She's never been able to say "no" to this man. "All right, if I must."

"What do you remember before the forest?"

"Well... in truth, not much," she admits. "Not from the last few days, at any rate. I suppose the last thing I clearly remember is standing in your office with Mr Potter and that unfortunate Edgewcombe girl while that idiot of a Cornelius Fudge tried to arrest you. But I ..."

Suddenly across her mind flash several visions, as clear as memories, except that she doesn't remember living them: she sees a gleaming white tomb on the Hogwarts grounds; she sees Severus, his face anguished, confronting her in duelling stance; then she sees Neville Longbottom, of all people. He looks rather older, and he is grinning broadly as he shakes Pomona Sprout's hand. "Enjoy your retirement, Professor Sprout," Neville says, and a beaming Pomona replies, "And enjoy your classes, Professor Longbottom."

The visions fade as Minerva gradually becomes aware of Albus's voice, speaking to her as if from a distance.

"Minerva? *Minerva!* What's wrong?"

With an effort, she focuses on Albus's face; both he and Severus are staring at her in concern. "What's wrong?" Albus repeats.

Minerva shakes her head to dispel the last wisps of the visions. "Nothing," she says. "It's nothing. Except that...well, I seem to be having hallucinations. Or I'm disoriented or..." She looks at Albus sharply. "You haven't been Obliviating me, have you, Albus? Or implanting false memories? For the good of the Order or some such thing?"

He smiles at her, but his eyes seem sad. "No, indeed. But you do seem to have lost a few years. Don't worry, Minnie; it often happens this way. Bits and pieces will come back to you, generally the memories you most need, and soon you will be close to your old self again."

Minerva feels as if she has been turned to stone. What does he mean, "lost a few years?" And why is he calling her "Minnie"? The last time he used that name was when he came to her rooms to inform her of her mother's death.

"Oh, no," she whispers. "Who has died?"

She barely feels Severus put his hand on her shoulder, so clearly does she suddenly imagine dead children ... for some reason, Colin Creevey comes to her mind ... and dead friends: is that Filius whose cold body she's seeing now, lying in state in such a small coffin?

Albus takes her arm. "Walk with us," he says. "We want to show you something."

Somehow Minerva finds this quiet sentence to be the most terrifying thing she's heard since this strange ordeal began. Her feet are refusing to move. "You're frightening me, Albus. Why can't you just talk to me?"

It's Severus who answers. "There's only so much we're able to explain, Minerva," he says. "This is something you'll be most comfortable learning on your own. Trust me."

Minerva gives in. She knows them too well; they have clearly said all they intend to say. "Very well," she says. "But I am not happy with either of you."

Severus surprises her with a bark of his rare laughter. "Plus ça change," he says, and Albus chuckles.

Rolling her eyes ... it's easier to be exasperated than afraid ... Minerva gestures down the corridor. "This way?"

"This way," Albus agrees, and the three of them head off.

Minerva is not sure what she expects, but she is fairly certain that she *does not* expect Albus to stop in front of one of the elaborately-carved doors. And she most definitely does not expect to find her name engraved on the little brass plaque attached to it. But there it is ... "Minerva McGonagall" in script that looks rather like her own handwriting.

"Go in," says Albus. "Take your time, and we'll see you soon."

"Yes," Severus agrees, and he almost smiles. "Very soon."

The door opens soundlessly at Minerva's touch, revealing what appears to be a small room, and, resisting the temptation to look back, she steps across the threshold.

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It's dim inside, and though she expects her eyes to take a moment to adjust, she can immediately see clearly. There's an attractive wing chair, striped in subdued Gryffindor red and gold, sitting near to a small fireplace. The fire is already laid, and it lights itself as she enters. The mantel looks like the one in her quarters; there's even a copy of the stylized cat statue that has stood on her mantel shelf for years. Next to the chair is a little table stacked with books, and in front of all is a window ... or what she assumes is a window, behind the heavy dark-velvet curtain that is currently drawn closed.

Minerva pauses. By all rights, she ought to be far more nervous than she is, after this bizarre evening of fear and mystery and the unaccountable behaviour of Severus and Albus.

But from the moment she entered this little room, her anxiety slipped away, and now she feels...only curiosity, and an odd sense of rightness.

She is suddenly consumed with the need to open the curtain, and so she does, or rather, as she reaches towards it, the curtain lifts of its own accord.

She is looking down into another room, one that is cluttered and bright and dominated by a large desk that seems familiar...there's someone sitting at it, a man writing with a large quill. Minerva moves to the edge of her window frame to get a better look at him.

Only then does she realise that she is looking into the headmaster's office at Hogwarts, and the person sitting at the desk is...but it can't be...it simply cannot possibly be...

But it is Neville Longbottom again, as he will probably look at least thirty years after leaving Hogwarts. Why on earth is he sitting at the head's desk, at *her* desk...?

Minerva feels stunned. Yes. It is *her* desk. Memory suddenly floods into her, and she remembers: the war is over, she is the headmistress now, and Albus...dear Albus is dead. And so is Severus. They are dead, and yet ...

A movement catches her eye from across the room, and she glances out to see Albus smiling at her from another window opposite.

