

# 7

## *Setback*

October gave way to a cold and damp November. Students hurried from one classroom to another, trying to spend as little time as possible in the castle's freezing corridors.

The peak of this dampness was felt in the Dungeons. Potions classes were a true torment for the students.

Professor Slughorn kept the fire in his hearth lit at all times and scattered small braziers throughout the room, each animated with green flames that hovered in mid-air.

The students, fascinated by this enchantment, spent more time warming their hands by the flames than listening to their professor's teachings.

That day, Slughorn was teaching them how to brew a potion of immense power: Veritaserum.

"Can anyone tell me its effects?" he asked the class, his nose hidden beneath a thick scarf.

He smiled when he saw Attilius's trembling hand rise.

"Mr. Malkin, of course."

"Veritaserum is, as its name suggests, a truth serum," he recited. "Its efficacy lies in the fact that it is odorless, colorless, and tasteless."

"Very good," the professor praised. "Ten points for Slytherin."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small vial, closed with a piece of cork.

"As Mr. Malkin explained so well, Veritaserum is a potion that allows you to extract any information you desire."

The students fixed their gaze on the vial with great attention.

"The use of this serum, as you might expect, is regulated by the Ministry of Magic," Slughorn continued. "Abusing it could land you in Azkaban."

Most of the students took a step back. Erine, however, continued to stare at the vial as if she were trying to unravel its mysteries, as though a plan were forming in her mind.

“What else can you tell me about it?” he questioned.

Erine raised her hand.

“Miss Warden,” Slughorn acknowledged with a smile.

“The potion takes a long time to brew. It must simmer for an entire lunar cycle. If even one step is done incorrectly, you’ll have to start over from the beginning.”

Slughorn gave her a satisfied smile.

“That is absolutely correct. Ten points for Ravenclaw.”

Attilius caught Erine’s eye and gave her a sincere smile.

“You all seem very well informed about the composition of this potion,” the professor continued. “Since you seem to know so much, I’ll ask you to start preparing this potion during the next hour.”

They were divided into pairs.

Attilius joined Rolf, who was already gathering ingredients from the cupboard.

“Looks like you might have some tough competition this year,” he teased, nodding toward Erine.

He laughed at his friend’s dismayed expression and returned to the table with his arms full of ingredients.

With a flick of his wand, he lit a fire under his cauldron and began preparing the potion.

Attilius joined him when he crossed paths with Erine, who was also gathering ingredients from the cupboard.

He stepped aside for her and moved away to return to his place.

“Oh! I forgot to get some Babelia powder. Would you mind grabbing some for me?” Rolf asked.

Attilius shot him a glare, but Rolf just gave him a mischievous wink before resuming the slicing of ingredients.

Attilius returned to the cupboard and waited patiently for Erine to finish collecting the ingredients for her potion.

Seeing that she wasn't about to move aside, he tried to strike up a conversation.

"Is there something you can't find?"

Erine didn't reply. She just kept searching.

"Are you planning to keep up this little game for long?" he pressed.

Erine turned to him and locked eyes with him.

"Long enough to get some answers," she muttered, so only Attilius could hear.

Attilius, surprised by her response, hesitated.

Erine took the opportunity to move closer and fix her gaze on him as he tried to avoid it.

"You know what you're guilty of," she said. "And I know you're here for a reason. I know your master sent you here for something, and I'll find out what it is."

Faced with Attilius's silence, she repeated, "I will find out."

She brushed past him and returned to her table, where she was working with Padma Patil, who caught Attilius's eye.

He grabbed a generous amount of Babelia powder and returned to Rolf, who was already deep into preparing the potion.

They spent the hour discussing Erine's resentment toward Attilius.

"I'm sure you knew each other before," Rolf suggested. "You probably broke her heart when you were younger, and now she hates you."

Attilius burst out laughing.

"If only he knew," thought Attilius. "He would never be so friendly with me."

When Professor Slughorn ended the lesson, he asked Attilius, Rolf, and Erine to stay behind for a moment.

"I have some good news to share," he said. "I've finally received permission to restart my little club."

The three students looked at him, confused.

"During my years of teaching, I've had the opportunity to gather students whom I found promising, so they could meet influential people in the magical world."

The students continued to stare at him, still not understanding.

"For example, I arranged for Hestia Jones to meet her coach, who later brought her into the Holyhead Harpies."

