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Secret Meeting

Two weeks had passed since the encounter with the Dark Lord. Attilius brooded over what his master had said and spent his time massaging the Dark Mark, which seemed to heat up from time to time.

Each of his Potions classes had become increasingly difficult to endure. Professor Slughorn's sad gaze was starting to irritate him. Since his punishment by Professor Carrow, Attilius had refocused on his mission. He no longer paid attention to Erine and her murderous looks, barely responding to Rolf's jokes.

"What's going on with you these days?" Rolf asked him as they studied in the library.

Attilius shrugged.

"Nothing special," he replied.

Rolf scrutinized him, trying to understand what was bothering him.

"Everything's fine," Attilius assured. "I'm just worried about the upcoming exams. I don't want to mess up."

His friend chuckled.

"Well, if you can't handle it, we might as well all start panicking. You're the best student among us. I've heard there's only one other student with grades as good as yours. A certain Hermione Granger."

At the mention of her name, Attilius noticed a student sitting a bit further away had lifted his gaze towards him. He recognized Neville Longbottom, who bore the marks of his punishment for trying to break into the headmaster's office.

Their eyes met, but neither of them said a word. Neville returned to his studies, while Attilius continued scribbling on his Transfiguration assignment about Animagi.

"I can't focus," he sighed. "I'd better head back to the common room."

He packed his things under Rolf's bewildered gaze and left the library, aware of the other students' eyes on him as they watched him leave.

He headed toward the dungeons, passing a few students chatting about the upcoming Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw Quidditch match. Attilius walked past them without bothering to greet them. He paid no attention to Quidditch. To him, it was a waste of time. Why bother with something as childish as a sport where two teams try to get a ball through three hoops?

No interest whatsoever.

He descended the four flights of stairs and walked past the Great Hall, where a few late students were finishing dinner. He didn't bother to take an interest and continued down the stairs to the dungeons, where a few students were leaving their Gobstones club, heading back to their common room.

He recognized a few faces he had seen before but paid them no mind.

A door further down the hall opened, and a voice called out to him.

"Mr. Malkin? Could I have a word?"

He turned to see Professor Slughorn beckoning him over.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, Professor," he muttered. "The last time I was in your office, I ended up with a punishment."

Slughorn didn't seem to react to Attilius' comment. He kept gesturing for him to come closer.

Frustrated, the boy followed the professor into his office and found that another person was present.

Sitting in a corner of the room was Severus Snape, the headmaster of the school, who was rarely seen. He was staring at the boy.

"Thank you for sparing me a bit of your time, Mr. Malkin."

He turned his gaze to Professor Slughorn, whose eyes were still vacant.

"I'll take it from here, Horace. You can go to bed."

With a flick of his wand, the headmaster's figure disappeared behind a side door.

Attilius watched him walk away with slow, deliberate steps and realized something was off about him.

"You've subjected him to the Imperius Curse," he noted. "You don't trust him?"

Snape gave a crooked smile.

"I trust no one."

Attilius returned the smile.

"Not even the Dark Lord?"

Snape's smile faded.

"I trust him fully," he corrected. "But I prefer to ensure that he has complete trust in me."

He motioned to the comfortable chair opposite him, inviting Attilius to sit.

"Does the Dark Lord have something against me?" Attilius asked.

Snape shook his head.

"Not to my knowledge."

He took a sip from his teacup before continuing.

"I've asked you here simply to learn more about the mission he's entrusted you with."

Attilius tensed.

"I'm not sure He would appreciate me confiding in someone He hasn't deemed fit to inform."

Snape frowned.

"I understand your hesitation," he assured. "However, I must insist for the sake of His plan.

You are no doubt aware that the last mission He assigned to a student didn't exactly go as planned."

Attilius smiled.

"I imagine you're referring to Draco and his failure to assassinate Dumbledore?"

Snape nodded.

"You must have realized by now that I'm not a coward like him," Attilius noted. "If the Dark Lord entrusted me with this mission, it's because He knows what I'm capable of."

He paused for a moment before continuing.

"I won't back down."

