

A Very Long Engagement

by RedOrchid

DH gapfiller: the AD/GG story. Unrequited love, my a*s. :-)

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: Dates somewhat impressionistic in this fic. Call it staying true to canon. :-) There might be some details off with regards to DH as well, but seriously, that book makes me cry. I'm not about to force myself through it again to check what the weather was like at Ariana's funeral or the exact design of the Peverell ring. If you, dear reader, discover anything amiss, don't be shy to point it out in the reviews. I don't mind in the slightest.

A big thanks to Red Hen, for the essay on Dumbledore that inspired this fic, and, of course, to Lariope, who makes every story a joy to write.

A Very Long Engagement

April, 1942

"It is high time, Albus."

The voice of his mentor was almost gentle. He closed his eyes and pretended not to hear.

"You can't keep avoiding this. The stakes are far too steep."

Truer words never spoken. And yet, the other man had no idea what was really on the line.

"There's nothing I can do."

"Four visits...in person...from the Minister over the past six months tell a different story."

Albus removed his cauldron from the fire and set it down on the cooling rack next to a window. Working in silence, he documented the potion's colour and scent, trying hard not to think about the pictures, the letters...and the message that seemed to come off each and every piece of evidence that the Minister had shown him. The mark...their mark...was everywhere, calling out to him and taunting him in blatant invitation. The papers had begun to notice it too over the last few months. He guessed he should be grateful for the fact that they had at least been about twenty years slow on the uptake.

"They say you're the only one." Flamel's voice echoed slightly in the bare room, rebounding off the stone walls to penetrate his heart rather than his ears. "The only one who can stop him." For a long moment, his younger apprentice just stared at a point far off into space; then he quietly took his wand and walked over to the small fireplace in the far corner of the laboratory.

"They're wrong, Nicolas," he said softly, turning his head only half way towards him. "They want Gellert Grindelwald dead or worse. I could never do that."

"Oh, come on, Albus!" Flamel protested, even as the younger man threw a pinch of glittering powder into the flames. "Think of all the people he has killed! The villages burnt to cinders all over Eastern Europe. I understand your unwillingness to take a life, but..."

A swirl of green flames left whatever the second part of his sentence had been futilely hanging in the air, unheard by the man it had been addressed to.

Many miles away, Albus Dumbledore stepped out of the fireplace in his private quarters at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and brushed a few specks of soot from his clothes. As he walked through the room, his gaze fell on a copy of *The Moscow Mirror* on a table. A face he hadn't seen in person for more than forty years looked back at him steadily from the cover, still with the same, handsome features and a glint of ruthlessness in the eyes. On top of the paper was a single, red rose, looking slightly crumpled, as though it had been transported in a wrapped up condition for many miles. Tied to the rose with a single black ribbon was a small piece of square parchment, folded into the shape of a triangle with meticulous care.

When you're ready, it said, the words curving themselves into a run-through circle in the centre of the shape. *I will be waiting for you at the end of the road.*

He did not have to look at the back to see the signature to know who it was from, the same way he did not have to leave the rose out on the table for weeks to know that this one...like the hundreds that had come before it...had been charmed to never fade. Gingerly, he took the flower between his fingers and let himself fill his senses with a single breath.

The sweet scent clung to his mind as he flicked it away, watching the fire warp the beautiful lines into so much grey ash. The paper went the same way, crumbling into non-existence in a matter of seconds. He watched what was left until the flames died down, fading into a glowing bed of coals in the hearth, and then walked out the door. It was time for evening rounds.

September, 1944

There was a flicker in the eyes of young Tom Riddle that made him eerily certain that his suspicions from the moment he'd first met the boy had been entirely correct. A bottomless pit rather than carefully constructed walls, a dark sense of freedom from his own conscience that reminded him so forcefully of *him* that he didn't know whether to look away or never stop looking. The mere memory the boy evoked made it nearly unbearable to be in the same room as him, and even though he knew that the boy needed to be watched...needed to be monitored...he found himself shirking away from the task, telling himself that Horace was better equipped and that the boy might still turn out alright with a little more time to mature.