Attilius, who wasn't particularly interested in Quidditch, didn't grasp the magnitude of what his professor had done. But from the amazed looks on his two classmates' faces, he realized it had been significant for his former student.

"I'd like to invite the three of you to join me in order to introduce you to some influential contacts. Are you interested?"

Erine and Rolf nodded. Attilius thought for a moment before agreeing as well.

As they left the room, Erine walked ahead, leaving the boys behind as she headed toward the Great Hall.

"What's her problem?" Rolf wondered. "Every time we're together, she distances herself from us. Did you do something to her?"

Attilius rolled his eyes.

"Are you going to ask me that question every day?" he snapped.

Rolf shrugged.

"I've already told you, I didn't do anything to her. I met her the same day you did."

They climbed the stone stairs and separated upon entering the Great Hall. Each went to their house's table.

Rolf was greeted by his housemates with big smiles, while Attilius received only a vague "hello" before everyone resumed their conversations.

He took the opportunity to observe the nearby tables.

He saw Erine chatting with her Ravenclaw friends. Padma, the Head Girl, seemed to get along very well with her. She kept asking Erine all sorts of questions, which Erine always tried to evade.

At the Gryffindor table, Ginny was animatedly discussing their last Quidditch practice with her team. She seemed pleased with how her players were improving day by day.

A bit further away, Neville was talking to An about their trip to Hogsmeade. They spoke in hushed voices, occasionally glancing toward the teachers' table.

Attilius detected a hint of suspicion and understood that the upcoming trip could prove to be very interesting. He couldn't afford to miss it.

After dinner, he tried to catch up with Rolf, but Rolf didn't notice him and followed his housemates toward their common room.

Alone, Attilius decided to do the same and headed toward the Dungeons.

On his way, he encountered Crabbe and Goyle, who were bullying a couple of second-year students.

With a simple gesture of his hand, Attilius conjured a powerful gust of wind that lifted their robes, covering their faces.

The younger students, terrified by what had just happened, ran off down a corridor as fast as they could.

"I see you're having fun," noted a calm voice behind him.

Attilius turned around and saw the old, portly man who headed Slytherin House. Professor Slughorn was wearing an emerald-green robe that emphasized his round figure. With a book tucked under his arm, he seemed to be heading toward his office.

"It seems you're not entirely innocent in that little prank," he said, nodding toward the two students trying to regain their dignity.

Attilius shrugged, a mischievous smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

"Come to my office," Slughorn invited.

Attilius froze for a moment.

"Is this a punishment?"

Slughorn shook his head.

"Just a suggestion."

He pushed open the thick wooden door, revealing an office with bare stone walls. A long, finely carved wooden table stood in the center. Behind it, a fire crackled softly.

This was the first time Attilius had entered this room. He had spoken with Slughorn often, but never in his office. He noticed the many intricately crafted and valuable objects decorating the space.

In one corner of the room, he saw an hourglass adorned with four snakes, with sand flowing in an unusual manner. Instead of falling straight down, it seemed to float inside.

He moved closer to inspect it, but was interrupted by the professor, who had seated himself behind his desk.

"Please, join me," Slughorn said.

Attilius obeyed and sat down across from him.

"Mr. Malkin, I fully understand that you believe yourself to be quite talented. Very talented, even."

Attilius made a gesture to respond, but Slughorn raised his hand to stop him.

"However, you must understand that there are rules at this school."

"Like respecting other students?" Attilius asked.

Slughorn nodded.

"That applies to you as well, Mr. Malkin. Your actions, while understandable, were inappropriate."

Attilius raised his eyebrows.

"You mean I shouldn't have done anything and just let those idiots bully those students?"

Slughorn's eyes widened.

"I ask you to be respectful! Those two boys are far from idiots."

Attilius burst out laughing.

"Come on, Professor, even you don't believe that."

A slight smile appeared on Slughorn's lips.

"In any case, as the head of Slytherin House, I must treat all my students equally," said Slughorn.

Attilius made a face.

"For that reason, I have no choice but to punish you."

He wanted to protest, but Slughorn interrupted him again.

"Don't worry, those two boys will share your punishment as well. You will all help Madam Pince organize the Library."

Attilius couldn't believe it. He had done the right thing and was being punished for it.

"When should I serve this punishment?" he asked.

Slughorn hesitated for a moment.

Just then, a knock on the door interrupted him before he could answer.

"Come in!" he said.

The door opened, revealing the stern face of Alecto Carrow. Her long blonde hair was tied in a strict bun, and her robe was pitch black.