He got up and left the office without further exchange with the headmaster. He stood before the blank wall concealing the entrance to the Slytherin common room and gave the password.

The wall pivoted, and he entered the high-ceilinged room.

The bluish light emitted by the lake faintly illuminated the space. A few embers still glowed in the fireplace, where a few students sat talking. Others, seated at intricately carved tables, were discussing some homework assigned by one of their professors.

He noticed the massive figures of Crabbe and Goyle waiting for him with their arms crossed in front of the tunnel leading to the boys' dormitory.

“There you are at last,” Crabbe said in his gruff voice. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

Attilius raised an eyebrow, surprised.

“We’ve got something to discuss with you,” Goyle followed up.

Increasingly perplexed by the tone of the two, Attilius suspected a prank.

“What can I do for you?” he asked.

“Professor Carrow wanted you to help us with some spells he’s assigned us to learn. We’re looking for a test subject, and he suggested your name.”

Attilius sighed.

He should have known that the Carrows wouldn’t make things easy for him, despite Voldemort’s order to leave him free to carry out his mission.

“I suppose you want to practice the Cruciatus Curse,” he guessed.

The duo exchanged a look, and cruel smiles stretched across both their faces.

“Don’t make us force you,” Crabbe warned.

“It’ll be easier for everyone,” added Goyle.

Attilius smiled in return.

“How about I practice on you instead?” he suggested. “I can cast Torture Curses while you learn to resist them. How does that sound?”

The two hulking figures began to tremble as they realized what Attilius might do to them.

Despite their limited intelligence, they did not doubt the power their opponent wielded.

“You... you’re not allowed to hurt us,” Crabbe stammered.

“Professor Carrow will punish you,” Goyle added.

The psychological hold he had over them was stronger than he had expected. He left them there and headed to his dormitory.

The following days passed quickly. Christmas holidays were approaching fast. The homework piled up, and the professors seemed more determined than ever to give them enough to occupy their nights.

According to the signup list, few fifth and seventh-year students were planning to go to Hogsmeade. Rolf had insisted that Attilius accompany him because he had never seen the village and wanted to visit it.

“I heard there’s a haunted house called the Shrieking Shack,” he mentioned during a Herbology class. “I hope there’s some interesting creature inside.”

Attilius was always surprised by Rolf’s fascination with magical creatures. He had only joined the Care of Magical Creatures class at the Dark Lord’s request to keep an eye on Hagrid,

the gamekeeper loyal to Dumbledore’s cause and a known member of the Order of the Phoenix.

“I’m not sure it still houses anything,” Attilius replied. “I think it’s more of a legend to scare off outsiders.”

Rolf made a disappointed face.

“Nothing’s stopping us from checking it out,” Attilius added to lift his spirits.

That earned him a smile and a playful shove before they returned to cutting the leaves of the Venomous Tentacula.

Further away, Professor Sprout was in deep conversation with Neville. From the few words Attilius could catch, the professor was giving the Gryffindor advice on the upcoming N.E.W.T.s.

“I’m sure you’ll do great,” she assured him.

Neville shrugged.

“I’d love to get a good grade,” he replied. “I really enjoy Herbology, and I’m thinking of pursuing it as a career.”

Sprout smiled in satisfaction.

“I could speak to a few of my contacts in Brazil. My counterpart at Castelobrujo would be happy to have you.”

Neville thanked her and packed his things to head to his next class. On the way, he met Ginny and Luna on the staircase leading to Charms, and he mentioned the meeting they had planned during their outing to Hogsmeade.

“We’re going to have trouble getting people together,” Ginny whispered. “I haven’t had many chances to spread the word. And with the Carrows around, I’m wary of students I don’t know well.”

“I’ve heard some people are snitching on others for extra points,” Luna added.

Neville clenched his teeth.

“I knew it would be tough, but not this bad.”

He glanced behind him to make sure no one was coming.

“Is everything okay?” Ginny asked.

“I feel like I’m being watched,” he replied. “I have my suspicions about certain people.”

Ginny frowned.

“Who do you mean?” she wanted to know.