Since the Chamber of Secrets was opened, he knew in the pit of his stomach that he was wrong, and once everything around him had quieted down, he had increased his efforts to dig into the boy's past, looking for things that might be used to control him. Whenever his eyes would lock with the tall, handsome youth's, however, a shiver would travel all the way along the length of his spine, and he would know, yet again, that just like with the man Riddle resembled so forcefully, he...Albus Dumbledore, acclaimed to be one of the most powerful wizards of the age...was not equal to the task of putting a stop to the events in motion.

With such a man, he might as well try to catch the wind.

March, 1945

Dear friend,

I hear there is a most promising student in that school of yours, one whose pedigree is most intriguing with regards to the objects we have been seeking for so long (I know that you still share these thoughts with me, no matter how much you may pretend to have other, nobler pursuits on your mind these days). A direct link via the Gaunts and Slytherins to the Peverells. And a boy who this year, I am told, displays a rather fascinating piece of jewellery on his right hand...

Don't try to interfere when he leaves your precious castle to go out in the world, Albus. Or, better yet, come with him as he joins me. I always knew you were a stubborn sort, but this valiant show of pretended disinterest has gone on for long enough, don't you think?

Especially as we both know what you truly want. What we both truly want.

It's time to finish it, Albus. I'm waiting for you.

/G

December, 1991

"Professor, what do you see when you look in the mirror?"

Harry Potter had gone off to bed, and he was alone in the room with the boy's words echoing in his head. The truth was that he hadn't looked...too certain of what would appear on the other side of the glass to bring himself to face it. As long as he didn't take those last, few steps, he could still pretend, could still wish, that he would see something other than the inevitable. His family whole and alive, like for Harry Potter, or some special type of glorious, academic achievement, like for the boy's red-headed friend...anything other than a laughing, young man with golden hair and eyes as blue as his own, extending his hand to pull him through the glass.

July, 1899

"I think I have a lead."

He felt his heart skip a beat at the words, and then another one as Gellert threw his arm around his shoulders and pulled him with him down onto the sofa. He tried not to let it show too much, but the happiness bubbling within him was much too large to contain on the inside.

Especially when his whole back seemed to tingle.

"What did you find?"

"A picture in one of Auntie's boxes, part of the source material for her current book on the Founders, I guess. It shows the Stone."

"You're joking."

"Not in the slightest. Here, take a look."

It was a ring. Gold set in an intricate pattern around a small, black stone. The photo wasn't terribly clear, but the overall design was readily visible. It was a wedding picture, quite old, with the bride and groom posing before the camera with serious looks on their faces, framed by flowers that trailed from the woman's hair. A calm sort of

happiness. Dignified.

"Who is the girl?"

"Lucinda Slytherin," his friend said softly, his voice filled with sparks of excitement. "The last of the line to carry the name."

"And the man?" Grindelwald was silent for a long time, eyes fixed on the young wizard with an arm around the waist of his new wife. There was a monogram on the front of his dress robes, the letters 'FG' carefully embroidered unto the dark blue silk.

"I don't know yet," he admitted, finally. "But I very much intend to find out."

August, 1899

It rained after they buried Ariana. He sat alone on the steps on the back of the house for a long time after the last mourner had left, letting the cold drops run down his neck, under the collar of his robes and down along the length of his spine. There was blood on his hands. Real blood from the broken nose his brother had dealt him, and a more symbolic version from the fact that he had allowed this to happen, had helped set things into motion that had spiralled out of control. And now his sister was dead, along with both his parents.

And Gellert was gone.

He was glad for the chill of the rain, grateful for something to distract him from the cold that seemed to spread through his body from somewhere deep in his chest. His teeth clattered together as he started to shake uncontrollably, and a kind of desperate wail escaped him, forcing and clawing its way out of his body. Hot trails mixed with cold ones on his face, and he couldn't care less about it right then. They were gone. How could they be *gone*?

