

Lumos Aeterna

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, liked to think of himself as a simple man evolving in a complex world. He believed that life, with all its imperfections, always had surprises in store. Therefore, according to him, the greatest way to enjoy it was to keep an open eye and an open mind for them, just in case they might be hiding around the next turn in the road. Just when those unexpected things were about to be revealed, his greatest pleasure was being able to strike back with a surprise of his own, a surprise as unexpected and weirdly original as possible. And have the last laugh.

That night, however, Albus Dumbledore was not laughing. He was pacing his office restlessly, his back bent by age as much as by the weight of his sorrows, his eyebrows furrowed into an expression of deep concentration... and concern. On his desk, various instruments were on display; some were chiming merrily, others emitted steady ticking sounds, and others seemed to crawl sideways as if they were searching for something.

All these curious objects were there for a sole purpose: find a spot on a particular map and detect traces of magic, Dark or not, that might have served to conceal it. Up until then, they had failed lamentably, and the old wizard was starting to worry with much less a sense of humour than usual.

"I'm starting to fear that there might not be enough time left, Fawkes," he murmured wearily, caressing his magnificent bird with his uninjured hand.

The bird closed its eyes to the familiar touch and enjoyed the proximity of the venerable man, cooing a note or two in an attempt to lift his spirits. The sound seemed to have its usual comforting effect; Albus huffed softly through his crooked nose, and his lips twitched into a semblance of a smile, which was at least better than the ominous expression that had just died on his face.

Sighing heavily, Albus went to the window. The moon had reached its full phase the night before; he expected that the upcoming night would be as splendid as the previous one. For now, however, the sun was melting slowly into the horizon, bathing the apparent stillness of nature in glorious shades of orange and pink, announcing a clear night. Momentarily spellbound by the beauty of the scenery, he forced his mind away from the dark, painful thoughts that reminded him that he had to say farewell to each season, one after the other, along with their own particularities that made every sunset unique.

He was about to go back to the map on his desk when he heard the low growl of the staircase leading to his office, which was soon followed by a sharp rap on his door.

"Come in," he said after Vanishing the map and the magical tools on his desk with an imperious wave of his hand.

"Headmaster," said Minerva, walking hurriedly into the office. "Auror Savage informed me that there is a woman at the gates who requested to see you."

"Did Savage say who it was?" replied Dumbledore, frowning slightly at the unexpected news.

"Apparently, she only gave him this," she explained, dropping a small object into Albus' outstretched hand, "and said you would understand."

When he uncurled his long fingers, they revealed a necklace that might have looked quite humble and insignificant, given its old leather bounds and its lack of any precious

gems or metals... had it not been for the fact that it literally pulsed with ancient magic and was adorned with the crest of Avalon.

Albus' heart skipped a beat when his eyes caressed the small piece of carved stone, but he quickly regained his composure. So life had taken another unexpected turn, and there had come the surprise. Smiling, he caressed the small ornament lovingly with his thumb and regretted that the unforeseen visit had come at such short notice; it did not give him enough time to prepare a surprise of his own.

"Thank you, Minerva," he said, looking at the witch benevolently through his half-moon spectacles. "I will greet her at the gates myself."

"Very well," she simply replied before turning her back to the wizard and walking out.

"Minerva always knew when to give me time and privacy," he thought as he headed towards his desk. He never needed to tell her twice; only the tone in which he thanked her sufficed for her to understand that he needed to be left alone. He was particularly grateful, that night, for her feminine acuity concerning his needs.

Opening one of his drawers, he picked a few quills and Transfigured them into a handful of white roses. A delicate flick of his wand gave them an eerie shine; it was almost sufficient to light his way through the darkening office once he shut the candles on his way out and flung his heavy cloak on his shoulders. Pausing just before he opened his office door, he gave one last wave of his wand; the roses' perfume immediately changed and brought a mischievous smile to his lips. The flowers had the rich, unctuous smell of a chocolate cake that just came out of the oven.

When the winter breeze came in touch with his skin, he first felt relieved. The joyful sun could still be felt in the air; its warmth was still softening winter's harsh nature. He felt less guilty at the thought that she had been waiting for him outside for so long, given the relative pleasantness of the weather.

Savage was standing by the gates, keeping an eye on the newcomer, the hem of his scarlet robes splattered with snow. They seemed to be conversing pleasantly together. When they heard Albus' steps crushing the thin layer of ice over the snow, the two people turned to him and Savage tapped the chains on the gates with his wand.