“He means Attilius,” Luna said, stepping closer. “You think he’s watching us to report to You-Know-Who, right?”

Neville stared at her, surprised by her insight.

“It’s not just him,” he added. “There are others I’m wary of.”

Seeing Ginny’s inquisitive look, he smiled.

“I’d rather not tell you for now, so you don’t start mistrusting everyone. Let me confirm my suspicions first.”

He glanced down the stairs again.

“Where are we going to meet?” Luna asked. “Last time we gathered at the Hog’s Head, we got spotted immediately. Maybe we should try the Three Broomsticks.”

“That sounds safer,” Ginny agreed. “If we keep the group small, we should be able to blend in.”

Neville thought for a moment.

“Keeping the group small won’t be too hard, considering how few people signed up for the outing. What worries me is that our former Dumbledore’s Army members don’t seem eager to join us.”

Ginny clenched her fist in determination.

“Each of us will go speak to our house. Luna, you’ll ask the Ravenclaws who were part of the DA. I’ll take care of the Gryffindors, and Neville, you’ll talk to the Hufflepuffs.”

He stared at her.

“Why do you want me to handle the Hufflepuffs?” he asked her.

“Because you have classes with them, and it will be more discreet than if I do it since I barely know any of them”, she explained.

Neville nodded. He said goodbye and rushed to Professor Flitwick’s class, where the professor greeted him with a broad smile.

He sat next to Seamus and An and explained the conversation he had just had with the girls.

“Do you think many people will come?” asked An.

Neville grimaced.

“I don’t know”, he confessed. “It feels like no one cares about the DA anymore. Just look at how no one intervened last summer when the Death Eaters infiltrated the school.”

Seamus shushed him as students turned to look at them.

“Try not to draw attention to yourself”, he advised. “If you don’t want to get us in trouble, we’d better talk about this once we’re back in the dormitory.”

An and Neville nodded, and they followed the class without mentioning the trip to Hogsmeade again.

When Saturday came, about fifty students were queuing in front of Filch, who was checking the list of registered students.

Attilius and Rolf stood side by side, their noses hidden under thick scarves, and their heads covered by hats. Behind them, a few Hufflepuffs were chatting about the candy they were going to buy at Honeydukes, the sweet shop that sold Pepper Imps and Sugar Quills.

A bit further along, Neville, Seamus, and An were shivering with anticipation at the thought of warming up with a hot Butterbeer.

“I hope we’ll see a lot of people”, said An, smiling from ear to ear.

“I’m hoping to find some people who can spread the word to their house”, Neville corrected.

Seamus, however, remained silent.

“Is something wrong?” Neville asked him.

Seamus sniffed before shaking his head with a smile.

“I’m fine”, he assured, slipping something into his pocket. “I’m just starting to feel a bit cold.”

Despite the mild weather, a cold wind would occasionally sweep through, cutting through the thick layers of clothing everyone was wearing.

Once Filch had finished checking the registrations, they set off for the village of Hogsmeade.

The younger students rushed ahead, while the older ones, already familiar with the village, took their time, chatting and deciding where to go.

Neville and his group headed to The Three Broomsticks, followed by many of the older students. As they entered the tavern, a sweet aroma filled the air.

They found a table in a secluded corner of the room and sat down, followed by Ginny, Luna, and a few friends. Shortly after, Ernie McMillan, Hannah Abbott, and some other Hufflepuffs joined them, with the last arrivals being the Ravenclaws led by Terry Boot and the Patil twins.

“Is everyone here?” Neville asked, trying to figure out how to fit so many people together.

“I think a few more are still on their way”, Ernie said, giving up his seat to his friends.

“I don’t see Zacharias Smith”, Ginny pointed out.

Ernie looked embarrassed.

“I don’t think he’ll be joining us, Hannah said. According to him, he’s not interested in this group anymore.”

“He thinks it was worth it back during Umbridge’s time, but now the classes are enough, so he doesn’t see the point of adding extra hours”, added Susan Bones.

Ginny shot Neville a venomous glance, but he paid it no attention. He wanted to get some things settled before focusing on the negative aspects.

