

Prisoner of Hope

by White Eyebrow

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Constant Vigilance

Chapter 1 of 35

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Chapter 1

Constant Vigilance

Alastor Moody was a patient man. After half a century of stalking and capturing dark wizards, it wasn't an attribute he was inclined to turn off, even in retirement. As such, when he received the owl from Albus Dumbledore to meet at The Hog's Head Inn, he set out from his home to stand outside the shady tavern just watching. Albus, at least, understood him. He understood that, in a world full of predators, you can't just meet anywhere on a whim. He understood how it wouldn't be prudent for Moody to drop his house's defenses in order to verify the identity of a friend. No, it had to be at a neutral location, someplace where he could see danger coming; a place of dubious repute, somewhere he could blend in.

He arrived hours early, looking for any unusual patterns of activity. The rain beat loudly on the thick enchanted fabric of his invisibility cloak. He was forced to pace up and down the sidewalk across the street, not standing in the same spot more than a few seconds, so as not to leave a telling dry spot on the wet pavement. He couldn't hear very well in the din, but his magic eye saw everything, even the dog that suspiciously converged on his position. He followed it with his "Mad-Eye", all the while tracking it with his wand as his human eye kept a watch on the entrance to the inn.

At the appointed time, he noticed an elderly but spry wizard walking along the outside of the building. Albus Dumbledore had a very distinctive gait; not too fast, not too slow. After Moody watched him go inside, he waited a bit longer to make sure he wasn't followed before finally coming in out of the rain.

Once inside, he whipped off his cloak and draped it over his arm. He frowned when he saw Dumbledore seated at the table located at the far end. The old wizard's robes were not exceedingly gaudy, but they were definitely too clean to belong to a regular patron of the Hog's Head.

He maneuvered the maze of tables, deliberately accentuating each step of his wooden leg in concert with his walking stick. His special eye flitted to and fro, settling briefly on each of the seedy characters before moving on to the next. They spoke his name in hushed tones when he passed them. Some left their tables altogether in order to give him a wide berth.

He noisily pulled out the chair across from Dumbledore and sat down without ceremony.

He propped his cane between his legs and interlaced his fingers atop the handle before saying, "Albus. Why is it every time we meet, you look a little younger than the last?"

Dumbledore's thin lips curled into a smile. "Perhaps it is because each time you have grown a little older." He placed his pointy hat next to the mug of butterbeer and lazily rested his elbows on the table with his hands clasped gently. "You have changed addresses again. You are a hard man to track down."

"That's the way I like it," Moody said with a smirk, although the gesture only served to contort the features of his heavily scarred face. He reached for the hip flask in his coat pocket and unscrewed the cap.

"So, how are you these days, Alastor?"

A frown revisited Moody's face. "Old and useless."

"I would argue both points to the contrary."

To that Moody grunted before placing the flask to his lips.

"How's retirement?"

"People in my line of work don't exactly retire," he said, wiping his upper lip on his sleeve.

"So, you have kept in touch with the others?" Dumbledore asked with a tinge of hope in his voice.

"No. I'm not exactly the sort you hang out with."

"As ever the loner, my dear Moody," Dumbledore said, seemingly disappointed.

He raised an eyebrow. "Your owl said you wanted to see me on a matter *ofutmost urgency*, Professor?"

"Very well." He blinked slowly. "I'm afraid I must once again ask too much of you."

"I figured you didn't call me here for tea and crumpets." Moody tapped his cane on the hard floor to accent his point, saying, "You're trying to get The Order back together, aren't you?"

"Sadly, I fear it will soon be needed again."

"I figured you'd be calling on me after the Death Eaters' raid on the Quidditch World Cup." Moody leaned in closer. His eye started to dart about frantically, as if looking out for eavesdroppers. "What's the mission?"

Dumbledore did not answer right away. He unclasped his hands and began to stroke his considerably long beard, giving the appearance of casual reverie. "Protection. I fear for Harry Potter's safety."

"Potter," he grunted, recalling the familiar surname. "James and Lily's son; the boy who lived. What's he like?"

"He's a lot like you were at that age, but without the cheek," Dumbledore replied with an irreverent grin and a twinkle in his eye.

Moody paused to acknowledge the comment before continuing, "The Order's ranks have thinned out over the years. There are fewer of us left: Elphias, Dedalus, Mundungus... although I never fully trusted him..."

"Don't forget Minerva."

He grunted at the mention of McGonagall's first name. "Still, we need fresh blood... professionals."

"Do you have anyone in mind?"

Nodding, he replied, "Shacklebolt, of course. And there is this young Auror who looks promising. Her skills as a Metamorphmagus will come in handy."

"Ah, just like her grandmother," he said as an afterthought.

Moody's human eye narrowed. "How did you know about her grandmother?"

"You will grant an old man *some* mystery, my friend," Dumbledore said with that same gentle smile.

"I'll put the team together. But we're going to need someplace other than your brother's bar to meet."

"I will leave the details to your experienced judgment. In the meantime, there is one more matter that calls upon your expertise."

"What is it?" he asked as he continued to scan the area.

"This year I am in need of a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

He paused. Both eyes now focused on Dumbledore. "You're kidding."

"I am quite serious."

Moody mused as he shifted his weight, trying to relax in a chair ill-designed for comfort. "I suppose it makes sense. That way I can keep a closer watch on the boy."

"I'd prefer you'd think of it as a protracted homecoming. After all, it has been many years since you have last visited the grounds."

He snorted before taking another hit from his hip flask. "Sure, why not? I got nothin' better to do these days. So long as you don't mind the appearance of letting 'Mad-Eye' Moody loose on those impressionable young minds."

"I could think of no better role model," Dumbledore replied, although a serious look came across his face as he pointed to Moody's hip flask. "However, I am worried about the 'appearance' of your frequent libations."

"What, this?" he asked, holding up the flask. "It's a broad-spectrum elixir. I use it as a proof against poisons *constant vigilance*."

"I see." Dumbledore picked up his hat and put it on his head before getting up from the table. "Well, I'll look forward to working with you this year, Professor Moody. Now, if you'll forgive me, I must take my leave of you."

Moody grunted in farewell and took one last hit from his hip flask before putting it away. "... Flavored with a wee bit o' scotch."

...oOo...

Moody felt strange having a job after all these years. To be out among people again was a daunting prospect. Social graces and civility were concepts that had fallen out of practice with him. In his youth, he had demonstrated them exceeding well. However, in his old age, it was the one aspect of life for which he ironically lacked the patience.

The day before his departure to Hogwarts, he traveled to London to stockpile some last minute magical provisions for his extended stay. Upon his return, he sensed that

the protective charms placed around his cottage were still in place, so he entered in his usual manner without incident. Once he was settled in, he fixed himself a cup of hot tea and sat in his study in quiet darkness. Going back to Hogwarts had weighed heavily on his mind ever since Dumbledore made the offer. Memories began to flood back from those days the days of his youth. He remembered the faces of loves he'd had and lost, the faces of friends long gone, and so many regrets.

A crash from outside brought him out of his reverie. His magic eye immediately focused on the source, zooming in through the walls of his house to the dust bin outside: nothing. He finished his tea before slowly getting up and heading toward the kitchen, on the way glancing at his Sneakoscope out of habit. It indicated all was clear, but decades of experience had honed his senses to know better. He stood in the middle of the living room, not moving a muscle. His eye focused on an errant shadow; his wand was already drawn as he zoomed in on a rat.

"*Stupefy!*"

A red light shot out of his wand and hit the rat with uncanny precision. Moody turned on the lights and levitated the animal closer into view. He scoffed when he noticed a finger missing from one of its forepaws.

"*Homorphus!*"

A blue aura enveloped the rodent, causing it to twitch uncontrollably. Slowly, the rat's features began to change. It grew in size and its snout began to round out, becoming more human-like. Grey fur was replaced by clothing. Eventually, the rat took the form of a ragged, middle-aged man that Moody knew as Peter Pettigrew, his one-time ally who had turned traitor to follow Lord Voldemort.

With a guffaw of satisfaction, Moody began to bounce Pettigrew repeatedly from the floor to the ceiling using the *Levicorpus* spell, oblivious to the noise that would undoubtedly begin to disturb the neighbors. When he had enough fun with his unwitting prisoner, he levitated Pettigrew back to the center of the room. A wicked sneer came across Moody's face as he dropped Pettigrew to the floor.

"Pettigrew!" He pointed his wand down at his prey, who lay prostrate before him. "You've got a lot of gall showing your rat face here!"

Pettigrew cringed into a corner, whimpering from the pain. "Please, Moody, spare me. I didn't come here to fight."

"How did you hoodwink my jinxes to get in here? Where's your wand..." He stopped when a dreadful realization hit him like a ton of bricks. *Pettigrew is too cowardly to have come here on his own. In fact, he is good for nothing more than a... diversion.* Moody scoffed as he whipped around and raised his wand, inadvertently knocking over a nearby lamp. *Stupid, stupid old man!*

Two flashes of red lit up the darkness. Then there was stillness.

Rough and Tumble

Chapter 2 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 2

Rough and Tumble

Alastor Moody stepped carefully around the open clearing of the cool forest floor. When he got to the rock line, he took off his jacket and tied it around a nearby tree. Using his wand, he blew the excess debris back toward the clearing and continued to follow the trail left by his mentor. The Auror in charge of his training had left early that morning to investigate claims that a giant had been seen in the vicinity...the same giant that was suspected of terrorizing the countryside. Moody had waited impatiently back in the village; it wasn't until teatime that he had decided to set out after him.

It was unnervingly quiet among the trees. The branches that draped over the path swayed noisily as he brushed against them. There were no signs of the usual denizens one would expect to find in a forest, not so much as a bird to caw in the trees, or a squirrel to scurry on the ground, not even a katydid's chirp to keep him company. He pointed his wand in front of him, mentally reciting a dozen curses to have at the ready in case he was attacked. A spark of orange flame shot out of his wand when he stumbled over a pothole...no, not a pothole, but rather, a footprint. He bent down to inspect it. It was large enough for a fully grown man to lie comfortably within its circumference. He took a pinch of the compacted earth therein and rolled it between his thumb and fingers before sniffing it.

He stood up and continued to follow the footprints, which were laid out a good ten feet apart. A sense of foreboding set in the pit of his stomach that continued to worsen the further he ventured along the path. He could feel the residual afterglow of powerful magic in the air. He laid a hand on a nearby tree and winced when a splinter poked his finger. He instinctively put his finger in his mouth before he noticed the strangeness of the tree itself. Half of the trunk was missing, as if the tree had been blasted from the inside. *The Exploding Curse*, he thought.

The air smelled of death.

Lumos.

His fears were confirmed when he saw splotches of blood hidden in the shadows of the dense brush. He put away his wand and dared to continue. The sounds of his quiet footsteps were soon replaced by the twisted cacophony of wet, twitching flesh with teeth scraping against bone. Moody could feel his heart pounding in his chest, but struggled to keep his breathing quiet and regular as he crouched down and crawled toward the source. With his hand, he brushed back a cluster of branches that blocked his way to the next clearing. His eyes widened in horror at a sight unprecedented in his seventeen years of life.

A giant with pale orange skin squatted atop a large rock in the center of a makeshift camp of newly felled trees. His brown hair, matted and unkempt, covered his entire body. He wore a black bearskin tunic. His back turned to Moody, he breathed loudly between gulps of whatever it was he was eating. Flies and other vermin buzzed angrily over the mound of his feces deposited at the base of the rock.

Moody gulped hard as he stepped into the clearing. He walked around slowly, coming into the giant's view. His spirits fell when he saw his mentor's remains strewn about at the giant's feet. The only identifiable body parts were the head and the right arm, loosely held together by the spine and pieces of the rib cage. He stared into the corpse's lifeless eyes. The look of horror that rigor mortis had frozen on its face was telling of the fact that he had been very much alive when the viscera was sucked out of

his abdomen.

Moody's instincts screamed for him to run, but his heart's yearning for vengeance steeled him. The giant eyed him briefly, as if he were barely worthy of notice, and resumed eating. The corpse's head snapped back violently with the popping sound of the gristle as it gave way from the bone.

"Anyone ever told you it's bad manners to stare, boy?" the giant said, wiping his maw with his forearm.

The giant snorted to clear his sinuses. A barrel-sized wad of mucus splattered on the ground next to the young wizard. Moody felt a slight reflux at the sight of the snot imbued with bits of gore.

Moody smiled and approached closer, forcing his voice to remain genteel. "Are you what all the fuss is about?"

In answer, the giant reached over to one of the felled trees. As quick as a blink, he swung the trunk over his head and brought it down on Moody. The makeshift club struck the ground, sending shock waves into the surrounding trees and jostling many leaves from their branches to send them cascading gently to the earth. The beast grunted in satisfaction, content that he had secured another easy meal. However, when the dust settled, there stood Moody atop the log, answering wrath with calm regard.

"Right. Allow me to introduce myself. Alastor Moody," he said with slight bow, all the while remaining perfectly balanced on the log.

The giant was not amused. "Can't you see I'm eating, boy?"

"Terribly sorry. Of course it's rude of me to interrupt your repast." He cartwheeled nimbly off the log. "I came to see you on the matter of a missing Auror. Perhaps you've come across him between your razings?"

For the first time, the giant turned his head to face the young human. The remains of a foot, still clad in its shoe, dangled precariously over his chin, hanging on by a thread of sinew stuck between one of his canines. "*Auror*? I an't seen no Auror."

"Not to be contrary, but I think you have," Moody replied matter-of-factly. "I believe you're chewing on his leg."

The giant grinned, shuffling the leg between his lips like a macabre toothpick. "So I am. What of it, Alastor Moody?"

"I'm afraid if I go back to the ministry without him, that'll be another strike on my record."

His brow furrowed. "Are you an Auror as well?"

"Yes... well, no... that is... not exactly. You see, I'm in training. I've already been through two mentors...well, three now...so I'm already on shaky ground. I'm afraid that if I go back with the lame excuse that a *giant* ate me teacher... well, I'm sure you understand."

"Of course." The giant picked the foot out of his teeth and flung it to the ground next to Moody. "I don't care for the feet anyway: too sinewy. If you wait around long enough, I'll return the rest of him," he said, sneering.

"Capital! You're too kind."

The giant looked on, nonplussed, as Moody pointed his wand at the fallen tree trunk, cleaning it using the *Scourgify* spell. After it was sufficiently scrubbed, he laid a handkerchief across it before sitting down. He then transfigured a nearby rock into a kettle and proceeded to fill it by conjuring a spout of water from the tip of his wand.

"What are you doing, boy?"

"I'm waiting," Moody said politely. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did you want some tea?"

At the end of his patience, the giant stood up from the rock and cracked his knuckles. "On second thought, how about I arrange for you to meet your mentor sooner?"

With a single leap, the giant closed the distance between them. Moody side stepped two fists that came crashing down from above.