Without further ado, the woman stepped through the open gates and, giving the Auror a curt nod, walked towards Albus, who welcomed her with his warmest smile. Given the fact that her face was almost completely covered by the large hood of her emerald, velvet cloak, he did not see her expression. Nevertheless, he knew at once, given the way the air seemed to sizzle all around him, that she was smiling, too.

She accepted the flowers he handed her and chuckled softly when their soft petals caressed her nose. She took his arm without a word, and they walked in silence towards the castle as slowly as the coldness allowed them to. Albus' mind was boiling with questions concerning her presence in Scotland, but he knew better than to press her with them a few minutes after her arrival. Good manners, along with the coming of age, had taught him to use the best of his patience with women... especially women he deeply cared for.

The hooded figure walked at Albus' side through a few staircases and crossed many students' curious glances on their way to his office. It was only when the door was closed behind them that she reached for her hood and lowered it, revealing a face with soft features. She had a pointy nose, wrinkled only by her wittiness; lips that age had rendered thinner but that still looked soft; high cheekbones; and a discreet chin. Her wrinkles told a lot about her tendency to smile as much as her tendency to draw a grave frown. What was the most stunning about her, nevertheless, was the dark, enticing brown of her eyes that made a striking contrast with the immaculate whiteness of her hair. It tumbled freely down her shoulders to her waist, except for the few discreet braids that adorned it here and there with silver threads that sparkled in the candlelight. On her forehead, just below her pale hairline, was a blue crescent moon, the rare symbol of the Priestesses of Avalon.

As soon as she entered the office and revealed her face, Fawkes flew across the room; giving a melodious cry of welcome, he landed on her outstretched arm. The woman ran her fingers against his feathers, murmuring soft words of greeting and affection. Once the animal felt spoiled enough with her caressing attentions, he took flight again and landed at his place next to the Headmaster's desk.

When she turned back to face Albus, he simply took her gloved hand in his. Pulling on each and every one of her fingertips, he unravelled her white hand, and with a religious and respectful slowness, he bent down to place a light kiss on the satin of her inner wrist... an old familiar gesture that never failed to make her smile.

"Vivian," he murmured as her fingers intertwined the coolness of their touch with the warmth of their gesture along his cheek. "I had almost forgotten how stunning your eyes become when they are smiling."

"A good thing, then," she replied, her voice as soft as the fabric of her cloak and as deep as its colour, "that I came here to refresh your memory. Should we put your quills in a vase before they wilt?" she added, grinning even more.

"You would have received real roses if you had warned me of your arrival," he retorted, his voice sparkling with humorous reproach as he helped her remove her cloak.

"The gesture was appreciated all the same, Albus."

"Vivian," he continued, becoming suddenly so serious that he was almost severe. "You put yourself in great danger when you came here."

"Is the Ministry still adverse to the idea of us being in the same room?" she asked teasingly, not at all intimidated by the wizard's tone.

"The Ministry is one thing; Voldemort is another. Imagine the loss if the Death Eaters knew they could find us together here?"

"If they did, my dearest, they would find a surprisingly harsh resistance," she commented cheerfully, helping him remove his cloak. "Which is also, I humbly think, what Voldemort and the Ministry fear so much. By Merlin, Albus! What happened to your hand?" she exclaimed in surprise, catching a glimpse of the man's blackened hand just before he tried to hide it underneath his large sleeve. "You told me nothing about it in your letters!"

"It happened in June as I tried to retrieve something Voldemort had hidden," he explained, obviously eager to keep things vague. "It appears it was very well protected. I was fortunate enough that Severus was here when I came back; he prevented the damage from spreading to the rest of me."

"And you dare lecture me about the way I flirted with danger while coming here?" she admonished, giving him a slight push in the chest. "I see you have lost nothing of your taste for adventure."

"Which is, if I am not mistaken," he replied in a pacifying tone, cupping her cheek with his good hand, "one of the things you liked the most in me."

"And I still do," she added softly, leaning into his touch. "Except when it means risking your life, Albus."

She sighed gravely and let him press his forehead against hers. Eyes closed, they savoured the sudden merge of their private space, which became enmeshed and shut them from the rest of the world for an infinite instant.

"I felt it in the air as I approached the castle, and now I see how real it is," she murmured very quietly. Her lips were now so close to his ear that her faintest whispers could be heard. "His evil influence has reached even the Holy Isle, Albus... but it is definitely more present here, even in this room. I do not remember you talking about my unexpected visits with such an unsatisfied heart. Ever."

"I apologise, my darling." He sighed contritely, encircling her waist with both his arms and placing his chin on the snowy top of her head to draw her closer. "Blame it on the foul temper of an old man whose burden has been made heavier with many worries lately."