"Can I help you, Professor Carrow?" Slughorn offered, noticing the two boys standing behind her, Crabbe and Goyle. Attilius immediately understood what had happened: the two boys had realized he was behind their embarrassment and had gone to complain to the professor who liked him the least.

"I take back what I said," he whispered to Slughorn. "They're not so dumb after all."

Slughorn nodded but gestured for Attilius to remain seated.

Alecto Carrow took a few steps into the office and approached Attilius's chair.

"I've heard about a prank this young man pulled on his two classmates. They told me he attacked them while they were peacefully heading back to their common room."

Slughorn was taken aback.

"Are you saying you're accusing this student of attacking these two without any reason?"

Carrow nodded, a predatory smile spreading across her lips.

"You have no proof that this boy attacked them," Slughorn protested.

Carrow turned to Attilius, who hadn't moved. She extended her hand, ordering him to give her his wand.

With a swift motion, he made his wand appear from his sleeve and handed it to the professor. She took it slowly and used her own wand to extract the information she sought.

"P<sup>r</sup>iori Incantatum!" she exclaimed.

Attilius's wand sparked, revealing a Summoning Charm.

"You see," Slughorn continued, "Mr. Malkin was with me."

Carrow, disappointed that there was no proof of the student's guilt, turned and aimed her wand at Goyle's head. A flash of white light struck the boy, causing large blisters to appear, distorting his face.

"Oh my goodness!" she feigned surprise. "Mr. Goyle, who did this to you?"

He pointed at his bewildered friend, shocked by the scene.

Alecto Carrow turned back to Slughorn, a satisfied smile on her face.

"See! Your student attacked his classmate."

Slughorn wanted to protest, but she didn't give him the chance.

"Mr. Crabbe, please take your friend to the Hospital Wing. Madam Pomfrey should be able to fix this unfortunate incident."

Crabbe obeyed and helped his friend out of the room.

Once they were alone, Carrow settled comfortably on Slughorn's desk.

"Mr. Malkin, given the evidence I now have of your guilt, I must punish you to prevent you from attacking him again."

Slughorn attempted to intervene, but Carrow's gaze silenced him.

"Now that we have our proof, I would ask you to follow me, Mr. Malkin," she said.

Attilius glanced at Slughorn, who didn't know how to respond to what had just happened.

He left the office with Professor Carrow and headed toward her office.

They climbed the stairs, passing a few students who were heading back to their common rooms. They stared at Attilius as if he were a condemned man walking to the gallows.

They reached the third floor and stopped. Attilius didn't understand why, as he knew Professor Carrow's office wasn't on this floor.

They advanced to a door that Attilius recognized: the Dark Arts classroom.

Alecto had brought him to her brother to finally determine his punishment.

"Enter, Mr. Malkin," she commanded.

Attilius was determined not to show any sign of fear. He walked in as if he had no idea what awaited him inside.

As soon as he entered, he realized what was about to happen.

Amycus Carrow wasn't alone. Two other people were with him.



He immediately recognized his brother, Romulus. His tall stature and long platinum blonde hair tied in a neat ponytail were unmistakable. Dressed in a dark, elegant suit, he looked at his younger brother with disgust.

The second person shocked Attilius even more.

The Dark Lord himself was sitting majestically in the room. Seated behind the professor's desk, he gently stroked the head of his snake, which hissed in pleasure.

"So, you've finally arrived!" he greeted him in his deathly voice. "I was beginning to fear you might refuse to join our little gathering."

He turned his gaze toward Professor Carrow.

"What kept you, Alecto?"

Her previously impassive face softened. Panic filled her eyes. A drop of sweat trickled down her temple and rolled to her jaw. She knelt before her master, her voice trembling.

"Forgive my delay, master," she stammered. "The boy was being held by that fat pheasant, Slughorn. He didn't want to let me take him, so I had to pretend it was for a punishment."

The Dark Lord's head swayed gently. Attilius noticed a few marks on his face. Dark circles underlined his red eyes.

"What can I do for you, my Lord?" Attilius asked.

A smile formed on his lips.

"I see your manners remain impeccable," he hissed.

Attilius acknowledged the compliment with a bow.

A dry laugh resonated in the Dark Lord's throat.

"It seems your brother is having more fun with his mission than I expected, Romulus."

Romulus grumbled in disagreement.

The Dark Lord turned to him, surprised.

"Apparently, good manners were optional in your education," he noted.