Moody pointed his wand. "You'll forgive me if I decline." And he shot a stunning hex into the giant's face. It only served to enrage the monster further, causing him to swing blindly and manage to hit Moody in the chest. The *Protego* charm protected the young wizard from being sliced in two, but the wind was knocked out of him when he hit the ground. His chest heaved as he struggled to suck the sweet air back into his lungs. By the time Moody made it to his feet, the giant had managed to wipe the sting of the hex out of his eyes.

When the behemoth dove at him again, Moody somersaulted out of his clutches, causing the giant to miscalculate and stumble toward him. Moody ran up the giant's outstretched arm, vaulted over the back of its head and slid down the length of its enormous body to safety. They both scrambled to their feet. The giant snarled in frustration and rushed toward him. Moody stood his ground and let loose a flurry of curses from his wand, none of which had any effect on the fast approaching giant. But he had saved his best defense for last.

"*Arresto Momentum!*"

The giant stopped. Not because of the spell, but rather to laugh at the youngster's arrogance. "You wizards aren't fast on the uptake, are you? Your magic doesn't affect me."

"Quite right," Moody conceded humbly. "However, I wonder if the same can be said of your clothing? *Wingardium Leviosa!*"

The spell raised the bearskin loincloth into the air, taking the giant with it. Snarling, the giant ripped the cloth apart in mid-air, which caused him to fall to earth right into the mound of feces. He stood up slowly and wiped the dung from his face.

"The first thing I'm gonna do when I catch you, Alastor Moody, is feast on your lungs," he said with murder in his eyes.

Moody's muscles tensed. If his plan was to work, he had to make sure that the giant followed him. "I must say, you are incredibly well-spoken for a creature ~~of~~ *near-human* intelligence," he said in a calm, superior tone.

He ran as fast as he could into the trees. He didn't have to turn to see if he was being followed, since he could hear the creature's roars of bloodlust close behind him. Had this been open ground, he would have been caught by now, but just as he had hoped, the thick vegetation was enough to slow the giant by a few steps. Adrenaline surged through Moody's body when he felt the giant's fingertips rake against his back as a blind swipe narrowly missed him.

Just a little closer.

He caught a break when he heard the giant curse, as if it had slipped. He took out his wand and began to sprint as soon as he hit the clearing.

Where is it, blast it?

Moody's desperation was relieved when his eye caught a glimpse of red. It was the jacket he had left tied to the tree. When he reached the marker he jumped, using a levitation spell to extend his leap to an amazing thirty feet. He rolled with the landing, but ended up cutting his thigh on the edge of a sharp piece of limestone. Keeping his

weight off his bleeding leg, he forced himself to his feet just as the giant burst through the tree line. Moody held his ground and pointed his wand as his pursuer approached.

The giant stopped just short of the rocks, wondering why his prey had decided to make a stand here, of all places. He regarded the youngster briefly and smiled wickedly as he raised his foot into the air. He brought it crashing down so hard that it caused Moody nearly to lose his balance. It also served to disrupt the Disillusionment Charm which Moody had placed over a large pit that lay before him. The giant looked into the shallow chasm, and noticed a clutch of trees sanded down to sharp points that had been planted at the bottom.

He snorted. "Was that your clever plan, Alastor Moody? To lure me into your enchanted pit of spikes?"

Moody clasped his hand around his bleeding thigh. He knelt to relieve the pressure before the muscle gave out completely. Exhausted, he raised his wand higher, his hand trembling. "Accio..."

The giant laughed, not even detecting so much as a tug from the spell. "Can't you see that's not gonna work twice?"

Moody smirked. "I wasn't aiming for you, mate."

The sound of cutting wind and rustling branches spurred the giant to look behind him. He caught a glimpse of his tree club hurtling toward him in the instant before it smashed into his face. The bludgeon snapped in twain, causing the giant's head to whiplash from the force. Dazed, the giant fell backward into the pit. Leaves flew into the air as he hit the bottom with a disturbing thud.

Moody brushed the leaves off of his hair and sleeves, keeping his wand at the ready in case the monster was able to climb out of the pit. However, when the debris settled, it was eerily quiet. Moody grabbed onto a vine and used it to support himself as he leaned over the edge of the pit. He would have been disturbed by what he saw had he not been numbed by the experience of seeing his mentor eaten alive. The giant lay at the bottom of the pit, impaled by one of the sharpened spikes. He looked up at Moody, chuckled something in his native tongue, and breathed his last.

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The pain in Moody's head had become bad enough to bring him out of his trance. The first thing he noticed was that his magic eye was gone. He looked around, squinting. He was back in the present, sitting in his reading chair. Pettigrew was huddled in a remote corner of the room, nursing his injuries. Once Moody recovered his bearings, he reflected on the ancient memory he had just relived. It being so long ago, he was a different person then. He never dreamt of the past before, so why start now?

"Lumos."

Suddenly, he remembered the presence of another intruder. He tried to move, but to no avail he had been hexed with the Binding Curse. Immobilized, he moved his head in the direction of the voice, craning his neck over his shoulder to compensate for his limited field of vision. His jaw dropped when the wand's light revealed the identity of his captor.

"I know you. You're Crouch's boy...Barty Crouch, Jr."

The Dark wizard walked around to face Moody. He crossed his arms, tapping his wand against his shoulder. The odd shadows cast by the spell's light made his young features appear unnaturally sullen. "I'm flattered that you would remember me, Mad-Eye."

Moody forced himself to sit upright in defiance. "What do you want with me, Crouch?"

Crouch snorted. His empty eyes revealed a darkness rivaling that of any Dementor. "You are just a means to an end."

There was a knock at the door. Before Moody could yell for help, Crouch jinxed his vocal cords. Moody watched Pettigrew transfigure himself back into a rat and scurry off. The voice outside sounded familiar.

"Alastor, it's Arthur Weasley. Open up."

Moody noticed Crouch taking a sip from his hip flask. *What the bloody 'ell is he doing with my elixir?* He didn't have time to ponder the point, though. The last thing he saw was a red glow from the wand Crouch pointed at him.

"Stupefy!"

Forbidden Colors

Chapter 3 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 3

Forbidden Colors

After the fight with the giant, news of Moody's victory had spread all over the countryside, especially at Hogwarts. He was asked repeatedly by his house-mates in the Gryffindor common area to recount his story of the battle. He tried to be brief, sticking only to the facts. However, by breakfast time, his exploits were already legendary, having been exaggerated by word of mouth. He had looked forward to first meal, but due to the constant interruptions, be it from owls or other students, he barely had time to scarf down a scone and a glass of juice.

At the risk of allowing all of the extra attention to feed his ego, he had to admit that it wasn't an entirely unpleasant experience. In the Gryffindor common area, he caught many of the girls stealing glances at him when they thought he wasn't looking. In the hallways between classes, he was approached by one particularly attractive Ravenclaw girl that requested 'private' dueling lessons. Outside the Potions room, he thought he heard his name whispered among a group of Hufflepuff sixth years. When he turned to look, they blushed nervously and giggled to themselves as they scampered off. By the time Transfiguration with Dumbledore rolled around, he was feeling very self-conscious and could have sworn that one Slytherin girl had bumped into him in order to lift a strand of his hair that had shed on his robe.

He had trouble paying attention throughout the lecture, since he was constantly catching side-glances from one pretty set of eyes to the next. In fact, he was so distracted that he almost didn't notice when Dumbledore asked him to stay after class. Fortunately, Moody had the presence of mind to acknowledge him before getting his books together and heading for Dumbledore's open office behind the podium. Once at the door, he thought it prudent to knock before going inside.

"You wanted to see me, Professor?"

Dumbledore was busy shelving a set of scrolls he had taken down for the day's lesson. He regarded Moody's presence aloofly before replying, "Yes, Alastor, come in."

Moody stepped slowly inside. He had never had the occasion to visit Dumbledore's private office before. It was of modest size, and as a result, every available inch of space was put to use. Shelves lined the walls, packed with scrolls and tomes covering virtually all ranges of magical discipline. Dumbledore's desk was placed in the back of the room facing the door. It was occupied with parchments and various other enchanted items, but was otherwise neatly organized. Behind the desk was a mock-up of the scoreboard kept in the main dining hall. It showed Gryffindor in the lead for the House Cup, just slightly ahead of Slytherin.

Moody stood at the edge of the desk. A baby phoenix was perched on a roost on the opposite side and appeared to be sleeping. Dumbledore was still busy tending to his bookshelf, so Moody took the liberty of taking a closer look at the contents thereon. He immediately noticed the town newspaper, turned to the page featuring an article about him. He leaned in closer to read the caption under the picture.

Mighty Moody Slays Giant

He tried to skim the rest of the article, but had a hard time reading the small letters upside down. By this time, Dumbledore had finished organizing the scrolls and was standing next to him, leaning against the corner of the desk.

"I heard you had a little adventure over the break."

Moody blushed but smiled with pride. "Yes, sir."

"Impressive, considering both your age and the fact that wizards with more experience have failed where you have succeeded."

He found Dumbledore's comment sobering. "I only wish I could've been there in time to save Auror Huxley, sir."

"Indeed." He nodded in agreement. "Now, if you would be so kind as to hand over your junior Ministry badge."

Moody's eyes narrowed. "Sir?"

"I have convinced the headmaster to suspend the Auror-mentoring program indefinitely."

"I... don't understand." He clenched his fists under his robe. "You can't do that."

"I respectfully disagree," Dumbledore replied firmly.

"But why?" he asked, his confusion starting to manifest itself in the rising volume of his voice. "If I hadn't stopped that *thing*, he would've continued to ravage the English West Country!"

Dumbledore maintained a calm, even tone when he replied, "You disobeyed Huxley's orders, putting yourself in great danger. In addition, you did not notify the Ministry and took it upon yourself to fight that giant. If you had failed, he would have escaped and continued his rampage. Worse yet, you killed him, further straining wizard-giant relations."

Moody blinked. "You can't be serious. I don't believe this to be fair, sir."

Sighing, Dumbledore approached him and placed a hand gently on his shoulder. "Don't you see how *wrong* things could have gone, Alastor? We cannot have students under our care engaging in battle with the Dark forces."

"But, sir, haven't you always taught us that evil only prevails when good wizards do nothing? It would have been shameful to turn tail and run," he said in defiance.

The old wizard smiled and nodded. He walked around to sit behind his desk, taking on an air of formality as he did so, and placed his chin on interlaced fingers before addressing the young wizard. "Why do you want to become an Auror, Alastor?"

Confusion washed over Moody's face. "Professor?"

Dumbledore grinned in amusement. "It is not a trick question."

He shrugged. "Well, I suppose in order to stop Dark wizards...to vanquish evil and all that."

"So, vanquishing evil is about dueling Dark wizards and slaying giants?"

Moody looked down at his feet, adopting a more humble countenance. "I don't rightly know, sir. All I do know is that I want to be the best at it."

"It is a noble profession, but is not without its disadvantages. I do not intend to dissuade you, but I would gently suggest that you supply yourself with a better reason before you apply at the Ministry. I assume you will be applying next year?"

He nodded. "Yes, sir."

Dumbledore unclasped his hands. A smile of encouragement graced his face, breaking the tension. "Perhaps you should consider taking a year off."

Moody felt his shoulders relax a bit. "It is my understanding that that tradition has fallen out of favor over the years."

"Yes. A shame really. Nevertheless, there is value to be gained in traveling *outside* of the familiar, to experience other points of view. I suggested the same thing to a student from Slytherin last year. Like you, he was very talented and singularly driven. However, I fear he may have drawn the wrong conclusions from my advice, which is why I have chosen to be forthright with you."

"I think I understand." Moody reached into his robe and took out his badge. He noticed that Dumbledore had also reached into his robe to pull out his wand. He arched an eyebrow in curiosity to ask, "What did you do during your year off, Professor?"

Dumbledore pointed his wand at the score board. "I, unfortunately, had to break from tradition. Life has a funny way of altering one's plans."

Moody watched Dumbledore wave his wand. As he did so, points immediately began to subtract from Gryffindor house's total, putting Slytherin in the lead.

Once the dial came to a halt, Dumbledore put his wand back into his robe. "It will cost Gryffindor the house cup, of course, but hopefully it will stifle any future heroics you may have inspired in your peers." He raised a white, bushy eyebrow, regarding Moody's expression as he asked, "Does that bother you?"

Moody stood up straight, unsure of how he should answer. Looking forward, with his hands clasped behind his back, he said in reply, "Frankly, sir, I've never regarded the

point system as a particularly persuasive motivator. It's just a game designed to foster childish competition between the houses. It has no basis in reality. I believe that the only challenger of import is oneself."

"And *that*, I fear, is part of your problem, Mr. Moody." Dumbledore paused and looked down. "You might want to report to the infirmary and get that leg taken care of."

Moody likewise looked down at his leg; indeed, blood could be seen seeping through the fabric of his trousers...a reminder of his ordeal with the giant. Without another word, he placed his junior badge on Dumbledore's desk before turning to leave.

Moody didn't want to admit it, but his meeting with Dumbledore had angered him immensely. Over the years, he had come to respect the professor's opinion and even to admire him, although he always had a difficult time reading him. Nevertheless, this time he was sure that his teacher was wrong. Why should he be penalized for something he excelled at?

The more he thought about it, the more he noticed the pain in his leg. He considered trying to heal it himself again, but the amount of bleeding prompted him to report to the hospital wing as Dumbledore had suggested.

He hopped slowly down the stairs leading to the common area. On the staircase, he met a group of seventh-year Slytherins on their way up. They eyed him up and down as they passed. They continued on their way, except for one girl who lingered behind. Her brow furrowed when she saw his leg. She had deep black hair that starkly offset her flawless white skin. Her piercing dark eyes regarded him silently as she clutched her books tightly to her chest. She looked as if she were going to say something to him, but when her peers called after her, she turned away from him and joined the other Slytherins. He watched them disappear into one of the paintings before he continued his descent to the ground floor.

Moody limped into the ward and stood at the entrance to the waiting room. On one side of the room sat a row of Gryffindor students seated opposite a row of Slytherins. They were dressed in Quidditch gear and sat hunched over, nursing various degrees of cuts and bruises. Quidditch season always seemed to amplify the animosity felt between the two houses. Noticing that the two sides looked like they were ready to have another go, he opted to remain standing by the door.

The nurse walked in. She wore a long, dark dress with a white apron. Her black hair was pinned back tightly into a bun, and she carried a clipboard close to her chest. She looked down at the clipboard, ready to read the name of the next patient, but when she looked up and saw the state of Moody's leg, she moved him to the head of the queue.

He followed her to an empty bed at the end of the wing. She instructed him to sit down after pulling the privacy curtain around them.

"Off with your kecks," she ordered.

He looked up at her, blushing at her instruction. Judging by her features and fair skin, he could tell that she was very young, possibly around his own age. However, the authority with which she spoke combined with her severe look made her appear much older.

"Come now, I don't have all day," she said impatiently.

He obeyed, taking off his robe and trousers while remaining seated. She knelt beside him and put on a pair of spectacles that were hidden in her apron pocket before examining the gash on his leg.