"Why don't you tell me about what this burden is made of, Albus?" she murmured, burying her nose in the softness of his impossibly long beard. "You have rarely kept things secret from me."

"First things first," he declared, breaking their embrace and leading her to the fireplace, where a roaring fire was projecting a comforting light that splashed all over the walls and furniture. "Tell me what brought you here this evening, for contrary to what my reaction might have misled you to believe, I am delighted to see you again."

"Last night, as we were celebrating the Esbat," she explained, sitting in front of Albus on a comfortable armchair, "someone interrupted my meditation. He must have been quite resourceful and powerful, having made his way through the barriers of the Sacred Circle. A wizard, quite young... He had the most fascinating pair of black eyes that I have ever seen... a temper like a dormant fire, all made of red embers that would just need the caress of a breeze to burst into flames again. Strong, masculine, authoritarian, very proud... and yet torn by an inner and quiet suffering that became very salient when I came in touch with his mind."

"I think you have seized the man very well, Vivian," commented Albus with a small frown. "Has Severus succeeded in communicating with you?"

"Oh, yes," she continued rather darkly. "He said he had been trying to reach me for a long time, but that his owls did not seem able to penetrate the natural barriers that protect the island. The connection we shared was taxing his magical energy greatly, so he did not elaborate, but..."

She suddenly seemed hesitant. Her delicate hands absentmindedly caressed the purple velvet of her robes, as if they wanted to smooth invisible wrinkles in the thick and warm fabric.

"Yes?" prompted Albus, riveting his eyes to hers over the rim of his glasses.

"He said that you would die by the end of the school year. And he said that you had asked him to kill you should your death not happen through other causes before the fatidic date. What does that mean, Albus? Was Severus telling the truth?"

Albus did not answer. His eyes took in the worry and fear in the witch sitting in front of him, and his heart ached. He would have preferred to put her in front of the accomplished fact, counting on her infinite capacity to understand and respect his deepest motives. Instead, he found himself forced to count on them in this instant, a thing he had never expected. He first felt an outburst of anger at Severus, who had taken the liberty of giving that volatile piece of information to Vivian without his consent. It was undoubtedly in the hope that she would make an attempt to change his mind, but it was useless. His mind was set, and now he had to go through the difficult task of informing her, one of the most precious persons in his life, of his final and unchangeable decision. The wizard's effrontery was not surprising or unusual. This time, however, it came as a particularly untimely irritant.

"I believe a conversation like this calls for dinner," he said, tempering the graveness of his voice with a smile that did not fool her. "Does primavera pasta still have the same effect on you as it did in the past?"

"Absolutely, though I would not count on it to drift us away from the answers I seek, Albus," she replied seriously. "Nevertheless... if Twinky is still here and could prepare the dish for us, it would make me forget my old bones in the blink of an eye."

Winking at her, Albus got to his feet and threw a pinch of Floo powder in the fire. He gave specific instructions, which Twinky received joyfully. Barely a minute later, she emerged from the fireplace with two crystal glasses filled with white wine.

"I owe you an explanation," said Albus at last once the house-elf had disappeared through the emerald flames. "Severus contacted you against my will. I would have preferred him to remain silent, but it seems that he did not see things my way."

"So what he said is true?" she asked, tension oozing from each word.

"I'm afraid so, Vivian. But before you speak," he added promptly, raising a hand to stop the protesting reply she was about to phrase, "let me explain my reasons. Last summer, Severus, who has resumed his work as a double agent since Voldemort came back, received a visit from a Death Eater and her sister. The latter is the mother of one of my students here, Draco. Severus had no idea why these two witches disturbed him at that time of the night, so he did exactly what was expected of him. He bluffed to get more information. He then learned that Draco had been given an important mission by Voldemort, but he did not get any details. He made the sisters believe that he had been informed of that mission, but the sisters spoke no more of it. Draco's mother begged Severus for help, and he agreed to help her son, like any Death Eater would have done under the circumstances. However, she asked him to make an Unbreakable Vow with her to insure his devotion to her son's safety."

"Did she have to go this far?"

"Apparently, she was very upset. She believed, rightfully, that Voldemort gave Draco the mission in hopes that he would fail and be killed in the attempt. Draco's father, a Death Eater, disappointed Voldemort greatly and is currently in Azkaban, following his failure. Severus did his best to keep away from a formal Vow, but it soon became clear that it was a way to prove his loyalty, a thing he particularly needed to do. In addition, he thought that the terms of the Vow would give him more information about the mission, but he was bitterly disappointed. Instead, he found himself making a Vow about a mission without even knowing its specifics."