His fiery gaze chilled Romulus to the bone. He preferred to keep his distance from his master and the snake that hissed at him as if smelling its next meal.

"Let's return to you, my dear Attilius."

His gaze, as heavy as a slab of stone, settled on Attilius's shoulders.

"How are your investigations going?"

A smile tugged at Attilius's lips.

"I have good news. I overheard some students mentioning a secret meeting during the next Hogsmeade outing."

Facing the silence of the room, he continued.

"I was also gathering information from Professor Slughorn when your delightful friend decided to sabotage my work."

Alecto started to reply, but her master's dark glare silenced her.

"I understand that you want all the freedom necessary for your mission," the Dark Lord said in his raspy voice. "However, their mission is to cover your back, so if they deem you should face punishment, you must obey their orders."

Alecto's face shifted from cold terror to a twisted smile. She lifted her head to thank her master before turning her predatory gaze back to her next target.

"But, Master," Attilius interjected, "did they tell you why they attacked me during my first week here?"

The Dark Lord raised an eyebrow.

"I heard you contradicted your professor and lashed out at him," he said.

He beckoned Attilius closer.

Attilius obeyed, stepping toward the desk where the giant snake coiled.

"Give me your arm," he ordered.

Attilius froze for a moment. The man's red, hate-filled eyes were fixed on his left forearm.

He was staring at the Dark Mark.

Unable to resist the Dark Lord's will, Attilius pulled up his sleeve and offered his arm. His flesh bore the symbol: a serpent emerging from a human skull. In proximity to its originator, the mark seemed almost alive, calling to him.

Despite his desire to resist, Attilius couldn't suppress the urge to move closer to the predator and its hissing tongue.

"Come closer, my boy," the Dark Lord urged. "You have nothing to fear."

Easier said than done when you're the most dangerous dark wizard of all time. Any wizard, no matter how powerful, would fear for their life.

Attilius took one last step, allowing the Dark Lord to grasp his wrist and hold it tightly. His gaze locked with Attilius's, and the long, white, thin finger touched the Dark Mark.

Almost instantly, the mark began to shift, and a sharp pain spread through the young man's arm.

Everyone else in the room started groaning, clutching their wrists.

Apparently, all the marks were connected by some kind of magic.

Attilius, summoning all his strength, opened his eyes and glanced at his brother, who seemed the most affected after him.

"What you don't know about the Dark Mark," the Dark Lord explained, "is that it grants me total control over my followers. When I place it on a Death Eater's skin, it doesn't just stay on the surface — it seeps into their bones and never leaves."

He stroked the skull with the tip of his finger.

"What you must understand, having accepted this magical seal, is that your life no longer belongs to you. Your parents and your brother decided you should no longer have a choice."

His grip tightened on Attilius's arm like a vice. He pulled the young man closer, forcing him to look directly into his eyes.

"You belong to me now."

Attilius's knees buckled, giving way beneath him.

"You see," the Dark Lord hissed, "when I come into contact with the Dark Mark, it resonates with my magic and reminds my followers who their master is."

He advanced so his face was closer to Attilius's.

"Do you understand?"

With enormous effort, Attilius lifted his head and locked his clear eyes on his master's burning pupils.

"It's very clear," he replied firmly.

The Dark Lord released his grip, but Attilius then grabbed his wrist, holding him back.

"Now it's my turn to be clear."

The Dark Lord tried to pull his arm away, but Attilius's grip was strong. He wasn't about to let him go until he had said what he needed to say.

"All fear you because you're the most powerful wizard in the world," Attilius said through gritted teeth, enduring the pain. "But you don't understand that it's you who's the most afraid. You fear that your life will end, just like it did sixteen years ago."

His master's eyes blazed with fury.

Nagini, drawn by her master's panic, rose and began to hiss.

"Stay back!" Attilius hissed through clenched teeth.

The snake recoiled and dropped to the ground, motionless.

"I will not allow anyone to oppose your reign, my Lord," Attilius assured, locking his clear gaze with his master's once more. "I will stand against any attempt to counter your will. But if one of your disciples attacks me again, I will gladly explain to your enemies what you fear most."

He let go of his master's wrist and collapsed at his feet, unconscious.

"What should we do with him, Master?" the Carrows asked in unison.

Voldemort rubbed his wrist silently.

"Do not interfere with his plan again," he ordered. "If he's so sure of himself, I want to see what he can deliver."

He gave one final instruction to his disciples before vanishing into the void, leaving them behind.