Among all the people who had chosen to join them, there were a few newcomers he didn't know.

They all went to order drinks before returning to sit down and listen to what he had to say.

"Thanks, everyone, for coming. I know the homework is piling up, and you're all worried about exams, but I think I'm not the only one who doesn't want things to keep going the way they are."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"I think we should start by figuring out who's best suited to teach us new spells", Michael Corner said.

Everyone turned to look at Neville, who froze.

"Wait...", he stammered. "You don't expect me to take Harry's place, do you?"

The other students exchanged glances, smiling.

"You were his best student", admitted Ernie.

"You were even better than Hermione", added Ginny.

Neville raised his hands to temper their compliments.

"That's very kind of you to say, but I'm not as talented as Harry, far from it. If I improved, it's because he was an excellent teacher, but I don't think I'm at his level."

Luna spoke up.

"That's not what we're asking, Neville", she reassured him. "But someone needs to take charge so we can be organized."

The other students nodded.

"We could meet and try things out together", suggested Terry Boot. "Each of us could practice a spell and then demonstrate it to the others so we could all learn."

"I like that idea", An agreed. "It would let us focus on one spell at a time, and that way, we'll learn faster."

Terry's suggestion seemed to appeal to most of the group. It was true that if each person focused on a single spell, they could research it more easily and learn how to use it without being noticed by the Carrows.

"Now we just have to figure out how to meet without drawing attention", Neville concluded.

"We could use the Room of Requirement again", Seamus suggested.

Everyone nodded.

"The problem is that to communicate the time, we'd need to make new Fake Galleons to enchant. Can anyone do that?"

No one answered. It was well-known that Hermione's talent for complex spells was unmatched. The feat she had accomplished was impossible for students like them to replicate.

"We'll figure something out", Ginny reassured them. "I'm sure if we ask our teachers, we can get the information and take care of the Galleons."

Her optimism spread among the group, and the conversation ended on that note.

The tavern door opened, and two snow-covered figures entered.

"Whose idea was it to go all the way to the Shrieking Shack?" grumbled Attilius, shaking snow from his hair.

"Oh, come on", laughed Rolf. "I didn't know the snow had piled up so much. I didn't see that there was a ditch."

Attilius muttered as he dried his clothes with his wand.

"Let me buy you a drink to warm you up", Rolf offered.

"If you insist", Attilius agreed.

Neville watched the two figures and turned to Ginny, who was chatting with Michael Corner about the upcoming match between their teams.

"I hope you're ready to lose", Michael teased. "I've heard our players are determined to win."

Ginny laughed.

"Considering how much trouble they had against Hufflepuff, I'm not too worried", she confided.

Neville moved closer to Hannah, interrupting her conversation to pull her aside.

“Tell me”, he wanted to know. “Do you know Rolf Scamander well?”

Hannah, surprised by the question, took a few seconds to respond.

“Quite well, yes.”

“And his friend, Attilius Malkin, do you know him?” he added.

Hannah nodded.

"Do you think we can trust them?" he asked.

The young woman stared at him as if he had just asked if it was possible to reach the moon on a broomstick.

"I don't know him well enough to say," she admitted. "But if Rolf trusts him, I think we can count on him."

Neville glanced over at the two friends who were laughing at the counter, joking with Mrs. Rosmerta, the charming innkeeper. Hannah left him to his thoughts and returned to chatting with her friends. Susan whispered something to her about him, but she chose not to respond and simply enjoy her free time.

Seeing that everyone was having a good time, Neville finished his bottle of Butterbeer and left the establishment, not paying attention to the glances that followed him. He opened the door and paused for a moment to see the Hufflepuff group waving for the two boys to join them.

He stepped outside into the cold, occasionally passing village residents who were hurrying to take shelter in their homes. The wind and snow reduced visibility, making it difficult for Neville to find his way through the storm.

Realizing he wouldn't be able to find his bearings, he approached the nearest door and knocked, hoping someone would open it. He heard heavy footsteps on the other side of the door, followed by a voice asking what he wanted.

"I just need a place to wait until the storm calms down," he said.