"How did you figure it out?" she asked, clearly astonished by Albus' explanations.

"Severus managed to have the sisters stay a little longer; they discussed the strategy Draco had concocted so far, which was not much, but enough for us to conclude that the mission involved Hogwarts, a murder... and that I was almost unmistakably the target," he concluded gravely.

Silence fell upon them as if all the office's windows had opened at once, letting the cold winter wind ravage the comforting warmth that had reigned in the room. Vivian did not need to speak her conclusions out loud. She already saw them in Albus' eyes: they had stopped twinkling by then and had a somewhat ominous glimmer. Someone, between Draco, Severus or Albus, was bound to die by the end of the school year. And Albus had obviously decided that it would be him.

"Why you, Albus?" she articulated with a narrow throat. "Why does it have to be you?"

"There is a time, my dear," he said softly, bending forward to grab one of her hands gently, "when a wizard knows when to stand and fight and other times when he knows it is time to retreat. Besides, even though Severus did his best to limit the damage, it will spread, eventually," he added, lifting his injured hand. "Severus gave me a year at best. It's Dark magic; there is no stopping it. I knew this day would come sooner or later. However, I do not want to simply declare forfeit and give Voldemort what he wants. I do not want to die in vain."

"You talk about it as if it were a done thing already," she said, her eyes filling with powerless tears.

"My decision is final, Vivian," he said, just as a house-elf emerged from the fireplace with a large platter and quickly Transfigured it into a table between them.

They sat in a heavy silence as the small figure quickly set the table and Apparated their meal. It vanished into the fire, still bent in a respectful bow. Their gazes remained lost in two different places among the dancing flames before Albus coughed discreetly and stirred on his seat.

"I believe we should eat before it gets cold," he said, raising his glass of wine. "To the unexpected pleasure of being graced by your presence again, my love."

She rose her glass and plunged her eyes into Albus' reluctantly. However, she soon found a part of her anger melt away when her essence reacted to his. His eyes, after all, were still as she had always found them: as blue and glorious as a cloudless sky over the temples of Avalon.

"You said that you did not want to die in vain, Albus," she began after taking the time to savour her food without any sinister word spoiling it in her mouth. "What did you mean by that?"

"You remember the discussions we had when I spent some time on the island last year. I received further confirmation that Voldemort has indeed made Horcruxes."

"The foolish, foolish little boy..." she murmured, shaking her head in dread and disapprobation.

"As I told you, I believe that Harry had destroyed one about four years ago. Destroying a second one cost me this," he said, raising his injured hand. "But it was a small price to pay."

"And what about your life, Albus?" she said severely, seeing right through him. "Will it be a small price to pay for destroying another one?"

"Vivian..." he began wearily.

"How many has he made?" she interrupted patiently, knowing that reproaches would not take her far. "Have you figured it out?"

"I still need one confirmation. Harry is working on it at the moment. Someone informed Voldemort about Horcruxes and I need to retrieve his memory. It might give us a clue about how many there are."

"It still does not tell me how your death might become useful," she observed.

"Severus has given me a very useful bit of information," he explained, digging in his pasta bowl with appetite, as if he were merely discussing the weather. "When he was a young Death Eater, he was ordered to brew a Draught of the Eternal Nightmare for his master. As you know, that potion is lethal, though it requires a few days to be effective. I do not harbour any illusions concerning its possible effects on me. Given my age and my weakened state since I destroyed the last Horcrux..."

"Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore," she articulated slowly, dropping her fork in her plate and running two weary hands on her temples. "Do not tell me that you intend to drink that aberration?"

"I'm afraid I will have to, Vivian," he declared very seriously. "I believe that the potion was used, among other magical artefacts, to protect a Horcrux. When he was ordered to brew the potion, Severus was also asked his professional opinion about whether or not the potion might alter or dissolve silver. We both believe that the potion was used to submerge an object, and that it must be drunk in order to retrieve it. That object, in my opinion, is Salazar Slytherin's silver locket. It's an object that Voldemort possessed and was almost bound to use as a Horcrux."

"I see. Have you found where the Horcrux might be hidden?" she asked, now rolling herself a small bite that did not seem so appealing anymore.

"I have had a few good guesses, but they were fruitless. I believe the Horcrux is hidden in a cave in England, where Tom went as a child."

"But..." she began, her mind racing with the information she had just received. "If there are other Horcruxes in addition to this one, how will they be retrieved and destroyed without you? Couldn't you go after them instead of this one?"