"What happened here?" she asked, peering closer into the wound. "Where you involved in the Quidditch riot this morning?"

"No. I got this fighting a giant." Noticing the nurse's skeptical expression at his reply, he reiterated, "Seriously, I'm the one you've read about in the paper '*Mighty Moody Slays Giant*,'" recalling the article from Dumbledore's desk.

"Clever," she commented dryly, keeping her attention on his leg. She reached for a jar of salve from a prep tray at the head of the bed, and applied some on the wound. Almost immediately, the bleeding stopped.

As she worked on his leg, Moody couldn't help but stare at her. "Have we met before? You look familiar."

"Probably because I only graduated last year," she replied absentmindedly before adding, "I'm working here as an intern until I receive my certification."

He snapped his fingers as the memory came rushing back. "Right. I hardly recognized you without your Head Girl robes. Minerva, right?" he asked with a lopsided grin. "But you've still got your grandmum's spectacles, I see."

"That's *Miss* McGonagall." She glared at him over the rim of her glasses. "And I hardly recognized you without your entourage behind you screaming accolades in your name."

Taken aback by the rebuke, he decided to return the focus back to his injured leg, saying, "I tried to charm it myself, but it just opened up again for no reason..."

She straightened his leg out brusquely over the mattress. "When healed improperly, stress can cause a wound to reemerge."

"Well, what's the verdict? Are you going to have to lop it off?" he said nervously.

"Not this time." She took out her wand and waved it over the cut.

"Ow!"

She continued to work quickly and efficiently, saying, "I'll just have to remove all vestiges from your inept attempt at magical surgery before I apply the proper healing charms."

He continued to wince at her ministrations. "Has anyone ever told you that your bedside manner needs work?"

"Maybe it'll remind you to think twice before engaging in battle with a man-eating giant," she replied with a hint of a smirk before closing the wound. "Just a little pinch now...."

"BLOODY 'ELL!"

He left promptly after his leg was healed and his pants *Scourgified*, thoroughly convinced that McGonagall was a sadist, although he had to admit that the results were exemplary. There was no sign of a scar and the pain was gone. Since he didn't have time to eat before his next appointment, he decided to skip lunch and walk down to the lake on the far side of the grounds.

Hogwarts had lush and beautiful scenery year-round, but Moody always regarded autumn as the season when it was exceedingly breathtaking. It was brisk outside, even though the sun shone overhead. He stood alone along the bank that buffered the Forbidden Forest and looked out over the waters as the breeze graced the skin on his face. He always found a calm center here.

A faint scent of jasmine brought him out his thoughts. Looking over his shoulder, he eyed a figure at the edge of the tree line dressed in robes bearing the Slytherin sigil. He turned slowly, wary of his visitor's intent. The stranger advanced silently toward him, brandishing a wand.

"Stupefy!"

Moody rolled out of the way to dodge the hex, coming about on his feet with his wand raised. He blocked another hex and counter-advanced as he aimed his own spell.

"Expelliarmus!"

The Disarming jinx knocked his opponent to the ground. They wrestled in the grass, but Moody prevailed, using his weight to pin the assailant down. He removed his attacker's hood, and a pair of dark, glimmering eyes stared back at him the same eyes from the girl he had seen on the staircase.

"Get off me, you brute!"

She tried to free her arms, but he had them pinned securely by her wrists above her head. With his free hand, he used his wand to undo the clasp on her robe, exposing her school uniform.

"Well, well. What are you doing so far from Slytherin, little girl?"

"Gryffindors don't own the grounds." She stopped struggling and sighed. "Now let go of me."

"There's a price for freedom, lass." He leaned into her lips and kissed her eagerly.

She turned away, giving him her cheek. "You're late, Allie. And I saw you making eyes at all those Gryffindor girls during first meal."

"I had to keep up appearances, didn't I?" he offered in defense. "Imagine the scandal, especially now, if the school found out that a Gryffindor is dating a Slytherin."

"Don't exaggerate."

His eyes perked. "You aren't jealous, are you, Druella?"

She rolled her eyes. "Hardly."

"Then why the hex?" he asked with an accusatory look.

She smirked. "Just marking my territory. I don't like all the attention you've been getting lately." She looked up to him, her face clouded with concern, before continuing, "It was bad enough before, but now I think you're going to find someone prettier than me."

He rolled off and lay next to her on his side, looking down at her with his head propped on his hand. He knew how easily he could lose himself staring into her dark gray eyes.

"C'mon, Dru, you know I would never date those girls from the other houses, least of all from Gryffindor."

Her teeth tugged gently on her lower lip. "Really? And why is that?"

"Too prim and proper. I've always been attracted to slightly naughtier girls," he said, grinning as he leaned towards her.

She turned her head away quickly, giving him her cheek again. "Maybe the sorting hat got you wrong, Allie love. You're all Ssslytherin," she said, teasing him with a seductive hiss.

He picked out a buttercup from the grass next to her head. She closed her eyes and let him pin it in her hair just above her ear. As he touched it, her hair started to change color in waves, turning from black to violet.

"Nah, I could never be a Slytherin... dreadful colors." He grabbed a few of the purple strands between his fingers and put them to his nose. They had the same hint of jasmine as her perfume.

Her eyes widened. "Not again," she sighed when she saw her hair. "Stop making it do that."

His eyes narrowed. "How could I possibly make your hair change colors?"

"I dunno," she said with a shrug. "But it only does it when I'm around *you*."

"Why do you hide it anyway? You should develop these abilities... see how far they can go..."

"And be regarded a freak? No thanks."

"You are not a freak." He continued to stroke her hair, making note of the way it glistened at certain angles in the sunlight.

She blew back a tuft of hair that had fallen on her nose. "I'm glad *you* think so."

He slid a hand slowly down her tummy until he reached the waistband of her dress. "I wonder... Does it change colors ~~everywhere~~?"

Giggling, Druella pushed Moody onto his back and sat astride him. "Don't get cheeky, Allie," she said, while she punched at him playfully. "I was just starting to forgive you."

They both laughed until her punches started to turn into gentle caresses. She arched a violet eyebrow as she pulled his shirt up to his chin to expose his muscular torso. He leaned back, interlacing his fingers behind his head, while she traced her nails between the grooves of his lean stomach.

"Beau corps, monsieur," she said with hungry eyes. "Est-ce que tu es aussi doux que tes yeux?"

"No fair speaking French, Ms. Rosier." He spasmed when she dug her nails deeper into his skin. "Aren't you afraid we'll be caught?"

With a mischievous smile, she leaned forward, propping her hands on his biceps. Her medium-length hair draped over one side of her face with the ends lightly grazing his cheek. "What do I have to be afraid of when I have the mighty Alastor Moody to protect me?"

He frowned. "That'll remain to be seen when everyone finds out I lost Gryffindor the House Cup to your lot."

She sat up, resting her hands on her hips. "I rest my case: you prefer Slytherin *top*," she said with a wink.

He sat up and grabbed her firmly by the arms. She yelped when he buried his face at the base of her neck. He began to kiss her tenderly, following the line up to just below her jaw. Her moans indicated her approval as the kisses lingered longer and longer in the same spot.

She gasped when she realized that she was enjoying the sensation a little too much. "Allie, what are you doing?"

"Marking *my* territory," he said after he finished sucking her flesh.

She forced herself to push him away. She picked the flower out of her hair, and using his wand, transfigured it into a hand mirror. She brushed her hair aside to examine the bruise. Exasperated, she snapped, "I have class in ten minutes, you git!"

She threw his wand back at him and got up to retrieve her things. A lopsided grin of satisfaction crept across Moody's face as he looked upon her. Her pouty expression remained even as she fastened her robe. She turned to storm away, but spun on her heels too fast and ended up tripping on the hem of her robe. A shrill yelp escaped her lips when she landed on her bum. She scrambled to her feet and glared at him, her bottom lip trembling, daring him to laugh.

He wisely chose to keep his expression humorless. "Don't forget about your hair, Dru."

She shook her head vigorously from side to side until her hair returned to its natural raven color. As she walked away, more carefully this time, she glanced back at him over her shoulder, giving him a wry smile before turning her nose up at him.

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Barty Crouch released his grip on Moody's mind, allowing him to regain consciousness. "Sorry about that last interruption. We had a little run-in with the police. Fortunately, your blood-traitor friend, Weasley, took care of it." He grinned with satisfaction when he noticed Moody clench his jaw. He leaned in closer to whisper in Moody's ear, "Y'know, I had no idea that old hag Druella was such a tasty slice of crumpet in her day."

"Don't talk about her like that!" Moody's head was still pounding; it felt like he had been drugged. He noticed that he was still in his chair, but had been moved to his bedroom his magical portmanteau sat open at the foot of his bed. He tried again to break the Binding Curse, but was unsuccessful. "And you stay outta my head, boy!"

Crouch spun him around in the chair, looking Moody in his good eye. "I could force you to answer a bunch of boring questions, but this way is much more efficient. Besides, I can't wait to see how this train wreck turns out. Who would've thought you were such a ladies' man."

Moody returned Crouch's stare. "If a peep show is all you're looking for, next time I'll just dredge up some memories of your sweet old mother," he said with an even timbre that hid his fury.

Crouch stood up straight, not taking his eyes off Moody. "My mother wouldn't give you the time of day, old man!"

Moody smiled. "It wasn't the 'time' I got from her, mate."

His eyes narrowed as he pointed his wand at Moody's temple. "You're lying."

Moody winced when he felt Crouch's Legilimency invade his brain. Struggling to stay conscious, he sneered when he saw the color drain from the young wizard's cheeks. "Thought I was lyin', did ya?"

Crouch's eyes widened in horror. "Mu...Mummy?"

He tried to break the connection, but Moody held fast in hopes of reversing the link. He was now able to wiggle his fingers slightly, so he continued to press Crouch, saying, "Look at the sweet haunches on that wench. Your mum really knew how to mount a broomstick, if you catch my drift. She always smelled like pickles, though."

"Shut. Up." Crouch's features contorted. He placed his hand over his eyes in a vain attempt to obfuscate the images forced into his mind.

Moody could feel Crouch's resolve weakening. If he could just free his hand, he could reach his wand across the end table. "I really miss shaggin' your tart of a mum. Let's see... The last time I was with her was around the year 19... Er, how old are you, boy?"

"CRUCIO!"

Reunions

Chapter 4 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 4

Reunions

A jostle welcomed Moody back to the waking world. He was about to place a hand on his throbbing forehead, but paused, realizing that he couldn't see it. He blinked to convince himself that his eye was open. Satisfied, he sat up, trying to pinpoint the direction of the disparate, muffled sounds of activity outside. He quickly got the sense that he was no longer in his flat. Probing the void, he managed to touch the opposite wall without too much of a stretch. His fingers traced the perimeter; all he could determine was that this prison of darkness was comprised of a rectangular area barely able to accommodate the length of his outstretched body. Propped betwixt the walls, he steadied himself on one leg and reached up as high as he could, but was unable to touch the ceiling.

A series of clicks was heard. The creaking of hinges preceded a sudden influx of brightness, spurring Moody to shield his lone eye until it was able to adjust. He looked up and sneered when he saw his own face eclipsing the light from above. If he didn't know any better, he would have assumed that he was looking into a mirror.

The doppelganger looked down on Moody and returned his sneer. "Oh, good, you're awake."

"Crouch!" Moody spoke his jailer's name, although it came out sounding more like a cough in his weakened state. "What is this?"

"You weren't in a very agreeable mood for traveling, so I had to put you inside this handy little footlocker I found in your bedroom. I had to make some modifications; I hope you don't mind."

It was unnerving to see Crouch wearing his magic eye and to hear him speak so cavalierly in his own voice. "I suppose we're at Hogwarts by now. Did you already jinx the Triwizard cup?"

Moody nodded in agreement. "I feel the same way. By a strange coincidence, I'm traveling as well, but your itinerary sounds much more exciting than what I had planned."

"Oh? Where are you traveling?"

He found himself blushing again. "I... was going to go about it willy-nilly, actually."

"You know, I think it was fate meeting you like this on today of all days." Tom came out from behind the counter and approached Moody. He spoke in a much quieter voice, "I was going to quit this job tomorrow and set off by myself next week. But conquering the world is much more fun with a partner, I always say."

Moody mused and stroked his chin, saying, "It's part of the tradition to travel with a mate. I'm in." He smiled, pointing back to the pocket watch. "Of course, I'll need some traveling money."

Tom snorted. "Right." He picked up the pocket watch and examined it more closely. "I'll give you five galleons."

Moody frowned in disappointment. "What? It's worth at least three times that."

He shrugged in response and returned to the counter. "Sorry, Allie. Times are tough all over with the war and all."

"Crap!" Moody curled his lip and shrugged in surrender. "I guess I'll take it."

Tom punched a key on the register. The drawer opened with a chime and he took some money out. "I'll send you an owl."

Moody took the money and said his goodbyes. Once again, the bell above the door jingled, marking his egress.

Godric's Legacy

Chapter 5 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 5

Godric's Legacy

Alastor Moody and Tom Riddle stepped out on the open plain. The tall, amber grass at their feet swayed gently in the cool wind. Moody looked down briefly at his shadow, taking note of his position relative to the sun, and looked back to face Riddle. They both stood relaxed, each brandishing a wand held loosely in his grasp. At the sound of the raven's caw they snapped their feet together and brought their respective wands up slowly in a salute. Moody used the position as an opportunity to wipe a trickle of sweat, beading on his upper lip, with his thumb before snapping his wand at his side; it cut the air with a satisfying *swish*.

Without indulging in further ceremony, the duelists took their stances. Moody engaged the standard "Unicorn" stance...his forward leg bent at the knee and his rear leg remained straight with his wand outstretched before him. Riddle, on the other hand, employed the "Dragon's High Guard" where the bulk of his weight rested on his back leg with his wand held crooked over his head. Moody's eyes narrowed at his opponent's unorthodox opening.

Riddle's smirk betrayed his intention to strike first. "*Expelliarmus!*" He nodded in approval when Moody deflected the spell with nary an effort. "Very good. I remember when Wallace got you with that one in your sixth-year semifinals."

Moody bowed his head slightly. "Thank you. Can we stop playing about now?"

"Very well. Slytherin House rules, then?"

"Fine with me."

Riddle advanced two steps closer and resumed his stance. "So, how did Druella take it when you told her that you would be gone for the better part of a year?"

"Not very well," Moody said with a frown. "She's under the delusion that you and I are setting out to sow our wild oats in every brothel between London and Timbuktu."

"You mean we're not?" Riddle replied with a smirk. "How did you get her to sign off on it?"

"Wizard's oath," Moody said hesitantly before tensing his muscles in preparation. "*Expelliarmus!*"

Riddle slapped the spell aside. It shot straight up into the air before dispersing harmlessly high above them. "What did you say?"

Moody sighed, embarrassed, and admitted, "She made me take the Wizard's Oath."

The smirk on Riddle's face broadened into a knowing grin. "She must really be the one if you're willing to go through all that. Druella was always a little high-strung."