Nothing happened for a few seconds, then the door opened, and he hurried inside.

He shook off the snow that covered his clothes and recognized the room he had entered.

He had ended up at the Hog's Head.

The dingy pub where Dumbledore's Army had first gathered.

"What brings you here?" the bartender asked gruffly.

"I got lost," he said. "I thought I could make it back to the castle, but the storm was too strong."

He glanced around the room, but it was empty.

"No customers today?" he asked, surprised.

The man walked to the counter and pulled out a dusty bottle, which he tossed to Neville.

"Ever since the Ministry tightened the laws, most of my customers avoid crowded places like Hogsmeade," he explained.

He grabbed another bottle and a grimy glass from behind the counter. He popped the cork with his teeth and poured himself a drink that some might have considered overly generous.

"Never any customers?" Neville pressed.

"Why? You planning to buy the pub?" the man grumbled.

Neville burst out laughing. He removed the cap from the bottle and took several long gulps.

"You must get pretty lonely," Neville noted.

The man furrowed his thick brows.

"What makes you say that?" he snapped. "Who says I'm not better off alone?"

Neville gave him a sad smile.

"We're never better off alone," he confided. "We might feel better for a while, but it never lasts."

The bartender chuckled. "I like you, kid."

He sat down at the table where Neville was sitting and handed him a second glass, filling it with an amber liquid.

"What's your name?"

"Neville Longbottom," he introduced himself.

The bartender raised an eyebrow. "Frank and Alice Longbottom's son?" he asked.

Neville nodded.

"You knew my parents?"

The bartender nodded.

"I was there the day they got married," he said. "They were kind enough to invite me and my brother." He downed his drink in one go before refilling it. "I was also there the day they were found after being tortured by those damned Death Eaters."

Neville shuddered at the mention of what had happened to his parents at the hands of Bellatrix Lestrange and her cohorts. He grabbed his glass and emptied it in one gulp. The liquid burned his tongue and throat as it slid down his esophagus.

"Do you know what you want to do with your life, kid?" the bartender asked as he refilled Neville's glass.

"Later, I don't know," Neville hiccuped. "But right now, I dream of killing every last Death Eater."

The bartender was taken aback by such blunt honesty. His words were harsh, seemingly cruel coming from a teenager. They spent the next few hours drinking and exchanging stories about their dreams. Neville learned the man's name was Aberforth. He had attended Hogwarts after his brother, and since his brother's death, he felt alone in the world.

"You should be heading back," Aberforth noted, glancing at the wall clock. "Curfew will start soon. Come on, I'll walk you to the castle."

He helped Neville, who was struggling to walk straight, put on his coat, then led him outside the pub. The wind had calmed. Snow was now falling in large flakes, and a layer of powder covered the ground, marking the path ahead of them.

When they reached the gate, a tall figure greeted them. Hagrid, dressed in his moleskin coat, held a lantern in his hand.

"Would you mind taking him?" Aberforth asked. "I think the boy overdid it a bit with the bottle."

"You sure it wasn't you who pushed him to drink, Aberforth?"

Aberforth smiled.

"You know I'm not the kind of person to make others do things they don't want to. That was more my brother's style."

Hagrid growled. "You'd better show some respect for your brother, Dumbledore."

Aberforth chuckled. "I think it's a bit late to be giving me that kind of advice, Hagrid. He couldn't get it from me when he was alive, and I don't think I'll be any more respectful in his death."

He started to walk away when Hagrid called after him again.

"I know you didn't hate him as much as you let on, Aberforth. You loved your brother. More than any of us." He paused before adding, "Don't tarnish his name."

Aberforth wanted to respond, but the gatekeeper was already walking away from the gate, carrying Neville in his arms to get him back inside the warm castle.

"Dumbledore..." Aberforth muttered under his breath. "They've got nothing else to talk about but him." As he turned around, he kept grumbling to himself.

"Ah, Albus... Do you really think these kids can take down You-Know-Who? You gave them a mission far too big for such young shoulders."

He pulled a flask from inside his jacket and took a long swig as he headed back to his pub.