"Alas, dearest..." He sighed. "There is not enough time left. Severus keeps trying to discover Draco's plans, but the boy will not cooperate. Fortunately, his only feeble attempt showed his lack of determination to reach his goal, and I have good faith that I will, eventually, influence him into turning towards our side. Severus assists me, however, in watching over him so he does not hurt any other students in his attempts. In the meantime, I have summoned Harry here a few times already and showed him the key memories I have collected over the years. By the time I retrieve the locket, he will hopefully know the most crucial information I could pass on to him about Voldemort. He will have to complete the task with the other Horcruxes on his own."

"He's so young, Albus!" she protested, grabbing his good hand over the table. "How can he succeed?"

"I have faith in Harry's courage and determination," answered Albus with a soft smile. "And he will not be alone. I have allowed him to share everything he knows with his two closest friends, young persons who have also shown remarkable courage and resourcefulness in the past. Furthermore, the Order will be there to assist them. And Harry will receive, I hope, help from within the Death Eaters' ranks as well."

"How so?"

"Severus," he declared, wiping his mouth with a napkin and tossing his plate aside. "I have, of course, anticipated that his public credibility will considerably diminish if he has to kill me to respect the terms of the Vow."

"That is an understatement," she commented, crossing her arms over her chest and tilting her head to the side critically.

"I expect, however," he continued, "that his notoriety will increase among his fellow Death Eaters, if that is indeed what happens. It will place him in an invaluable position to keep helping Harry and misinforming the Death Eaters. I also trust that he will do his best to protect the students of Hogwarts after I'm gone. Besides, I will be there to assist him from my portrait," he commented, nodding to his numerous colleagues on the wall. "As for Harry... I have no doubt that the journey itself will have the desired impact and allow him to do what must be done, all in its own time."

"It looks like you have figured everything out," she finally commented after a short pause during which their table was cleared, Transfigured into a low coffee table, and furnished with tea and an assortment of cakes and cookies.

"Not as much as I would like," he said, pouring tea for the both of them. "But enough to insure that things turn out for the best."

"At what price?" mused Vivian.

"I think I already mentioned that I am ready to pay that price. Severus is far more useful alive than dead, and Draco can still be rescued from the Death Eaters' influence. Someone has to die in order to retrieve the locket; it is far better to be me."

"Are all the other people implicated ready to pay that price, I wonder," she commented gravely, magically turning a tiny silver spoon in her cup of tea. "How did they react?"

"I had to argue strongly with Severus when he told me about the sisters' visit, but he finally agreed. Given his temper, however, I was surprised that he hasn't come to me in protest already. I am now expecting to have a strong discussion with him again very soon."

"So Severus did not agree easily to your request..." she prompted, encouraging the wizard to elaborate with an inquiring eyebrow.

"He said that he had made a stupid mistake and was ready to assume the consequences," replied Albus with a tense sigh. "But I will not let him."

"And why wouldn't you?" she asked, seeing her intuition confirmed. "Aren't you at least a little sensitive to how it shows he cares about you?"

"It would not serve any purpose, other than easing his undeserved guilt!" he retorted briskly, putting his cup of tea back on the table a little harder than intended. "We cannot afford such self-centred actions, Vivian, not in a time like this! Everything must serve its best purpose, including people! Severus can learn a great deal by accepting his mistakes and letting them make a better man out of him; I can hardly see how dying will bring him any closer to this goal."

"You have always asked a lot from him, Albus," she pointed out softly. "This is no small request."

"I have never asked him to do something that was beyond his capacities and strengths," he replied firmly, his voice still inflamed by the emotions that shook his heart. "No matter how I turn things in my mind, my decision seems in everybody's best interest. I will make sure things happen the way they are supposed to."

"Even if it means forcing people's hands?" she asked.

"Oh, Vivian, I hope I won't have to do that," he exclaimed painfully, looking very tired all of a sudden. "But I might be forced to retrieve the Horcrux without giving him any prior warning and put him in front of an accomplished fact. Should he continue to be that uncooperative, I will not hesitate."

Vivian rose from her seat and walked behind Albus, a little to give him comfort, a little to hide her tears. She put her hands on his large shoulders and started massaging them, trying to unclench all the tense muscles she found there. He let her work her way from his neck to his arms, remaining completely silent and still, until her trembling hands started lacking the necessary strength and reached for her face.

"I see that your mind is set," she articulated in a broken voice before she covered her sobs with her joined hands.