"You should know." Moody tracked Riddle's wand as he feinted to the left. "You introduced us."

"Yes, well, better you than I..*Expelliarmus!*"

"Thanks... I think," Moody said sarcastically after a successful block. "Seriously, how come you never made a move? I know she liked you at one time."

Riddle's grin disappeared. "I'm a half-blood, remember?"

Moody kept his wand at the ready as he moved closer. "Dru doesn't care about that stuff."

"Are you sure about that? She comes from an old world family. You wouldn't have a problem being a full blood and all..*Expelliarmus!*"

Moody spun to parry the spell while simultaneously advancing two more steps. "Being a full blood isn't all it's cracked up to be, to tell you the truth. With all the pressure of being a wizard, sometimes I envy a bit of the mundane."

"Take it from me. I spent the first eleven years of my life among Muggles. The experience was overrated."

"Expelliarmus!" Moody cursed when Riddle dismissed his best attack. "So, you haven't had anything to do with Muggles since you started at Hogwarts? What about your family?"

Riddle shrugged. "Truth be told, I did pay my Muggle father a visit not too long ago. I needed the closure so to speak."

"Really? How was it?"

"Satisfying." Riddle gripped his wand tightly as he moved in for the last two steps. He stood less than ten feet away from Moody.

"Expelliarmus!"

Riddle brought his wand across and, in a backhanded riposte, deflected the spell back to hit Moody in the chest, knocking him off his feet. With a painful grunt Moody picked himself up, regarded Riddle briefly and saluted in closing.

Riddle returned the salute and walked over to shake Moody's hand. "You've improved greatly since sixth year. I wasn't sure if I was going to win that one."

"That certainly didn't stop you from knocking me on my arse," Moody replied, rubbing his chest. He walked with Riddle back to their camp. "Where did you learn that move?"

"I'll show you." Once they reached the campsite, Riddle rummaged through his bag and pulled out a book. He tossed it over to Moody. "I dug that up from my old job. Supposedly, it's a lost manuscript of Godric Gryffindor's travels."

Moody opened the aged tome carefully; the leather binding creaked quietly in his hands. "Tom, this looks valuable. Shouldn't this be in a museum or something?"

Riddle reached into his bag again, pulling out a canteen and unscrewing the cap. They started to walk along the trail. "We bought it from this bloke for six pence. He ripped us off; it's a copy of a copy of a translation. There's no way to verify it. My boss was going to toss it, but I convinced him to give it to me instead. Personally, I believe it's based on real accounts."

Moody continued to skim through the first few pages. "They didn't teach us this stuff at Hogwarts."

Riddle took a swig from his canteen. "They didn't teach us a lot of stuff at Hogwarts, mate." He offered his canteen to Moody, to which he politely declined, and screwed the cap on before putting it back into his duffel bag. "If you like it, you can keep it."

"Really? I can pay you."

Riddle waved his hand dismissively and said, "Like I told you, it's not worth anything. I got everything I wanted out of it besides."

"Thank you, Tom," Moody said, nodding in gratitude. He skimmed over a few more pages and started to fall behind. He had to jog to catch up to Riddle.

Riddle slowed to allow Moody to catch up. They walked side by side in silence as they entered the forest. When they found the hikers' trail, Riddle slung his bag over his shoulder, grinning as he mused, "You know what's funny; I learned more in one year peddling people's garbage than I did in all my years at school. It's amazing what people throw away."

"In times like this, people become desperate. They end up parting with stuff just to make ends meet. I wasn't crazy about selling my father's pocket watch, but sometimes you have to do what you have to do."

"At least your father left you something, mate," Riddle remarked. "But you're right about the things people do when they're desperate. I'm sure every one of the objects in our shop has a story to tell."

"Any you'd care to share?" Moody looked up at the sun in order to gauge the time. He wiped the sweat from his brow and added, "It's a long walk to the next borough."

Riddle glanced back at him, smirking. "Some other time, mate. I promise."

They broke through the edge of the forest and stopped. A female giant was drawing water from a nearby stream. She had amber skin with long black hair and was wearing a deerskin dress. She looked sufficiently distracted, so they retreated quietly into the brush and moved parallel to the river, careful to stay out of sight.

Riddle frowned and whispered, "Well, there goes any chance of making it into the next town before sundown."

Moody nodded in agreement. "She hasn't seen us. We can stay out of sight if we stick to the trees along the river."

"That'll add a good two hours to our trip," Riddle said. He promptly stormed onto the riverbank.

Moody grabbed for him, but Riddle was already out of reach. "What are you doing?"

Riddle approached the giantess with his wand aimed. When she saw him approach, she snarled and waved at him threateningly with a series of grunts and clicks. Undeterred, Riddle fired a few stunning spells and advanced quickly. The giantess screamed, picked up a small boulder and flung it as a child would toss a rag doll. Riddle sidestepped the man-sized rock and countered with the Binding Curse. The giant's limbs held fast together and she fell to the ground, shrieking as Riddle stood over her.

Awed by this demonstration of advanced magic, Moody ran out of the forest, carrying their bags, and came to Riddle's side. "Good job, mate." He looked to Riddle with apprehension as the giantess struggled against the curse's effects. "Let's go; that's not gonna hold her for long!"

"I beg to differ." Riddle pointed his wand with authority, reasserting the spell, and held her fast. All she could do was wail in her bindings.

"Wow," Moody uttered under his breath.

At this point, Riddle had become visibly annoyed by the creature's moans. "Quiet, you cow!" He flourished his wand; she writhed on the ground and screamed even louder.

Moody looked to Riddle, then back at the giantess. "The Cruciatus Curse?"

"Yes," he said casually. "Tough little monster, isn't she?"

Moody's eyes narrowed. "But it's in an 'Unforgivable', Tom."

Riddle rolled his eyes at Moody's reaction. "We're outside of the Ministry's jurisdiction, mate. All bets are off."

Moody retained his look of steadfast disapproval. "Tom, you're hurting her."

"Right, the noise is annoying, isn't it?" He finally released his hold on her. She bolted to her feet and started to run, but Riddle bound her ankles, causing her to trip headlong into the grass. "We're not done yet, love." He kept his wand raised and forced her to her feet. She stood up straight and walked over to them calmly. Moody started to back away, ready to run, but Riddle motioned for him to stay. "It's all right, Allie, she won't give us any more trouble."

Moody stared at him in horror when he realized what was going on. He walked over and grabbed Riddle by his wand arm. "Are you mad? Let her go!"

Riddle scoffed at the rebuke and replied, "So she can get her friends? Not a smart move, mate." He broke from Moody's grasp and, with another flourish, commanded, "Dance for me, love."

The female giant immediately began to prance around in front of them. She twirled and pirouetted gracefully in spite of her massive size. The ground shook slightly every time she landed from a jump.

Moody looked on, regretting the amusement he felt from the display. "The Imperius Curse."

"Mhmm," Riddle replied with a furrowed brow. "It just takes a little more concentration."

"Amazing. But how are you doing this? It's a giant."

"I would be happy to teach you if you'd stop prattling," Riddle snapped, at the end of his patience. "You see, Dumbledore would have you think that in order to be a powerful wizard you have to be an old wizard made wise by life experience. Not true. I've discovered that a wizard's power is directly proportional to his force of will. That's why you couldn't stun your giant."

Moody shook his head but kept his gaze upon the giant, as if mesmerized. "Not to be contrary, but I put a lot of willpower behind my hexes, and they didn't even slow my giant down."

"That's because you were afraid," Riddle answered with a knowing wink. "Things like fear and doubt will interfere with your potency. You see, when you're afraid, you jinx yourself. You worry about the spell not working because you worry about dying. The solution, of course, is not to fear death. Therefore, the wizard that can conquer death will conquer all magic." He focused his attention back to the beast and hissed, "I said *dance* for me, you gargantuan tart."

Moody looked on, jaw agape, as the scene took a disturbing turn. The giantess' movements became slow and more deliberate. Her hands moved slowly down the contours of her body. She whipped her hair about in rhythm as her belly undulated seductively to a melody heard only to herself.

Riddle grinned in satisfaction. "Do you remember that half-breed oaf of a giant Hagrid?"

"The one that opened the Chamber of Secrets? Yeah."

"The existence of creatures like that always made me wonder what the appeal was for a bloke to shag a giantess. Although, now I must admit to a sudden curiosity."

"If you believed the rumors of his pedigree in the first place." Moody raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms, trying to look visibly bored. "At any rate, I've never had the occasion to ponder it myself."

"Don't be a dullard, Allie." Riddle scowled but persisted, "I figure, in such unions, it'd have to be the case that the mother is invariably the giant; I doubt that a human female would survive such a coupling. That is, unless the genitals for a giant don't scale like they do for humans." He sneered in realization. "We have a unique opportunity to answer that question now, don't you think?"

At his command, she slowly started to push off her shoulder straps and let them slide down her arms. The dress draped over her waist while one of her arms rested across her breasts. With her free hand, she combed through her black hair and whipped it over her shoulder. Her lips parted slightly as her fingers traced the outline of her mouth.

Moody watched the deerskin dress slip lower and lower down her waist before he finally looked away. "What are we doing here, Tom?"

"We are here to push the limits of all magic. To learn what they refused to teach us in school."

Moody sighed in frustration. "No. I mean what are we doing *here*?"

"My answer is the same." He glanced back at Moody, confused. "Why do you care, anyway? It's just a giant. Given the reverse, she would squash us like bugs."

"You don't know that."

"Oh, c'mon! They're animals! You should know that better than most!"

Moody put himself between Riddle and the giantess, pointing at her, saying, "Look at her eyes, Tom! She's scared!"

"Like your mentor, Huxley, was?" Riddle shoved him aside. "Like the people in the English West Country, living in terror at the mercy of their giant while the Aurors flitted about with their thumbs up their arses?"

"Still, that doesn't give you the right..."

"I have *every* right. Just as you did when you played judge, jury and executioner."

Moody paused and curled his lip. "That was different."

"Was it, mate? How did you know your giant was the same one that attacked all those villages?"

"HE WAS EATING HUXLEY!"

Riddle shrugged, keeping his tone calm. "But how do you know he killed him? Maybe it was some other giant. Maybe Huxley had an accident, a little slip and fall, and your giant just happened upon the body and decided, 'Waste not, want not.'"

"That's not funny, Tom."

"No, it's not. You didn't even bother to investigate. You just assumed and you took action. Why? BECAUSE YOU ARE SCARED OF DEATH!"

Moody looked down at his feet. "...I never considered the possibility."

Riddle responded with a reassuring smile. "No worries, mate. It's in all of us from birth. Besides, it was only a giant. As a race, they don't have the intelligence to tie their shoes, let alone wear any. Creatures of 'near-human intelligence', right?"

His eyes widened when he realized the significance of Riddle's words. His head snapped in Riddle's direction, his eyes glaring. "Are you reading my thoughts? Get the hell out of my head!"

"Sorry, mate, but you were projecting a bit," Riddle said with an apologetic shrug. "Won't happen again."

"Enough of this." Moody made no more effort to hide his agitation. He tossed Riddle his duffel bag. "Let her go. I mean it, Tom."

Riddle arched a wary eyebrow and chuckled. "Relax, Allie. It was just a bit of fun." The giantess slumped to the ground as Riddle discontinued his Imperius Curse. He slung the bag over his shoulder and brushed past Moody, slapping him on the back. "See, no harm done. Let's go; I'm famished."

Moody switched his backpack to his other shoulder and followed after Riddle. As he walked away, he glanced regretfully at the giantess who was left sobbing by the riverbank.

Paradigm Shift

Chapter 6 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 6

Paradigm shift

BAM!

Two figures Apparated from a ripple of displaced air. They coalesced into the forms of Alastor Moody and Tom Riddle, each landing headfirst into a patch of wet mud. They lay there, not moving, for several seconds until Moody broke the stillness by swatting at a fly that had landed on the tip of his nose. The sun was shining directly overhead, and he squinted until his eyes adjusted to the brightness. He looked to his left and saw Riddle lying calmly next to him with his head in his hands.

"Tom?"

"Yes, Allie?"

"Still alive, eh?"

"I think so." Riddle sat up, wiped a glob of mud from his face and flicked it at Moody. "That's the last time I let you talk me into doing something like that."

Moody spat out the mud in his mouth and sat up. "Don't act like you didn't like it." He wiped the remaining mud that had fallen into his eyes on his sleeve. When he looked up, he saw that Riddle was pointing a wand at his head. Moody gasped when a stream of orange light shot out and grazed the side of his face.

Riddle sneered as he put his wand away. "One of the little buggers hitched a ride."

Moody looked down at the hairy, multi-legged animal covered with stingers that twitched at his feet. "Thanks, mate. But how about a little warning next time?" he said, rubbing his cheek.

"What are you complaining for?" Riddle picked up his bag and headed back for the trail. "You'll be doing this sort of thing for a living soon enough. What's the pay like, anyway?"

After adjusting the straps on his backpack, Moody followed close behind. "Not enough, from what I hear."

"You should strive for something more lucrative," Riddle said, glancing back at him over his shoulder.

Moody rolled his eyes and decided to change the subject. "What's next on the itinerary?"

Riddle reached into his bag, pulled out a map and held it up to the light. Two blips on the page were synchronized with their position on the path. "Assuming you have no more 'diversions' planned for us, we'll soon be coming across an ancient library in the next village that once belonged to Merwyn the Malicious."

Moody tried in vain to comb the already dried flecks of mud out of his hair with his fingers. "Shouldn't we get cleaned up first?"

"Naw, we'll blend in better this way."

BAM!

They reappeared at the edge of a large hamlet. Riddle put the map away and led them into a bustling marketplace. The streets were lined with vendors selling various foodstuffs and exotic magical items.

Moody was relieved that he had taken Riddle's advice; most of the seedy villagers were dressed in raggedy clothes and likewise covered in grime. Aside from a few odd looks, they seemed to be accepted by the populace. "If memory serves, Merwyn was a really bad egg. Invented all sorts of evil magic."

"To some extent, it's all relative," Riddle replied. "Even Godric and Rowena dabbled in what we now call the 'Dark Arts' and they founded Hogwarts."

They stopped at a stand and were greeted by an old man who spoke Scandinavian. Riddle waved his wand to cast a translation charm.

"It was a different time, Tom." Moody picked out two blocks of cheese from the cart and continued, "They didn't have a Ministry of Magic back then."

"It just proves that knowledge, in and of itself, is not evil. If it were, then why bother having a restricted section at Hogwarts' library? Why not just destroy the information?" Riddle paused to grab an apple. After sniffing it, he put it back into the barrel and grabbed a plum instead. "I guarantee you that Dumbledore and the rest of those old cronies in positions of power want to keep all that information for themselves while they keep the masses in ignorance 'for our own good'. It's just another level of control."

"I understand what you're saying, Tom. But you have to admit that it would be a disaster if everyone went around experimenting with Dark magic *ad libitum*."