"I'm moving out." Aberforth was standing a few feet away, under the protection of a large oak tree that grew close to the kitchen window. Albus could only nod.

"Where will you go?" he asked, somehow managing to get the right syllables out through his constricted throat. Aberforth shrugged.

"Anywhere but here," he said bitterly. "Hogsmeade probably. I'm sure there is something I could do around there. Farming perhaps. I'm good with animals."

"I'll make the arrangements with Gringotts. Sell the house. Something."

"You do that."

"There's no need to sound so hostile, Abe. I'm only trying to be practical." He hadn't meant to say it. Something in the other's tone just set it off inside him. He regretted the words almost before they were out of his mouth, but then it was already too late. The tension grew thick between them for a moment, like air just before thunder, waiting to come alive.

"I hate you!" Aberforth came at him in a furious mass of kicks and fists and teeth, pulling him from the steps of the house to slam into the pitiful, muddy excuse for a lawn. Pain erupted along his jaw, in his hair, along his arms and legs, and Albus pulled himself into a tight ball to protect his body from his brother's punches.

"Stop!" he wheezed, fighting to catch his breath after a vicious knee to the stomach. "Please stop. Hurts so bad." With a cry of frustration and outrage, Aberforth gave him a last punch in the (recently broken) nose, hard enough for him to lose his grip on reality for a few moments, towering on the edge between searing pain and merciful blackness.

"You deserve it!" the younger boy hissed, slumping down in the wet grass (or lack thereof). He was shaking badly, deep, hulking sobs wracking his body as he tried to get the anger under control. "You killed her! You and that black-hearted bastard! You don't even care, do you? He could commit mass murder and it wouldn't make a whit of difference. Even Ariana didn't mean a thing next to him, did she?" Aberforth was screaming now, voice already growing hoarse from emotion and strain. "She was the only one I had...the only one!...and now she's dead, and it's all. Your. Fault!" His voice broke at the last word, and he recoiled, huddling on the ground, turning away.

"I never meant for things to end up this way" Albus said quietly. "I know that you have absolutely no reason to, Abe, but please forgive me. Please. Because I'm your brother and because I'm begging you to."

Aberforth's silence was almost more frightening than the physical attack.

"No," he said slowly, after a long pause. "No, Al, I'll never forgive you for this."

"Please, I..."

"No," Aberforth stated harshly, still keeping his face firmly turned away. "I might attempt to look at you again, to be civil to you with time, but I will never forgive you for Ariana."

Albus nodded, bringing a hand up to stop the blood which was flowing freely from his nose again after the last punch. It was more than nothing.

"You have to choose," Aberforth suddenly said, the undercurrent of pulsing anger back in his voice.

"Choose how?"

His brother turned around, and the eyes which were so like Albus's own pinned him down, burning bright with bitter grief.

"If you want the chance to have a brother, you can never see him again. A heart for a heart."

Numb with shock, Albus could only nod in acceptance, hearing the faint echo of the broken pieces inside of him shatter into yet smaller shards. He crawled over to the steps and managed to steady himself enough to get to his feet. With great hesitation, he walked over to the wet, shaking huddle which was his younger brother and extended his hand. After a long moment of inner conflict, Aberforth accepted it, taking it neither in friendship nor in forgiveness, but simply to pull himself off the ground. But it was more than nothing, and so he vowed to do anything he could for his brother from then on, as they limped brokenly together back into the house.

Later that evening, the first rose arrived.

May, 1945

He shaved off his beard before leaving, feeling the cool night air directly against his skin for the first time in over two decades. He supposed he did it because it felt right to end this where it had all started: with just the two of them and no disguises. He looked at his face. Did he look much different from the last time? How much did a man change on the outside in nearly fifty years when his heart had stubbornly refused to age at all beyond the age of seventeen? Behind him in the study, the corrected copies of all his student exams and evaluations lay in a neat pile together with his lesson plans for all seven years. If he didn't come back, Dippet would have sufficient time to find someone else. Transfiguration wasn't a terribly rare speciality. The school would be fine.