Albus turned on his seat and grabbed her small wrists gently, forcing them down and leading her to his side. Lifting his long beard with his other hand, he made her sit on his lap and let her bury her nose in his neck, where she sobbed harder and even more silently. A few moments later, his hand left her back; for an instant, he removed his half-moon spectacles and ran his fingertips over his eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me any of this, Albus?" she cried, raising a tear-stained face to him. "Why did you carry that burden alone?"

"I had very little choice," he explained, entwining his long fingers in her hair and wiping off her tears with his thumb, which only gave birth to new ones. "I could not discuss this with any other people than Harry and Severus, and even they do not know the full story. The consequences of a leak would be far too terrible; I cannot take that risk."

"So you had planned to put *me* in front of the accomplished fact as well?" she concluded, rising from his lap and wiping her face grudgingly with the heels of her hands.

"I... yes," he articulated with a heavy sigh.

She walked to the window and looked outside. The sight was lovely; the grounds were a real frozen beauty. For some people, it was difficult to imagine that Ostara was coming close and that, very soon, the first signs of spring would emerge, but Vivian was used to feeling these signs in advance. There she was, thinking about the renewal of life when all they could talk about in this room was death... and, even worse, about its gains, if there could be any. Her shoulders dropped in defeat and she sobbed quietly again. Suddenly, the bluish whiteness of the snow intertwined with a reflection in the window as the outline of Albus' long hair was reflected in it.

"I am so sorry, Vivian," he murmured against her temple, caressing her arms and pressing her against him in a tight embrace. "I didn't want to have any words of farewell between the two of us. Not one."

"You know," she said softly, cuddling into Albus' arms with her gaze still wandering freely over the grounds. "When we parted, so many years ago, to pursue our personal endeavours, I always found comfort in thinking that, one day, you would come back to Avalon and spend the rest of your days with me... as you promised when you left."

The grip of his arms tightened... and so did his throat as he spoke.

"That thought has always remained dear to my heart, believe me. It is what kept me waiting with great patience when I missed you too much. I know I could have come before, but..."

But there had been his nomination as Hogwarts' Headmaster during Voldemort's sombre rise to power, followed by his defeat, during which Albus had made the acquaintance of a little boy who had stolen his heart... and stolen Albus from her. Vivian had never expressed her deepest thoughts concerning Albus' particular attachment to the young boy, for she knew they would change nothing and only stir painful memories that he had never quite come to leave behind.

The loss of his sister, not to mention that of her son, at the young age of thirty-six, had left a fathomless emptiness that nothing had ever filled. Not generations of students, not the salvation of a few lost souls, not the salvation of one special baby boy. Nothing could fill the gap; nothing could ease the pain of the loss, the heaviness of the regrets, or the remorse of how severely demanding he had sometimes been as a father and how self-centred he had been as a brother. It had taken Albus years to realize it... and now it was too late.

She knew she had no lesson to give him; he had attempted to fulfil his fathering needs with Hogwarts' students as a teacher and Headmaster; she had had generations of young apprentices as Avalon's High Priestess. He could have become a High Priest... He had even taken the role on several occasions, especially when he sneaked out of the castle and came to the island for the Beltane celebrations or spent a part of the summer there. But like Vivian who found herself unable to tear herself away from the strong call of the Old religion and her unalterable will to protect and transmit it, Albus had always felt the call of adventure... the only mistress he had ever taken over the years. Always, she had let him go, for always he came back to her, like the waves that travel the oceans never fail to crash on the shore.

Except this time. This time, adventure had melted into duty, a thing Albus' heart simply could not ignore.

"Now that you are here, Vivian, I want us to make the best of the time we have together," he murmured, making her turn and face him.

And so they walked to the fireplace and snuggled together on the armchairs, which they Transfigured into a large couch. They talked for hours about what they both already knew by heart: he, about the daily life in the castle and she, about the daily life on the island. Somehow, these so familiar topics, words, remarks, common problems, brought a sense of normality to the time that passed, slowly and steadily, gliding over them like the wind sweeping the snow that had accumulated on the window frame.

They inevitably drifted to other subjects, recalling their first meeting, their first kiss, which he had stolen against one of the sacred trilithe late at night when everybody had fallen asleep. Her infinite patience at his enthusiastic speeches and the quiet way in which her sharp mind understood and enriched the discussion. The way he always managed to surprise her and make her laugh, even in the darkest times, even when she had to observe a vow of silence during her magical training. The handfasting ceremony that had followed a few years later... their first night together, and all the others that had followed afterwards... the way she mischievously screamed each and every of his names when she was irritated... and how he never failed to obtain her forgiveness...