Riddle paid the man and the two were off again. "There is no Dark and Light magic, only Dark and Light wizards."

Moody chose to soothe his rumbling stomach before replying. He didn't realize how hungry he was until he took his first bite of goat cheese. "But just look at what a few of these so-called wizards have done with that knowledge."

"There wouldn't be any Dark wizards if those fat cats at the Ministry weren't so drunk with power. Crime comes from ignorance and corruption, not enlightenment. The founders knew that. I suspect you know this too."

"I have to admit that my confidence in the system has been shaken of late," Moody conceded, talking with his mouth full.

"Then why become a Ministry lapdog?"

"The Aurors are not 'lapdogs'. Without them in place, you end up with... well, a cesspool like this, actually. They are the only forces that keep us from lawlessness."

"The virtue of the people is what keeps us from lawlessness," Riddle corrected him.

Moody looked back with narrowed eyes. "You know what I mean."

"Well, for what's its worth, I think you'd make a pretty good Auror."

Moody raised an eyebrow. "You think so?"

"Yeah. You're sufficiently idealistic and you duel pretty well. Although, you can be a tad conventional."

His brow dropped. "What do you mean by conventional?"

Riddle spat the plum pit onto the ground and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "I mean you're easy to read."

Moody snorted. "I am *not* easy to read." He walked silently for a few more paces before his curiosity got the better of him. "How am I easy to read?"

Riddle shrugged, half annoyed, before taking a swig from his canteen. "I don't know, Allie. Do you really want to get into this now?"

"What else are we gonna talk about?" he replied, nudging Riddle in the ribs.

"Well, I just meant that you fit into a certain mold and tend not to deviate from that pattern."

"The pattern being?"

A grin slowly etched its way onto Riddle's face. "The Maverick Hero: he who sweeps in, battles the baddies and saves the very grateful damsel in distress."

Moody snorted. "Rubbish."

"It's a bit cliché, really," Riddle persisted.

"Now I know you're talking out of your arse ."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. You just need to think outside of the box. Otherwise, it can leave you vulnerable..."

"Vulnerable? How?"

"In the real world, a person that wishes you harm won't formally challenge you on the piste. It's all about finding and exploiting your enemy's weakness."

"What if your enemy has no weaknesses?"

"Everybody has a weakness, Allie."

"Is that so?"

"Let's take you for instance," Riddle said, still grinning. "People with your personality type usually have the debilitating habit of loving too hard."

Moody smiled in reply and, with a wink, added, "Some weaknesses are worth having, mate."

Riddle sniggered slightly. "Yes, well, theoretically, if I were a Dark wizard, I would follow you home and observe you, waiting until you let your guard down. But I wouldn't attack you directly. No, I would wait until you left your loved one unprotected, then snatch her as my prisoner. That way, when I chose to confront you, I would have the advantage."

Moody looked at him curious. "You're speaking theoretically, of course?"

"Of course," Riddle replied, punching Moody in the shoulder and causing him to drop his cheese. "I'm merely saying that you have to stray from the paradigm to keep your enemies off guard." Riddle looked at Moody in disgust when he picked his cheese up off the ground and wiped the dirt off.

Moody paused before taking a bite to say, "Three second rule." He scarfed down the rest of his breakfast, ignoring Riddle's jeers of revulsion. "Anyway, I know what you're saying, Tom, but still, it's not very honorable."

"It's not about honor; it's about winning."

Moody nodded. "So, what's your weakness, then?"

Riddle stood a little taller. "Well... I happen to be an exception to the rule."

Moody threw up his hands, exasperated. "Haven't you stopped to think that perfection can be a weakness?"

"No," he replied, blasé in his response. "But it can be rather dull."

"Wanker."

Riddle called for a truce, massaging his shoulder after Moody punched him back. As they left the noise of the crowd, Riddle's lighthearted demeanor seemed to fade along with the din. "Allie," he said in a sudden moment of reverie, "Still speaking theoretically, of course, what would you say if I told you that there exists magic that would allow you to cheat death. Would you use it?"

"Not without asking 'what's the catch'?" Moody replied absent-mindedly. "What prompted this?"

Riddle smiled weakly. "Nothing. I was just curious, 's all."

They came to the center of the town square where a small crowd had assembled before a raised platform. Moody watched a short, stout, middle-aged man bring a young unicorn filly on stage. Its legs were shackled to prevent it from galloping. The man chained the animal's neck to a post sticking out of the floor. He uttered something to the crowd in Scandinavian, which immediately sent the onlookers into a frenzy.

Moody looked on in apprehension. "This can't be good. What do you suppose they're doing?"

Riddle slyly took out his wand and waved it around their ears. "Only one way to find out."

Moody's fears were soon confirmed once the translation charm took effect. "They're auctioning off her organs?"

Riddle nodded. "It makes sense, I suppose. You'd get more money for the parts than you would trying to sell the whole. A unicorn's pancreas alone could be used to..."

"It's barbaric! These animals are almost extinct!"

Riddle put a calming hand on Moody's shoulder. "But these people are desperate, Allie. It's not for us to judge, especially with the state of the economy in the wake of the Muggle's wars..." He stopped when Moody shrugged him off to head for the platform. "What the bloody hell are you doing, Allie?"

His words fell on deaf ears for Moody was already halfway through the crowd. After he pushed through to the edge of the podium, he took out his wand and jumped onto the stage. Before the auctioneer could react, Moody stunned him. He quickly turned to the poacher and shot him off the stage in short order. He immediately went to work unlocking the unicorn's shackles, ignoring the cries of the angry mob. He heard a command in Latin and spun in the direction of the voice, but his would-be attacker was already unconscious. He looked back and saw that Riddle had broken through the crowd, the embers of his stun spell still dancing off the tip of his wand.

With a standing leap, Riddle joined Moody on the stage and guarded him while he finished untying the unicorn. "Are you insane, Alastor?"

"I'm being unconventional, remember?"

"Right. I did say that, didn't I? Silly me."

"What can I say? Dru likes unicorns; her Patronus is a unicorn. She'd be miffed if I stood by and let one get slaughtered."

"I see. The last thing we want is to upset your girlfriend."

The mob had gotten larger as the noise started to attract more onlookers. The duo blocked the random spells that were shot sparsely from the crowd. Fortunately, most of the villagers did not seem to own wands. However, that did not stop the rest of them from taking up arms and advancing in angry unison.

With a practiced flourish, Moody banished the first wave, sending them flying like leaves in a breeze.

"Ace move, Allie!"

"The competition keeps me in shape!" he answered, all the while dueling a couple of older wizards who had been able to punch through.

Not to be outdone, Riddle gripped both hands tightly around his wand and sent a yellow arc of energy into the center of the mob. Those that weren't blown aside scampered away in fear.

BAM!

Without looking, Riddle pointed his wand in the direction of the familiar sound of Apparition, followed by a deadly voice.

"*Avada...*"

Riddle was ready for him. "**EXPELLIARMUS!**" His enemy flew backward, hitting the pole hard and rendering him unconscious. Riddle stood over his prey. His expression was serene, but the tip of his wand glowed a bright green.

As Riddle had done for him before, Moody placed a calming hand on his friend's shoulder. "Tom, he's down. Don't do it; it's no longer self-defense."

"You would have me spare this trash?" Riddle said in a disturbingly pensive tone.

"I don't care about him. I'm thinking about you."

"What did I tell you about idealism, Allie? This isn't the classroom. You don't give an enemy a chance to regroup. This is about life and death."

"Yes. And I'm thinking about *your* life; he's not worth fracturing your soul over."

Riddle lowered his wand. "I suppose not."

To conceal their escape, Riddle cast a powerful Confundus Charm, causing the majority of the mob to mull about aimlessly. With the unicorn in tow, they Disapparated from the village and reappeared at their campsite on the far side of the forest.

Once they were settled, Tom paced back and forth, still reveling in the excitement of the moment. "Well, we didn't get to see the library, but still, that was bloody brilliant! I don't believe we did that!" He calmed down enough to notice that Moody was quiet. "What's wrong with you?"

Moody knelt over the unicorn lying in the grass. A pool of thick, silver liquid had started to pool under her and seep into the soil. "I think a stray shot hit her. She's bleeding out."

Riddle looked on quietly for several minutes. The unicorn moaned weakly while Moody gently stroked her mane, powerless to stop the bleeding.

Riddle gently knelt down beside Moody. "Stand back. I can help." When Moody was clear, he placed his wand on the unicorn's forehead. "*Avada Kedavra.*" A green light enveloped the animal and it stopped breathing. He looked at Moody. "She was suffering. It was the only way." He looked away, unable to read Moody's expression. "You know I'm right."

Without saying a word, Moody got up and walked away, leaving Riddle alone with the corpse.

Unrequited

Chapter 7 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Unrequited

Moody stepped tentatively through the darkness. The lichen-encrusted floor made a loud crunch under the weight of his feet. He walked with a slight crouch and panned his wand about, trying desperately to get a lay of the dark cavern by the dim light of the *Lumos* spell. Wherever he flashed his wand, he caught glimpses of strange vermin before they scurried off. He looked over to Riddle, who held his wand high overhead, its light diffusing shortly past the length of his arm. Since his head was directly below his wand's hilt, Riddle's face was obscured in shadow. Moody could tell by the vigor in his companion's step that he had a different opinion about the potential dangers that might lie ahead of them.

"Just because I almost got us killed last time does not mean you should try to one-up me in the 'reckless stunts' department, Tom. You're supposed to be the levelheaded one."

"What are you going on about? It's perfectly safe in here."

Moody kicked aside an ossified femur after almost tripping on it. "Then why, pray tell, is the ground littered with skeletons?"

"I wouldn't say 'littered'; I counted three skeletons four, tops. I'm sure it's meant to scare off the riffraff."

Moody could imagine the smirk that must be etched on Tom's face. "Don't be glib, Tom. It's not the skeletons that give me pause but the way they came to be here."

"That's my point. You don't see any fresh corpses around, do you? According to legend, this antechamber is over a millennium old. I doubt if any traps still work after all this time."

"I doubt that magical contraptions would have an expiration date."

Riddle sighed, maintaining an air of casual disinterest. "Would it make you feel any better if I walked a few paces ahead of you, Allie?"

"Why, yes, Tom, it would. Immensely." It felt good to throw some of Riddle's sarcasm back at him.

Riddle's features disappeared in the darkness despite the light from his wand. Moody kept a wary eye out for danger as he followed the bouncing orb ahead. He whipped his light in the direction of a shrill, clicking sound; it was only a bat. When he reached the end of the ancient corridor, he found Riddle examining a door with inscrutable writings carved into the rockface.

Riddle waited until Moody got his bearings. "Everything all right?"

"Yeah," Moody replied rather quickly. "So, what do you make of this?"

"You mean you haven't figured it out yet?" Riddle snorted before pointing his wand at the ceiling. "*Lumos Maxima!*"

A flare shot from the wand and exploded a few meters above them, illuminating every crack and crevice in the immediate area. Moody's eyes widened with recognition. He reached into his backpack and pulled out Godric's manuscript. He flipped frantically through the pages until he found a hand-drawn rendering of a vault the same vault which now stood before them.

"We've found it," Moody said barely above a whisper. "Gryffindor's tomb." He reached out to feel the door, tracing his fingertips between the grooves of the many glyphs. He looked back at Tom, who stood over him with a grin of satisfaction. "The writing... can you translate it?"

"No," he replied, pursing his lips. "As far as I can tell, it's rooted in Old Germanic."

Moody stood back to get a better view of the writing. He reckoned that it measured about six meters from the floor to the ceiling. Water dripped from a crack in the weathered masonry above. He could see a colony of algae clustered around the moisture. It spread all the way from the adjoining wall to the seal lining the door. The vault's craftsmanship was impressive; the stones were fitted so tightly that there was no need for mortar, and yet they had held the cavern together for centuries. There wasn't a surface that did not have runes chiseled into the rock. Even after all that time, it was evident that the calligraphy had been performed by a master.

Unfortunately, Old Germanic was not one of Moody's strong suits. "There's got to be a way to open it. It's probably hidden in code."

"*Alohomora!*"

"Tom, wait..." Moody hopped back. The sound of aged gears and scraping rock could be heard behind the wall. A stale breeze puffed past them as the twin doors cracked open.

When the doors had fully parted, Riddle brushed past Moody, slapping him on the back. "See, I told you. It's perfectly safe."

Moody followed Riddle past the doors into the main antechamber. With a wave of his wand, Riddle activated the torches along the wall. Moody opened the book and read aloud the reference below the rendering of the tomb.

"*In these hallowed walls lie my most prized possession and the source of my power: my core!*" He closed the book and put it away. "What do you think it means?"

Riddle walked toward the center of the chamber. The Gryffindor sigil was carved into the stone at their feet. When he put his weight on it, a pedestal raised from an opening in the floor. The two crowded around the stand and stared in awe at a bright red gem suspended at its peak.

"How's that for an answer, eh?" Riddle commented.

"The core?" Moody probed the jewel with his wand. The light from the tip reflected off the gem brilliantly and illuminated the room, bathing them in a crimson glow. "The core is an amulet?"

"It would appear so; it reacts to magic." Riddle backed away from him to examine some of the glyphs along the wall with greater scrutiny. "Take it. If this place is truly a tomb, then this could be the key to finding the sarcophagus."

Moody reached out but stopped short of touching it. "I feel like we're making a mistake."

Tom continued to press him. "What we're 'making' is history."

Moody nodded uncertainly. "So easy...."

"Go on."

Moody did not go on but instead lowered his hand and glared at Riddle. "Too easy."

"Pardon?"

"Do you honestly expect me to believe that we could just stroll in here unchallenged? Even you are not this brazen. You've been here before, haven't you? You deactivated all the traps." He sighed in sudden comprehension and thought aloud, "There's something preventing you from taking the amulet, isn't there? Something that you need *me* for?"

Riddle shook his head. "You're being paranoid, Allie."

"Really?" He stood aside. "Then you take it."

Riddle met Moody's stare but eventually curled his lip. "I can't."

He scoffed in disbelief. "Do you think me stupid, Tom?"

"I don't think you're stupid, Allie. A little naive, perhaps," he replied with a smirk. When he saw that Moody was not amused, however, his expression sobered. "Yes. I was able to anticipate and disable every trap from a careful reading of the text. However, the last puzzle how to grab the amulet itself escaped me." He walked over to the adjacent wall and illuminated a specific spot with his wand. "None of the renderings made sense until I saw this glyph."

Moody's eyes focused on the faded depiction referenced by the glyph. He recognized it immediately. "Gryffindor's sword." He chuckled in understanding before adding, "So, as with Godric's sword, you think only someone with the true heart of a Gryffindor can claim the amulet?"

"It was the only solution that made sense!" The urgency in Riddle's voice betrayed his excitement. He paced back and forth thoughtfully as he ran his fingers through his dark hair. "And when you walked into Borgin and Burkes the day before I quit, I believed it was providence confirming my theory."