Except that it isn't a window. It's a portrait frame. It's Albus in his Hogwarts portrait.

Albus in his portrait, which exists because he is dead.

And she is on eye level with him. Which means that her window must be a frame, too. Which means...

She looks back at Albus, who has been joined in his frame by Severus. They are both watching her, and she raises her eyebrow in silent question. *Am I...?*

Severus nods solemnly. Yes.

Yes.

She is a portrait now, just memories ... fragmented, partial memories ... in canvas and paint.

Minerva sits down abruptly, and for an immeasurable time, she is aware of nothing but the sensation of the chair beneath her (how odd that she can still feel it) and the overwhelming knowledge that she is dead.

She doesn't know how long she sits there, struggling to make sense of things, struggling to balance the joy of being reunited with Albus and Severus against the breathless pain of knowing that she will never again walk the corridors of Hogwarts, never again be free to walk to Hogsmeade in the crisp winter air, never again be part of the camaraderie that is the staff room after dinner, never share meals with beloved friends or feel an ocean breeze or embrace her nephews. Her friends can talk to her in a frame on the wall, but it won't be the same: for all she knows, she may have lost some of her most treasured memories of them. The Hogwarts portraits have always said that they retain only partial knowledge of their former lives. How much might Minerva herself have lost, now that she is dead?

Now that she is dead.

The word hangs in her mind. Dead.

She is dead, and she doesn't even remember how she died.

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But gradually, that indescribable feeling of rightness begins to overtake her again. The dark cloud that surrounds her starts to thin. All is not lost. She has Albus and Severus, or at least their adumbrations. She will be able to talk to her friends; at least she remembers *them*, if not all her memories of them. Her nephews can visit. And she has Hogwarts.

Yes, her original body may be dead, but her thoughts remain. A line from a Muggle poem crosses her mind: "Though much is taken, much abides."

When she looks out again into the office, Albus is smiling at her, and Severus raises an imaginary glass. "Slàinte," he mouths, just as he had so often done when they'd shared a drink in her rooms of an evening.

She quirks a small smile in their direction and turns her gaze towards Mr Longbottom. Headmaster Longbottom now, she supposes. Another Gryffindor leading the flock. Excellent.

"Good evening, Mr Longbottom," Minerva says, and he looks up, his eyes wide in his round face.

"Headmistress McGonagall!" he cries, jumping out of his chair and rounding his desk to stand beneath her frame. "I thought you might be waking soon. I mean, I hoped you would. Your portrait showed up here about an hour ago. I only got the news this afternoon. That you had... um, of your, well, that is...the news of your...er...passing, I mean." He stops and looks uncomfortable, but then takes a deep breath and gives her a wide smile. "Well, anyway, I'm glad you're here. Welcome back."

A chorus of "welcomes" and applause comes from the other portraits, and Minerva is more moved than she would have expected. She thanks them all and has just taken her chair again when there's a slight disturbance at the door to her rear. The surfaces swirls, then splits, and Severus steps through into her portrait space.

"I knocked," he says, "but you were otherwise engaged."*Sotto voce*, he continues, "Longbottom as headmaster. You see the depths to which we've fallen." But he's smiling as he sits on the floor next to her.

"All right?" he asks, after a few minutes of comforting silence.

"I...yes," she replies. "Or at least, I think I will be."

"Yes, I think so, too. In time," he says. Then, after a pause, "You can ask. About whatever you've forgotten. If you want to know."

She considers. There are so many things... Finally she asks, "The war. Harry won it, didn't he?"

Severus narrows his eyes. "We all won it," he says, rather tersely. "But Potter delivered the death blow to Voldemort, yes."

Minerva bites back a smile; in the midst of all these changes, it's somehow reassuring to know that Severus's antipathy towards Potter will never fade. And he's right, of course. The victory was the work and sacrifice of many people, Severus not least among them.

She changes the subject. "And how long did I...live?"

"After the war? A long time, Minerva. Thirty-three years."

"Then why do I believe the current year to be...when was it that Umbridge was the headmistress? 1995?"

Severus's thin shoulder lifts in a shrug. "There's no telling. It happens to most of us ... we lose time when we first inhabit our portraits." He looks up at her, his head cocked. "Sometimes we stick in a year that was meaningful to us in some way. You did almost die during that Umbridge year, you know. Hit with four Stunners. Do you remember?"

She shakes her head, and suddenly she has learnt enough for one night.

"Anything else?" Severus asks after a moment.

"Perhaps later."

He nods and gets up. "You'll want some time alone now, I imagine, to think things out. I know I did."

"Thank you, Severus."

"Yes, well. Believe me, it takes some effort to come to grips with the fact that you'll be spending eternity with Phineas Nigellus and Albus and the Fat Lady."

"And you," says Minerva, standing and patting his shoulder. Unlike the Severus of old, he does not flinch at the contact.

"And me," he says. "Indeed. So tell Longbottom to have another chair painted into your portrait. We'll have much to discuss, and I'm not going to spend centuries sitting on your floor."

With that, he is gone, and slowly, Minerva sits down again. Later, she will take time to adjust. To grieve. There will be much to think about in the days to come, much to learn. When the time feels right, she will ask about how she died.

But for tonight, she will be content to think about how she lived.