Pulling a warm towel against his jaw to clean away the remains of the magical shaving cream, he met his own eyes in the mirror and wondered, yet again, if he ever would

come back from this.

June, 1997

Dear friend,

I'm going up against Tom tonight, most likely for the final time. The fact that you've received this letter should alone account for the seriousness of my intent and solid belief that tonight will be my last one alive. I've grown weak over the past year, and I dread what will come of it all, of the best laid plans of wands and wizards, if I do not act. It's time to rectify a wrong, and so I'm hiding the wand, hiding it somewhere Tom will never think to look. He will come hunting for it, of that I am fully convinced, and once he starts unravelling the strands of time, they will undoubtedly lead him to you.

I'm sending you this with Fawkes, my beautiful, golden companion, should you wish to avoid death for a while yet. He will wait as you read this and for however long you wish afterwards. Let him know your decision once you've reached it, and he will see it through. I do wish our story in this life could have been a happier one, or a simpler one at least, but it's almost midnight, and there is no more time for regrets. I will see you in the next life, waiting for you impatiently at the station.

I could say a lot more, but they'd be only words, and I have enough words saved to last a lifetime. I'm including these as well. They're for your eyes only. I can't even read them myself.

Until we meet again.

Yours, always,

(as though there could ever be anyone else)

Albus

He put down the quill and folded the piece of parchment into a perfect triangle, drawing the familiar run-through circle in the centre. From a hidden drawer in his desk, he withdrew a small chest, the size of his closed hands next to one another. Tracing his fingers across the smooth rosewood, he gently opened the lid and looked down at the hundreds...thousands even, perhaps...similarly folded shapes. Ninety-eight years of love. He supposed he could have done worse for himself.

Walking over to the window, he motioned for Fawkes to approach, attaching the chest to one of his legs and his last note to the other, tied to a long-stemmed, red rose with a single, black ribbon. The Phoenix looked at him sadly, as his master gently stroked the beautiful feathers for the last time, and a single, glittering tear fell from the fiery eyes to his burned and ruined arm. It remained black. Sometimes, there was just no helping things.

"Goodbye, Fawkes," Albus said softly, running a hand over the golden head. "Stay with him for awhile. And if you can, please look after the other lost boys for me as well." The magical bird nodded in understanding and spread its wings. A moment later, the Phoenix was gone in a swirl of flames and Harry Potter was at the door.

May, 1945

It was over. After forty-six years, it was finally over. He weighed the long, beautiful wand in his hand and ran a finger over it, feeling the connection and the power that seemed to pulsate from the polished wood. Through the Eastern window, the sun was rising. He watched the golden beams hit the stone and sweep softly across the floor until they reached the bed. Hardening his resolve, he carefully placed the long sought-after wand in a velvet box and summoned his own from the discarded pile of robes on the floor. Softly, caressingly, he moved it through the air in intricate patterns, conjuring shields, wards, clothes and, finally, ropes. The man on the bed stirred, and he cast a *Petrificus Totalus* before the other could open his eyes. He would have to face the betrayal, or worse, the *acceptance* in those eyes eventually, but right now, he couldn't ask it of himself. The morning light was too harsh when reflected on the fair skin, and would be too sharply beautiful in those blue, blue eyes...heady enough to cloud the memory of the dark blue of the night, filled with moonlight and pleasure, completely free.

Ending his wand movement with a last flick, he let out a shaking breath, slid the wand into the bound and frozen man's hand and turned around to look for his clothes.

THE END

A/N: Please review! This was completely new for me, both the format of the story and the pairing, so I'd very much appreciate any comments/tips/words of encouragement you might have. Concrit extremely welcome. Thanks for reading!