Moody gripped the manuscript tightly in his hands. "I now see why you gave me this book. And all that talk about justification through reason... I suppose that was all rubbish too?"

"NO!" Riddle held up a finger as he approached Moody from the opposite side of the pedestal. The red light reflected from the amulet amplified the intensity in his eyes. "Everything I've told you was true; knowledge will set us free. I wasn't trying to deceive you; I just wanted to gauge your level of interest."

"Gauge my level of interest?" Moody turned his back on his friend.

Riddle kept his voice soft and reassuring as he reengaged him. "Our travels together have convinced me of one thing: you and I are two of a kind."

"But, Tom, we have to tell somebody about this. It should be studied. Everyone has a right to the knowledge."

"I agree. But you know what's going to happen once those fat cats at the Ministry get their hands on this place? After they usurp its magic for themselves, they'll destroy it, catalog it and stick it in a vault somewhere. I guarantee you that the knowledge will never see the light of day in any history text."

Moody averted his eyes, looking down on the red jewel. "So, what knowledge do we gain from this?"

"I believe this object to be more powerful than the Elder Wand or any Philosopher's Stone. Verily, Gryffindor's secret may bring us one step closer to defeating death."

"I thought what we were trying to accomplish was enlightenment."

"Yes, enlightenment through a complete understanding of magic. But in order to gain a complete understanding, we have to be fearless in its pursuit." Riddle grasped at the amulet longingly. His hand passed through the relic as if it were nothing more than a projection of false light. "They say Godric was never defeated in combat. Why is that? Was he that good? Or did he have an edge?"

"So, you think this... *trinket* was Godric's edge?" Moody asked. "How can you know that?"

"I don't claim to know. But you read the text yourself," he said, pointing to the manuscript now in Moody's pocket. "Godric wouldn't have gone to such lengths if this were not powerful magic."

Moody rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Sure, it's powerful...so powerful that Godric hid it away. Maybe this is all a warning, Tom."

"If it was so evil, so dangerous, then why bother at all? Why not destroy it? Is it supposed to sit here for all time in this musty cave?"

The room went quiet. In his reverie, Moody rested his hands on either side of the pedestal and stared deeply into the artifact. It had an almost hypnotic glow about it. "I...I just don't know, Tom."

Riddle stood behind his friend. He placed his hands on Moody's shoulders and rubbed them gently. "Some of the greatest discoveries of wizardkind started with 'I don't know'. We come to knowledge by questioning." He leaned in and spoke softly in Moody's ear. "I don't know either, Allie, but I want to. Join me. We can find those answers together...you and me against the world. All you have to do is reach for that unknown and take it. Take control of your destiny."

Moody found his friend's words soothing. The way Riddle stroked the hair at his temple, the way his warm breath felt on his earlobe put him at ease: things were starting to finally make sense.

It's the only way we can be together.

The thought echoed in his head. Tom was always such a good friend: always kind, always a good source of advice and always a genius at magic. Why not?

You've always admired me. Who has been a better teacher to you than even Dumbledore? Who tutored you through your O.W.L.s? Who helped to conceal your relationship with that... girl?

Yes, he'd always admired Tom. He loved the way his strong hands held him, as a master would the hilt of a wand, wanting to shudder at his touch, the conduit for Riddle's power, in service to him...to service him. Moody yearned to kneel before him, arms outstretched, smitten, at the mercy of whatever spell ejected from the tip of that magical rod. The thought of it made his blood surge.

We'll do that, and more, when we're together. All you have to do is grab my jewel...

WHAT THE BLOODY FU...? Moody turned to face Riddle. Not realizing how close they were, their lips grazed as their eyes met. Moody jerked away and moved to keep the amulet between them. "I...I will realize my destiny, Tom... but on my own terms."

Riddle reached tentatively for Moody's hand on the corner of the pedestal. Moody's withdrew from him, and Riddle sighed impatiently, his eyes pleading. "Look, I get it. You're still mad. I'm sorry about lying to you, I'm sorry about the unicorn, I'm sorry about the bloody giant..."

"That's not it, Tom." Moody backed away and leaned thoughtfully against the wall just below the glyph of Gryffindor's sword. "It's just that this isn't fun anymore."

"*Fun?* What did you think this was going to be, Allie, a field trip? I don't know about you, but I'm here to raise the level of the game."

"At what expense, Tom?" he asked, raising an eyebrow and folding his arms.

"There you go again, talking like a sheep! What's wrong with wanting to be the greatest wizard in the world? I thought we were partners."

"So did I. But now I'm starting to get the distinct impression that what you want is a... minion."

Taken aback by the accusation, Riddle started to retort but quickly abandoned the notion and fell silent. He glanced several times between Moody and the wand resting in his hands before finally replying, "How can you say that Allie? How long have we been friends?"

Moody stood upright. "Long enough for me to know that sometimes you can be a right tosspot!"

They squared off with their wands pointing downward and grasped tightly in their hands. There was to be no salute.

Moody stared at Riddle intently, looking for any sign of the person that he had once regarded as a friend. Riddle had his back to the flames, which cast his features in shadows, making him more inscrutable than ever. Moody debated whether he should either strike preemptively or devise a counter-spell; there were still some moves in his arsenal that Tom had not seen yet. After the brief moment of tension, however, something unexpected happened: Riddle laughed loudly in a rather mirthless display of cachinnation.

Riddle put his wand away, keeping his movements slow. "You're right, of course. I am a tosspot. But don't you see? This is why fate put us together, Alastor. Because of your heart. We are a perfect match; you can keep us honest."

Moody sheathed his wand. "I'm glad you agree because my heart tells me that the amulet should stay here as Godric intended." He tapped the panel and watched the pedestal lower back into the floor, taking the amulet with it. Satisfied, he headed back for the door but noticed that Riddle was not following him. "Are you coming or staying?"

Riddle looked back with disappointed eyes. "Nothing's keeping you here on my account."

"I see." He reached into his pocket and offered up Godric's manuscript. "I s'pose you'll be wanting this back, then?"

Riddle shook his head before looking away for the last time. "No, you keep it. No hard feelings, eh?"

The quietness of death returned inside the tomb. Moody started to walk over to Tom to make one more entreatment to his friend, but something, an instinct, stopped him. A wall of unfamiliarity had arisen between them. One thing was for sure: he no longer felt safe.

"Goodbye, Tom."

"Goodbye, Allie."

Moody left without another word but did not turn his back to Riddle until he had cleared the chamber. After Apparating at their camp, he reached into his backpack once more and grabbed a small velvet box. He opened it with care and gazed longingly at the ring inside before touching it with his finger.

BAM!

Angel Be Mine

Chapter 8 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 8

Angel Be Mine

BAM!

When Moody's vision came back into focus, he removed his finger from the ring. The light, caught by the diamond of the Portkey, sparkled under the streetlamp over his shoulder. As he stood outside the Rosier residence, he closed the velvet case and walked up the stairs leading to the front door to ring the buzzer. After the sound of shuffling on the other side, the door creaked open slightly. The small face of a house-elf peeked out and looked up at him.

"May I help you, sir?" the elf asked timidly.

He looked down at the small creature and gave her a reassuring smile. "Alastor Moody to see Druella Rosier."

The elf led Moody inside where he was instructed to wait in the foyer. He rested a hand on the solid oak table. The crystal vase that sat atop it cut the light from above like a prism and sprinkled the surface with a bevy of colors. His eyes followed the wrought-iron banister of the grand staircase up to the second floor ledge which was obscured behind a solid gold chandelier. The mural of the Rosier family crest was stained into the glass ceiling high overhead.

The sounds of footsteps on the hard marble floor drew his attention back to the moment. Evan Rosier, Druella's younger brother, entered on his way from the living room.

He stopped when he noticed Moody standing by the table. "What do you want, Gryffindor?"

"Nothing that has anything to do with you," Moody replied casually.

"You wouldn't be allowed to show your face around here if it were up to me—" He stopped when Moody stepped closer and backed away instinctively.

"How lucky for me that it is not up to you, then."

Evan sneered. "It's a shame that you didn't meet with any unfortunate accidents while you were away—"

"Evan, play nice."

They both looked to the top of the stairway. Druella regarded them casually as she descended, all the while tracing her fan along the handrail. Her long bangs covered most of her face and drew attention to her cherry-red lips. A lace scrunchie pinned her hair into a ponytail, exposing the delicate, white skin of her neck. The thin fabric of her straps rested loosely off her shoulders. Her sleeveless dress was a dark green color which appeared black when she turned at certain angles. The bodice was perfectly pleated to fit snugly around her tiny waist with the attached skirt flexing with her hips, causing the hemline to flow around her naked calves at every step.

Moody looked upon her, unblinking, as if he were seeing her for the first time.

When she got halfway down the staircase, her heel slipped on the edge of the marble. She cursed as she stumbled but managed to grab onto the handrail before falling on her bum. Moody had plenty of experience in keeping a stoic expression after such displays. Evan, on the other hand, was not as practiced and let a loud snort of amusement escape his lips.

Glaring, she pointed her wand at her brother. “*Waddiwasi!*”

Moody watched Evan launch vertically toward the ceiling to crash through the mural and out of sight. The pieces of glass that rained around him were stilled by Druella’s *Reparo* spell and dangled in the air briefly before reassembling themselves on the ceiling. As she dispelled the few remaining shards stuck to his collar, he watched them dart back to their home in the mural as if of their own volition. The hole repaired, he looked at Druella with a sly smirk. “Someone’s been practicing.”

Druella had since made it to the foot of the stairs. She put her wand away and brushed her black hair out of her eyes while she regained her composure. “I didn’t think you’d be back for months.” She eyed him briefly. “You look like hell, by the way.”

“Thanks,” he said, approaching her. He noticed as he got closer that she was fidgeting nervously and refusing to look at him directly. It reminded him of how his own heart raced in anticipation of holding her again. “Let’s just say that I couldn’t stand to be away from you any longer. It didn’t feel right. I had to come here straight away.”

“Charmer.” She embraced him and immediately relaxed in his arms. “So, I take it that you’re back for good? No more gallivanting all over creation?”

He smiled a mischievous grin. “Well, there was this *one* bordello in Turkey that was closed for the season. I was thinking about popping over next week.”

She pushed him away and turned her back to him as she folded her arms. “You’re not as funny as you *think* you are.”

He grabbed her arm and spun her back around firmly. Their eyes met. “Don’t act like you didn’t miss me.”

When he leaned in, she turned her head away. “*Maybe* after you’ve taken a bath—”

Not to be denied, he gently grabbed her chin and turned her back to his lips.

She moaned quietly; her hair changed to a deep shade of violet. When they finally parted, she wrapped her arms around his neck and asked, “So, did you find the answer you were looking for?”

“Pardon?”

She nuzzled the tip of her nose against his. “It was the reason for your trip; you said that you had a question that you needed to answer.”

“Right. That I did, love.” He smiled again and leaned in to whisper in her ear. “As it turns out, I have an even more pressing question in need of an answer—if you would be so kind as to indulge me, Miss Rosier?”

Rolling her eyes, she pushed him away, her hands on her hips. “Not if it’s to entertain any more of your cheek.”

“I see.” He took her hand in his and knelt in front of her. He waited until she looked down on him so as to gaze into her eyes.

She gasped in realization when she saw the ring he had placed on her finger.

“In that case, will you marry me?”

o~o~o~o~O~o~o~o~o

Moody kept his eye closed as he tried desperately to hang onto the image of Druella accepting his proposal: the look of love on her face, her smile as she nodded, her unmistakable scent. They had both been so happy then. As much as he wanted to linger on the memory, he couldn’t escape the harshness of reality; he was back in that damned footlocker.

“Even then, in his youth, the Dark Lord was magnificent, was he not? I envy you.” Crouch’s snarling voice was unmistakable.

Moody wiped the grogginess from his eye but kept it closed because it hurt too much to see. “I can’t help but notice that you have an elevated opinion of Tom Riddle.”

“Gee, I wonder why?” Crouch said with heavy-handed sarcasm. “Is it because he’s the greatest wizard of all time?”

“Aven’t you been paying attention, kid? You are nothing more to him than sheep.”

“Yes, toward those who are unworthy, but he rewards loyalty. As for *you*, he reached out to you, and you spurned him!”

“If I had known what he planned on becoming, I would have done far more than ‘spurn’ him.”

“And you would have failed, old man. Because then, as now, he was your better!”

The painful light dimmed as Crouch closed the lid. In the darkness, Moody could hear the clicking of multiple locks engaging followed by deafening silence.

Lasting Impressions

Chapter 9 of 35

Alastor Moody’s defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Lasting Impressions

The icy wind, not yet warmed by the morning sun, raced away from the approaching light that peeked over the horizon. Five pillars of stone swayed inches above the ground while the wind whistled between the narrow crawlspaces that divided them. A lone man walked in a circuit around the massive display before levitating to the top of the first stone. The tail of his overcoat flapped loudly at his back as he looked to the remaining rectangular pillars then to the sun rising in the distance.

Between the gusts of wind, the sounds of footsteps crunching across the cold, dormant grass could be heard. Despite the chill in the air, the source of the sound wore sandals adorned with gold and precious stones. Her ebony skin was visible between the straps as each step alternately caused her feet to venture beyond the hem of her dress.

She stopped afore the lead pillar and looked up to acknowledge the elder wizard. "Good morning, Maestro."

"Mornin', Shacklebolt," the maestro replied, all the while keeping his eyes on the horizon. "So, I take it that you're going to be Delany's replacement, after all?"

"Obviously," she replied aloofly.

"The only thing that's *obvious* to me is that you're late."

"Despite evidence to the contrary, I know better than to interrupt you when you're having your bit o' fun," she responded in an unapologetic tone.

For the first time, he looked down at her and sneered. "I don't remember you being so... critical."

"Gee, I wonder where I picked up that little quirk." She returned his sneer with a smile. "Is it as peaceful up there as it looks?"

"It is." He eyed her a while longer then finally allowed a grin to carve its way into his wrinkled face. "Care to join me?"

"If it's all the same to you, I'll stay on the ground."

"Suit yourself, girl."

He stomped hard against the granite surface as he walked it. The sound of each step permeated the rock and reverberated all the way to the bottom.

She kept pace beside him into the wind. "So, how are the recruits faring?"

"They're the sorriest bunch of *scabs* I've ever seen." He stopped at the edge of the stone and hopped over the gap to land flatfooted onto the next pillar.

"Really? And here I thought my class was the absolute worst."

"It was at the time. Every year, I get older and the scabs get scabbier." He proceeded to again stomp his way across the entire length of the column before leaping onto the next.

She balanced on her tiptoes, having lost sight of him at the far end. "That just means we'll have to be that much better at training them, then, won't we?"

He snorted. "Our job is not to train them, Auror Shacklebolt."

"Really?" she asked, befuddled. She caught up to him at the edge of the fourth monolith before continuing. "Then I'm afraid that I have been laboring under a falsehood. Would you care to enlighten me, Maestro?"

"It's simple. Our job is to make them ring that bell." He then pointed behind her.