When the old grandfather clock rang eleven times, Albus lifted his cheek from the witch's forehead and graced it with a few kisses. Sitting straighter, she looked at him, suddenly submerged by the fear and dread that they might be about to say goodbye.

"Your eyes, Vivian... I wish they could stun me again before you leave..." he murmured, cupping her face with his hand and caressing her lips with his thumb.

"Do you wish me to leave now, Albus?" she asked in a shaky voice.

He shook his head, and little by little, his thumb slid aside, freeing her lips... which he seized and trapped into a long, unhurried kiss. Vivian's hands caressed his chest all the way up until her fingers got lost in the thick silvery mane that tumbled down his back. After a while, she felt him fumble his sleeve and found herself slightly lifted over the couch. He carefully rested the healthy part of his right arm under her thighs while his other arm supported her back, and he got up.

"I'm afraid the time when I could carry you to our bed without magic is long gone," he chuckled, walking past Fawkes towards a small staircase that led to his private quarters.

"You have always been a romantic, Albus," she giggled, nesting her head on his shoulder. "And you know I couldn't carry you around without magic either."

When they entered Albus' bedroom, they saw that a house-elf had thoughtfully placed a nightgown for Vivian on the blanket. She picked it up and, flashing Albus a witty smile, threw it on the nearest chair.

"Old witches like me prefer sticking to their equally old habits," she said, walking towards him as he removed his glasses and put them on his night table.

"Surely you remember how cold the castle can become during winter..." he commented as she playfully tossed his beard out of the way and undid the front of his robes slowly.

"Well, we have the fire, the blankets... and for the rest, I guess you will have to hold me real tight against you."

"I always do," he whispered before he bent forward and shut her mouth with his once more.

Their hands were in perfectly known territory; though Albus needed a little help to undo the numerous buttons and delicate laces on Vivian's robes, they mostly kept their eyes closed, each kiss bringing them one step closer to a complete nakedness. Sliding underneath the sheets, they enjoyed the forever moving sensation of skin against skin as they pressed their bodies together. Albus noted with great delight how Vivian's hands had softened over the years, they who were always a bit rough given all her outdoor work on the island, magical or not. Vivian, however, marvelled at the way Albus had come to understand better how to tame his ardour. It kept a steady and never-ending passion to each of his gestures instead of submerging her powerfully like during their younger years.

They caressed each other for ages, sometimes with their hands, sometimes with their lips, sometimes with words, loving glances, knowing silences, appreciative gasps and sighs. The wisdom that inhabited their minds and bodies, instead of tempering their pleasure, led them through each other's needs almost effortlessly. All thoughts of past and future, immediate or distant, were left far away from them. Together, they sank in the moment, a moment that could have seemed the last to so many people but was simply timeless for the both of them.

Albus contemplated Vivian's beauty with awe-struck reverence when she received him within her depths, shivering both with the burning desire his attentions had elicited and the giggles his beard provoked when it tickled her breasts and sides. For a while, he took her... slowly, rapidly... tenderly, mercilessly... lustily, elegantly... joyfully, gravely... parting momentarily with her welcoming warmth only to feel the pleasure of becoming one with her again, and again, and again.

Many times, her moans escalated into cries of pleasure, sometimes victorious, sometimes poignant, ecstatic or even surprised. He swallowed them with his open mouth, let them echo off the walls, held his trembling breath to hear her faintest whispers and moans, engraving each and every one of them in his memory so he could cherish them until the end. Patiently, he let her ravish him with kisses and caresses, not always tender, until she finally gave in, unable to take more. She abandoned herself into his arms, her fingers still entangled in his thick locks but too weak to pull on them like moments before. Only then did he allow himself to slide into the delights of release; her name died in a long whisper on his parted lips.

"I love you, Albus," she murmured, caressing his face as it rested on her bosom which now swelled with a much slower breath.

"I love you too," he replied, holding her even tighter with his arms and legs.

"And I will keep doing so for all the time that remains ahead of me. Rest assured of that."

"So many people have known the wizard, Vivian..." he said in a tone that was swelled with emotion, "and you have known the man. I consider myself so very lucky for that..."

"So do I..." she whispered, her eyes smiling radiantly as they met the twinkle in his. "We should get some rest now.... Good night, Albus."

He gave her a long, amorous look that secured all her lovely features into his mind.

"Good night, my love."