She looked to see a golden bell magically suspended at the edge of the henge. She chuckled softly to herself before replying, "I see. I assume that we hope the ones that pass are good enough to one day be worthy to call themselves Aurors?"

The maestro shrugged. "If you say so." He then leapt onto the last stone and started to jump up and down vigorously with his full weight as if to drive it into the ground.

She waited with ambivalence. When the old wizard stopped to catch his breath, she interjected, "Are you quite done?"

In reply, he backflipped off the ledge and landed nimbly beside her. "I guess I'll be off, then."

Shacklebolt watched him walk off then referred back to the floating pillars. "Er... are they supposed to be left like that?" she asked before he was out of earshot.

He paused in mid-stride, turned to look at the stones then glanced her way to say, "No, I suppose not." He returned by her side and orated into the open field, "You scabs have been lying around long enough. Remove your training stones."

Each of the five megaliths hovered painfully aside to reveal a trainee underneath. They were flat on their backs, pressed against the earth in defiance of the great weight which threatened to crush them, without the benefit of a wand. The ground shook when the stones plopped to ground in unison.

Relieved of their burden, the trainees slowly sat up. The maestro circled the lot of them, his hands clasped loosely behind his back. A smirk of satisfaction was visible on his face.

"That, lady and gentlemen, was the levitation spell. Now, if someone asks if you can raise two tons of rock without the use of a wand, you can comfortably answer 'yes'." He held up his wand and ordered them to their feet before adding, "The point of this exercise was to remind you that the magic you wield comes from within you, not a piece of wood. At the very least, you should come out of this with an appreciation for those magical creatures that do not rely on wands."

At this point, the trainees were lined up and at their feet, save for the one who had hefted the fifth stone. He remained bent, resting with his hands on his knees, even as the maestro stood over him.

Sneering, the maestro looked down at the young man with the dirty-blond hair. "Still breathing, are you, Scab Moody?"

Moody returned the sneer with a smirk but knew better than to look the maestro in the eye. "Yes, Maestro."

"You look a little... tired."

Moody forced himself to stand erect but kept his eyes forward. "Never better, Maestro."

"A shame. I was counting on getting a ring out of you today." He turned to Shacklebolt. "They're all yours. When you're done, have them replace the training stones on the henge."

She acknowledged the request and waited until he Disapparated before addressing her new charges. "My name is Queenie Shacklebolt. Now that introductions are out of the way, you'll notice right off that my teaching style will vary greatly from that of the maestro. And from what I've seen, he's been too soft on you. Defending yourself in a controlled setting is one thing, but how many of you have had to contend with full-strength curses?" She paused briefly to study each of their faces. When she saw no takers, she continued, "Well, then, let's see what I have to work with. Collect your wands and queue up."

She waited, tapping the tip of her wand against her thigh as the trainees retrieved their own wands which waited for them next to the golden bell. The way they mulled about made it obvious that they were still exhausted from their previous session with the maestro. This, however, did little to ease Shacklebolt's impatience.

"Suck it up, scabs. You can rest when you're dead."

With renewed vigor, they lined up single file to face her. Shacklebolt drew her wand and engaged the trainee at the head of the line, a young female with red hair. "The object of this exercise is to block the curse in any manner you deem fit." Shacklebolt waited until the trainee took her stance, making note of how the wand shook in the young witch's trembling hand. With a flick of her wrist, a fluorescent, blue spark shot out of her wand and hit the trainee in the chest, causing her to fall on her back, gasping for breath. The trainee behind reached down to help her up, but Shacklebolt promptly waved him away. "Those tears aren't going to do you any good against a Dark wizard, chile. As you can see, at full-bore, even a plain and simple *Expelliarmus* can be quite unnerving. Minus two points."

The next trainee fared no better than the first; Shacklebolt downed him with an even faster Disarming spell.

She sighed in disappointment. "Minus two points. Who's next?"

The trainee that followed managed to get his wand up to block, but the force of the spell sent it flying across the field. She summoned the fallen wand to her hand and tossed it back at the trainee's feet.

"It does you no good on the ground, scab. Minus two points. Next in line."

When Moody took his place at the head of the queue, Shacklebolt stopped to regard the younger wizard. The way he stood, the confidence with which he held his wand, his defense left no apparent openings. Nevertheless, she had no deficit of criticism. "You'll all come to find that I despise stragglers...those who hang back in line for the obvious advantage of going last." She continued to eye him as she took her guard. "Drop your wand."

Moody's eyes narrowed. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

"How am I supposed to defend myself?"

"That's *your* problem."

He knew it was coming the moment his wand would hit the ground. As soon as he loosed his grasp, Moody closed his eyes and began to chant inwardly, trying desperately to summon the *Protego* charm. He felt the powerful energy of Shacklebolt's hex surround and envelope him. The charm dispersed most of the attacking spell's energy, but it wasn't enough. When he opened his eyes again, he was flat on his back. The other trainees stood around him, each sporting an amused expression at his expense.

"Not bad. But your empty-hand technique needs a lot of work. Don't assume that you'll always have access to your wand. Minus five points." She watched Moody take his place at the sideline before calling up the last trainee. When he took his guard, she ordered him to drop his wand to which he grudgingly obeyed.

"*Avada Kedavra.*"

A green light enveloped the unsuspecting wizard and blew him off his feet. The others looked on in horror at his still, fallen form. Moody made a run for him, but Shacklebolt ordered him to stay back as she raised her wand.

"*Rennervate!*"

The green aura was replaced by a soft, white light that seemed to diffuse into the cadet's body. He gasped loudly as the air filled his lungs. He bolted upright, screaming when he realized what had just happened and frantically started tearing into his clothes to scratch the skin underneath.

She approached him calmly. "You'll only make it worse if you scratch at it."

His head snapped in her direction; he reached instinctively for his wand. "What did you do to me?"

"Next time don't dawdle when I order you to queue up. Minus twenty points."

Ignoring his discomfort, he sprang hastily to his feet. "Twenty points? What's this cock-and-bull? First you deprive me of my wand, and then you hit me with an unblockable curse!"

"And you failed," she answered softly. "What of it?"

"It's the Killing Curse! It wasn't a fair test!"

"Fair?" She snorted in amusement. "You're still alive, aren't you?"

"First you people try to crush me, and then you try to kill me?"

He gripped his wand and stood threateningly before her. Shacklebolt took no action but did not back down either. Her only visible response was to raise one of her eyebrows.

Moody had since drawn in closer unnoticed by both of them. His wand was out, but he kept it lowered. "Norman, calm down. You know perfectly well that you have to mean them."

Norman ignored him at first but after a few seconds seemed to relax. He finally glanced over to Moody and put his wand away before storming off. "I don't need this shite!"

They watched Norman storm off the field. Once he stepped beyond the henge, he Disapparated out of sight. The golden bell began to toll.

...oOo...

The events of that morning weighed on Moody heavily. He sat in the changeroom, staring into his open locker. Lost in thought, he barely took notice when one of his teammates walked up and opened the locker next to his.

"So, what do you think of the new instructor, Moody?"

"She has a sexy accent, Jeff," he replied casually.

Jeff snorted as he retrieved his favorite derby and placed it atop his head, slightly askew. "I meant in a professional capacity."

Moody shrugged. "I haven't formed an opinion yet, honestly."

Jeff took out a change of shoes and sat on the bench next to Moody's. "C'mon, mate, you have to admit that she made a hell of a first impression."

Before Moody could answer, two more cadets, one male and one female, entered the changeroom. The male spoke, "Hey, gents. Tough break about Norman, eh?"

Jeff waved him off. "Bah, Norman was a wanker anyway. Don't tell me you're going to miss him, Reuben."

Reuben ignored the comment and sat down at the bench in front of his locker. "I only meant that since there're only four of us left, there'll be a lot more abuse to go around now."

"So what? You afraid you won't be able to hack it, mate?"

"What I'm 'afraid' of is her overcompensating to prove that she can play as rough as the boys."

For the first time, the red-headed female cadet spoke. "And what's that supposed to mean, Reuben?"

Reuben smiled mischievously and said, "It means that, like all you other females, she probably has something to prove, Angie."

Angie slammed the door of her locker after grabbing her purse. "If it was the maestro we were talking about, you wouldn't have given it a second thought. But since she's a woman, she obviously has hormonal issues, right?"

Reuben's smile broadened. "Yep, that pretty much covers it."

She frowned. "Hmph. Figures, you being a *halfsie* and all."

"In his own limited way, Reuben may have a point, Angie." Jeff said, and before Angie could respond, he added, "There are some years where nobody makes it through the program. The instructors intentionally try to break you."

Angie winked in reply and said, "Sounds like you've half given up, Jeff. Maybe you should go ring that bell now and save yourself the trouble."

"That'll certainly make the maestro very happy. I can imagine the old warhorse shooting his goo every time he hears a tinkle."

"You blokes are missing the point," Moody interjected. "Didn't you see how bent Norman got? He completely lost his composure."

"Getting hit with a Killing curse will do that to you," Reuben said.

"Maybe, but would you want somebody like that watching your back in a scrape? She certainly had him pegged."

Reuben merely shrugged and finished tying the knot on his tie. "Just hope that she doesn't start pushin' your buttons, Moody. You might be next."

With that Reuben closed his locker and left the room. He was soon followed by Angie.

"We're giving Norman a proper sendoff at the pub, if you gents want to tag along," Angie said on her way out.

Jeff waited until he and Moody were alone again before saying, "Things are starting to get serious, eh?"

Moody hesitated and nodded. "Yeah."

"Have you been practicing your Patronus Charm?"

Moody looked at him warily in reply. "A bit."

He smiled at Moody's reticence but pressed him anyway. "So, what is it?"

"I... still haven't quite got the hang of it yet, but I'm pretty sure it's an animal with four legs."

"For your sake, I hope you pull it together soon, mate. Rumor has it that with all the trouble the Dementors have been giving the Ministry, they might make conjuring a Patronus a requirement on our exit test."

"Rubbish. A Patronus isn't the only way to take down a Dementor."

"Maybe not. But if you're gonna try to get by without one, you'd better at least come up with an edge."

"Okay, Mummy."

"Hey, I'm just looking out for you."

"Yeah, I know."

"I think I will head down to the pub for a pint. Are you coming?"

"Naw, I have a date with Dru."

"That's nice." Jeff closed his locker and got up to leave. "Give her a pat and squeeze on the bum from me, will you?"

Moody curled his lip at his failure to formulate a timely rejoinder but decided to let it go. When he was finally alone, he reached into his locker and retrieved his copy of Godric's manuscript. He thumbed the edge of the binding thoughtfully and then put it away in his coat pocket. He left the room and, with a flick of his wand, closed the door to his locker.

Stargazing

Chapter 10

Stargazing

"That was certainly... different."

"Wasn't it fascinating, Allie?"

Moody wrapped an arm around his fiancée and drew her in closer as they stepped out of the auditorium. The closing door muffled the sounds of applause from within the building. The sidewalks of Diagon Alley flooded with attendees, most of whom were young couples like themselves. The air was abuzz with talk of the lecture still impressed in everyone's minds. Moody pulled the pamphlet that he had been using as a makeshift bookmark out of his manuscript. The picture on the cover depicted two snakes circling a dagger with a caption written in Greek. When they broke from the crowd, he glanced over his shoulder, making note that Evan Rosier was keeping pace behind them.

"I hope you don't mind my brother tagging along," Druella said while thumbing through her identical pamphlet. "Mummy and Daddy wanted him exposed to some culture for a change."

"Naw, I don't mind," Moody replied with exaggerated crestfallenness. "After all, it's only been the first time in *months* since we've had the opportunity to spend some time alone together."

"Aww, I know." She looked up at him with sympathetic eyes. "I promise I'll make it up to you."

He nodded behind them. "He hates me, you know."

"You mean Evan?" Druella answered with a pinched brow. "How can he hate you? He doesn't even know you. Don't be so paranoid, Allie."

"*Me* paranoid? I think the people in that meeting have the market cornered on paranoia. A bunch of blabbering idiots, that lot." He threw the pamphlet away as they passed a convenient dustbin.

"How would you know?" she asked, eying the manuscript that Moody had placed back in his coat pocket. "You seemed to be more absorbed by that dingy old notebook than the presentation. What is that you've been reading, anyway?"

"It's... something for work. Nothing you'd be interested in."

She seemed unsatisfied with the answer but didn't press the issue. "Well, I didn't agree with everything they said either, but they still had some valid points. You would've been impressed had you been paying attention."

"I was paying attention," he corrected her. After a few steps, however, a smirk betrayed him. "What did they call themselves again?"

She looked to him with a reprimanding glare in answering, "The Separation Society."

"Right," he said, snapping his fingers. "So, the Auror in me is left wondering how these blokes are any different from Grindelwald and his ilk."

"Grindelwald was about the subjugation of Muggles and other lesser beings. The SS, on the other hand, is about pure segregation: leaving Muggle affairs to Muggles and Wizarding affairs to wizards."

"But let's be honest; the level of separation they want can never be achieved. There haven't always been wizards and witches. I mean, we came from humans; therefore, we are forever related, aren't we?"

"Yes, but you have to look at in context. Of course we came from humans, just as they evolved from a lower form of primate."

"So, where does that leave half-blood wizards?"

Druella remained blasé in her response. "I have nothing against halfsies. Some of my best friends at Hogwarts have one Muggle parent, but that doesn't mean I want them in my family."

"But, by your own admission, we all came from Muggles. So, we're all Muggle-born to some extent, right?"

"And that's why they propose the *Pure-pool*: seven generations of Wizarding blood in your family tree is considered sufficiently pure." She glanced into the pamphlet to make sure she quoted it correctly. "It makes sense, given the magical significance of the number seven."

He grinned at her enthusiasm. "Sounds like a wizard-breeding program."

She snorted quietly. "It's more about preserving our heritage. There aren't many of us left, after all."

"Now you're advocating arranged marriages? That's a little old-fashioned, don't you think?"

"On the contrary, it's about choices: a community by and for pure-bloods. I think it's quite progressive."

"And what's wrong with Muggles, anyway? I know a few myself. They aren't a bad sort in general."

"You're kidding." She said, rolling her eyes. "Muggles have the capability to destroy the planet. Their constant warring is fodder for Dark magic." She rolled the crinkled pamphlet into a tight cylinder. It made an odd scratching noise when turned against her laced silk gloves. "Honestly, did you sleep through *all* of your Muggle Studies courses?"

"Frankly, if it didn't help strengthen my wand-arm, it didn't garner much interest for me."

"In that case, it's lucky that you have me." She smiled and took his arm in hers. "There have been studies done by the Ministry that suggest Muggle cultural influences are serving to unravel our very way of life. The SS certainly makes a compelling argument when they claim that a departure from our traditions has led us astray. Moreover, all this interbreeding is accelerating that departure."

He gave her a knowing wink. "With all this talk of breeding, you're not trying to hint at something, are you?"

She bopped him on the forehead playfully with the cylinder. "Focus, Alastor."