Vivian's tender hands rocked him to sleep, and once she was reassured that he would not wake up, she carefully broke free from his grip and slid out of the bed. She got dressed without haste, her eyes set on the sleeping form before her, trying not to break down in tears. Her gaze did get blurred a couple of times, but she quickly chased the pain away by noting how genuine the expression of contentment and peacefulness looked on his face as he slept. This was how she wanted to remember him, for there were to be no words of farewell between them indeed. Never.

On her way out, she met nobody in the deserted corridors. Just as she reached the immense oak doors, however, she paused and hesitated for a second. Then, giving in to a sudden urge, she headed for a staircase that led her to the depths of the dungeons. Feeling her way through the intricate corridors that froze her to the bone with their unwelcoming humidity, she finally reached her goal. A few well-calculated charms allowed her entrance, and she closed the door behind her silently. She did the same with another door at the other end of the room she had just walked in.

There he was, sleeping, helpless and, by the looks of it, trapped into the turmoil of a tormenting nightmare. She sat on the edge of his bed, as light as a breeze, and delicately removed the few greasy locks that stuck to his face. She then took some time to observe the hard features that had interrupted her meditation before and ran the back of her fingers gently along his large forehead, his cheeks, his chin and his lips, calling his mind softly through the dark and misty dreams that surrounded it until it emerged and came within her reach.

"The deed that fell upon you is mighty and terrible to carry, young man," she whispered, feeling her words reach his mind through his countless barriers. "I see how my husband's attitude leaves you very little choice and puts you in a difficult situation. Nonetheless, when the time comes to make a choice-and it will, for he intends to face you with that choice inevitably-I trust that you will make the right decision. If it can bring you any comfort, however, Severus... feel my heart now, and remember its feel when you look back on what you have done. I give you my acceptance, my forgiveness... and my complete understanding. Let them soothe your aching heart and soul whenever you need it. Be brave, young wizard; my prayers and thoughts will accompany you along the way."

His eyes moved slightly behind his closed eyelids, and the crease that scarred his forehead deepened when his eyebrows drew a concerned frown. As she bent forward, her long snowy hair slid past her sides and wrapped them both in an immaculate radiance. She gently curled her fingers around one of his cold hands and pressed her lips softly against his forehead, which relaxed and smoothened at her touch.

At that precise moment, her vision got blurred by images that left her breathless. In a flash, she saw big yellow eyes looking at her malevolently; the snake's bare fangs were already dripping with deadly poison and aiming at her throat. She did not feel the bite, though; she only felt pain, unbearable even for the few seconds it seized her heart. That pain belonged to other moments, countless moments, old, new, some of them even unborn yet.... Still somewhat paralysed by her premonitions, she forced her mind into stillness, fearing that her agitation would wake him or, even worse, give him a glimpse of the horrible things that were ahead.

"Blessed be, Severus," she murmured as her lips parted with his skin. "May you find the freedom and peace that fate has always denied you."

As she got to her feet, she noted that his features seemed considerably more serene than they had been when she had entered the room. Giving in to a motherly instinct, she adjusted the sheets around him so he would not be cold, and after giving his hand a last caress, she left.

A few months later, just before the people of Avalon started to prepare the summer solstice celebrations, a melodious cry pierced through the morning mist encircling the island. Her heart thumping wildly in her chest, Vivian-who had been brutally awoken by a vision the night before and had been unable to sleep since-saw the sun glitter in a very strange way... until her eyes discerned the regular and graceful movements of a pair of wings.

When Fawkes landed on her arm, his feathers emitting a breathtaking glow in the uncertain light, she saw, carefully tied to the bird's leg, a golden wedding ring. Her necklace, which Albus had never given her back, was probably still around his neck, and that thought brought her some comfort. Wiping the tears that escaped from her dark eyes, she untied the ring and slid it slowly onto her finger, next to its companion. She then headed for the sacred temple on the top of the Tor, the bird's consoling weight on her shoulder.

And there, to her surprise, she found that no candle, no torch needed to be lit. The sunrays that hit the trilithees made all the crystals hidden in the stone shine and glimmer like billions of small diamonds. Extending her arms to the sky, she felt the elements' presence all around her and felt the God and Goddess' reassuring power fill her as the sun rose. In that perfect moment, though her heart ached at the loss of the one great love of her life, she suddenly felt calm and peaceful.

"The Wheel of life has turned and will turn again," she murmured as tears born of a new wisdom rolled down her cheeks. "For the light never dies; it merely changes form... And even in the depths of darkness, I shall always find it.... Always, my love."

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Author's notes

Thank you for taking the time to leave a review; they help me progress as a writer! :)

Thanks to my wonderful betas, Vaughn and Southern_Witch_69, who help me improve my English with each new chapter! :)