"So, the fact that Aurors have to fight off goblins, ogres and Dark wizards is due to Muggles?"

"I'm just saying that if there were less Muggle influences in our wizarding society, then your job would be a lot less perilous. Ergo, you wouldn't have to work so hard. Ergo, you would get to spend more time with me."

"I guess I can't argue with that..."

She yelped when her heel gave out from under her. Arms flailing, she spun out of his grasp and fell backwards.

Moody's training took over. *Mobilicorpus!*

His spell grabbed her inches before the back of her head would have struck the base of an old iron lamppost.

"Putain de merde!" She looked down at the heel of her shoe which had caught in a crack in the pavement and broken off. Oblivious to her near peril, she seemed more concerned with the appearance of her dignity. "That wasn't my fault!"

"I know it wasn't," Moody sighed, relieved that she was considerably lighter than a training stone. After she was steady, he levitated her upright.

She looked back to her brother, Evan, who had wisely pretended not to notice the display. "That's a deathtrap; someone could get hurt!"

"Funny how you seem to attract danger like a magnet," Moody commented under his breath.

She glared at him. "What did you say?"

He smiled. "What? I didn't say anything."

"You can't blame me for that one!"

"I know, pet."

"Honestly, I almost broke my bleeding neck!"

He brought her around firmly at eyelevel, forcing her attention. "Not when you have me around to catch you."

The words calmed her enough to allow her to notice that she was still suspended off the ground. She blushed when their eyes met. "Allie, put me down."

He shrugged innocently. "What? It's not me."

"I *know* it's you." She giggled involuntarily when, with a wave of his hand, he spun her around higher, but she grew self-conscious again when she regarded the looks from some of the passersby. "Allie, people are starting to stare. It's not proper."

"That's because it's not everyday that you get to see an angel flitting about." He curled his finger.

She embraced him when she settled slowly to earth. "Charmer."

They leaned in tentatively, caressing each other's lips, when the moment was interrupted by a shrill cough. They looked over to Evan, who remained a few paces back and whose expression sported a slight look of annoyance.

Moody frowned. "I think I'm starting to see the real reason why your parents wanted your brother to tag along."

She put a hand on his cheek and leaned in closer to whisper, "Why don't I take Evan home, then meet up with you at our *special place*. Say in an hour?"

Regarding her mischievous wink, Moody looked around warily with a sly grin. "I don't know. People might get the wrong idea it not being 'proper' and all."

"Don't be that way, mon bébé."

"Alright. But only if you promise to be on your best behavior," he said, shaking his finger at her sternly.

She balanced on her tiptoes, stopping short of gracing his lips with hers. "Absolutely not."

He watched her as she and Evan headed back toward the train station. When they were out of sight, he reached into his pocket. He opened the manuscript to where he had left off and continued to the end of the street. His eyes were fixed on a picture of Godric dueling two dragons, one gold and one red, and dispersing the dragons' flames with twin spouts of water. Moody had studied the drawing for hours in his spare time, analyzing every detail especially the wands that Godric wielded in each hand.

He soon found himself standing outside of Ollivander's wand shop at the far end of the street. He put the manuscript away before going inside; the doorbell tinkled upon his entrance. He gave the place a quick sweep. He hadn't been here in years, ever since he had purchased his own wand before enrolling at Hogwarts. Nevertheless, the ancient shop looked just as he remembered it. The only difference was that the old man he then recollected behind the counter was replaced by a much younger one.

The shopkeeper finally looked up from his ledger to regard Moody. "Purpleheart wand with a core of gryphon's feather."

When he realized that the shopkeeper had just described his wand, Moody looked at him suspiciously. "That's right."

The shopkeeper, Ollivander, went on, "I was the one that delivered it when you purchased it from my father."

"I see."

"Purpleheart...a relatively uncommon wand, but elegant nonetheless." He stepped out from behind the counter and walked over. "Is that the kind you used against the giant?"

"You have a good memory."

"We *all* do. I just choose to exercise mine." He crossed his arms. "Now, what can I do for you?"

"Do you... have anymore Purpleheart wands in stock?"

...oOo...

Moody made his way beyond the edge of the Forbidden Forest. When he was sure he was alone, he took out his new wand and compared it to the original. Ollivander's craftsmanship certainly had not waned over the years. The two specimens were indistinguishable from each other. His eagerness got the better of him; he could no longer wait. With a wand in each hand, he made his way to a clearing, pointed both wands at a nearby tree and concentrated on the first spell that came to mind.

Aguamenti.

Nothing happened. He tried the spell verbally.

"Aguamenti!"

He frowned. Not so much as a drop of water appeared. He held both wands together in the same hand. This time, he decided to try something simpler.

"Lumos."

He was blinded by an explosion of light. He dropped his wands instinctively to shield his eyes. The nearby creatures of the night darted from their hiding places, confused by the sudden appearance of daylight.

Moody got on his hands and knees and groped blindly for his wands. Eventually, the light subsided enough for him to see. When he was able to open them, he found himself face to face with a unicorn filly. He couldn't tell at first if the glow around it originated from the animal or if his eyes were still reeling from the effects of the wand-flash.

The unicorn approached closer and nuzzled against the side of his leg. He put his hand across her mane when he recognized her energy as a Patronus. She encouraged Moody to follow her deeper into the forest. He followed the trail illuminated by the Patronus' afterglow until he passed a familiar boulder perched at the head of a shallow stream.

He walked around to find Druella sitting comfortably on a felled log, warming herself by a small campfire. The surrounding trees only allowed for a small inlet of the night sky to be visible through which a beam of silver moonlight shone down upon her.

She basks in the moonlight, my night-angel.

Is she real, or simply a reflection of love?

The promise of her smile drives my heart to beat

with a scent sublime and a kiss so sweet.

Her beauty's so bright, it hurts to see.

It compels me to ponder,

Has she bewitched me?

Druella smiled and beckoned him over. When he took a seat next to her on the log, they both petted her Patronus briefly before allowing it to trot off.

She withdrew her wand after sending the Patronus back into the aether. "She keeps me company when you're away."

"You have got to show me how you do that sometime."

"And give up the one thing that I'm better than you at? Not likely."

When he moved in closer, his hand brushed against something leathery. He looked down and picked up an old book. "What's this?"

"I had to make a stop at the library," she said, blushing as she bit her lip. "Now give it here."

"Hold on a sec." He kept it out of her grasp when she reached for it. He read the title aloud. "*Practical Astrology*."

She reprimanded him as he flipped through the pages. "Don't get snarky, Allie."

"I didn't say anything."

"You have that look." Before he could respond, she continued to explain, "I couldn't exactly tell my father that I was going out unescorted to meet a boy in the Forbidden Forest."

He grinned in understanding. "So, you told him that you're off to the library, and you grabbed this book on the way in order to give credence to your lie."

She looked at him, slightly shocked. "It's not a lie."

Amused, he continued to thumb through the tome. "So, why this book?"

"I just grabbed the first book I saw." She started to become annoyed as he continued to read. "What are you doing?"

His grin broadened into a smile. "Well, if you're going to carry on with a lie, you must do it properly."

"Stop it, Allie. I didn't lie."

"Sorry. I simply meant that you should be prepared in case your dad decides to check out your story."

"I see you're already starting to think like an Auror." She sat up straight, putting her hands on her hips, and turned her nose up at him. "For your information, daddy trusts me. He would never question my intentions."

At that, Moody's smile disappeared. He leaned over and eyed the circumference of her dress. "Er... how is your father, besides? Charming man that he is."

When she realized what he was doing, she put her hand to her mouth in order to stifle her laughter. "My dress isn't ~~that~~ big, you paranoid git."

"I'd rather *not* underestimate your father's resourcefulness," he said with an arched eyebrow. "I thought that vein on the side of his temple was going to explode after we told him that I proposed to you."

"Meh. It always does that," she said dismissively. Upon further consideration, however, she leaned in and read along with him. "Come to think of it, you may have a point."

His grin returned as he opened the book wider, making it easier for her to gander. "I like to keep it simple. Pick a detail to read up on, that way, if he happens to ask, you can tell him about your favorite part, thus circumventing any suspicion."

She looked to Moody with a suspicious eye which he failed to notice. "You know, it worries me how naturally this comes to you. It makes me wonder if you're hiding anything from me."

"And you call *me* paranoid?"

She pinched his arm lightly. "So, what do you suggest?"

He flipped the page to the next chapter. "This looks interesting: constellations." He presented the page to her and asked, "Which one's to your liking?"

By this point, she was no longer looking into the book. Placing her head on his shoulder, she looked skyward. The stars twinkled brightly in the heavens, second only to the moon in brilliance. A shooting star caught her attention and led her gaze to a clutch of stars in the east. Using her wand, she traced their pattern in the air for Moody to see. "Which one is that?"

After examining the formation, he referred to the book for the answer. "That would be Andromeda, pet."

"*Andromeda*," she parroted in reverie. "Go on."

Moody read on, "Andromeda is a constellation named after an Ethiopian princess who was chained to a rock by her parents as a virgin sacrifice to a ravaging sea monster."

"That doesn't sound very nice."

"Well, I'm sure it had a happy ending," he said, patting her on the leg before reading further. "It says here that, according to this bloke, Ptolemy..."

Her head perked off his shoulder. "Who the devil is Ptolemy?"

"Heck if I know, pet. But I'd bet he's big in Peoria," he said dryly.

"Do tell."

When her head nestled back into his shoulder, he finished the passage, "It says that all of the stars within are of the nature of Venus, and lovers at odds are reconciled under its influence."

She closed her eyes, hanging onto his every word. "I like that name."

"Ptolemy?"

"No, silly," she giggled. "*Andromeda*. It's pretty...the sort of name I'd give to a girl if I had one."

He closed the book and let it rest on his lap. "That's not the kind of name you give to a child."

When he put his arm around her waist, she snuggled in closer, resting her head in his chest. "Why not?"

"Because it's not a real name."

"Of course it is. Someone had to have been called it at one time, hence the name, right?"

"Maybe an eon ago." He spoke softly as he stroked the top of her brow lightly. "But using it for a constellation sorta retired it for conventional use, don't you think?"

"You certainly have all the answers, don't you, Alastor Moody?" She slowly stood up and turned to face him. She removed the hat on her head and allowed her hair to flow freely. She kicked the book aside and lowered herself onto Moody's lap, straddling him. "Answer me this: have you given much thought to what life will be like after we're married?"

"Every day, pet."

"Doesn't it scare you?"

He pondered for a moment. "The only thing that scares me is that one day, fifty years or so from now, it will eventually come to an end."

"Not bad." She smiled seductively. "I have a surprise for you."

Moody stared as Druella peeled the laced gloves from her delicate arms. She ran her bare hands through her black hair a few times before fanning it out. By the time it settled back to her shoulders, it had changed to blonde. She pursed her lips and they became slightly fuller. Her breasts swelled, on the verge of popping out of her corset.

Moody said with his eyes what he was too stunned to utter with his mouth.

"You like?" She let him trace a finger along the length of her lip before nipping it tenderly. "I've been practicing for you."

"For me?"

She pressed against him with her arms curled around his neck. "With the excitement and adventure you'll be living as an Auror, I don't want you to grow bored with me." She leaned in closer. "I could be a different woman for you every night."

He placed two fingers onto her parted lips. His voice remained soft yet stern. "I never want to hear you say that rubbish again*ever*!"

She was taken aback by the rebuke but quickly softened in his firm embrace. At his insistence, her feminine features returned to their comfortable dimensions. Nevertheless, she pouted. "Why is it that the only person with whom I can truly be myself only wants me to be... myself?"

"You don't know by now?"

When they finally kissed, he felt complete. He knew that she was the only woman for him, and her moans at their parting lips let him know that she felt the same. He ran his fingers through her violet hair; he loved the way that it shimmered in the moonlight.

"Allie, would you...." Her voice cracking, she cleared her throat before saying in a breathless whisper, "Would you like to ask me how my father is again?"

Moody was content to gaze into her starry eyes. "Your father can wait, pet."

Threads of Discontent

Chapter 11 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Threads of Discontent

Ouch!

Moody squeezed the tip of his index finger. A tiny bubble of blood appeared in the spot the needle had pricked him. He placed his fingertip in his mouth and looked around the room to see if anyone had noticed. The other cadets were busy threading their Invisibility Cloaks while levitating themselves in a half-lotus position above beds of nails. The familiar brass bell hung ominously atop a desk at the head of the classroom while the maestro paced leisurely between each of them in order to monitor their progress.

"Patching your Invisibility Cloaks should be second nature to you by now," maestro said with a reprimanding glare toward Moody. "It's a wonder that you scabs can walk and chew gum at the same time."

When the bleeding stopped, Moody went back to the task at hand, being in the same predicament as the other cadets. His mini-cauldron wobbled at his knee as he continued to mix the thread in the silvery solution.

Stir, dip, thread... Stir, dip, thread... Stir, dip, thread...

He didn't dare breathe as he levitated the delicate, glowing, wispy strand from the iron pot and quickly threaded it through the eye of the needle before exposure to the air could cause the string to vanish. He continued to mend the seam, guiding the needle by feel through the invisible fabric. He was careful not to prick his finger again, all the while thinking how much easier this would be with the use of his wand.

"You take care of your Invisibility Cloak, and it will take care of you." Maestro proceeded to continue with his lecture, as if having his charges seated above a bed of nails wasn't enough of a distraction. "The art of stealth is an Auror's greatest weapon. Can someone tell me what other methods we may employ to become invisible?" He paused in front of Reuben in tacit expectation of an answer.

"Disillusionment Charm?" Reuben said.

"I'll accept that. Two points awarded." The maestro took a casual step towards Jeff.

"Transfiguration," Jeff offered quickly so maestro wouldn't have to break stride as he passed.

Maestro looked at him and pursed his lips thoughtfully, although the wrinkles in his face gave the appearance of a grimace. "Not exactly what I'm looking for, but you are partially correct. Two points awarded."

Angie, knowing she was next, replied preemptively before maestro passed by her station, "Camouflage using the Polyjuice Potion."

"Correct. Two points awarded. Any others?" By now he was standing directly in front of Moody. "Anyone?"

Moody took his time in finishing the last loop of the seam. Since this was a critical part of the process, he didn't allow the maestro's proximity to intimidate him into another bloodletting, which was the old wizard's obvious intention. Moody sighed in relief when the fabric disappeared along the splice. Satisfied, he tied off the thread before finally giving his answer. "Assimilation."

"Assimilation," maestro repeated, nodding in agreement, although he failed to award Moody points for his answer. He turned around and, continuing on the subject of assimilation, inquired, "Scab Prewitt, who is the current Muggle Prime Minister?"

Angie averted her eyes, at a loss for an answer.

He arched an eyebrow at her and looked toward the next cadet. "Scab McKinley, how many Muggles live in London?"

"A couple of million or thereabouts, sir?" Jeff offered, though he would have preferred to remain silent.

Maestro snorted at that answer then turned to face Reuben. "Scab Ledley, who won the big cricket game last night?"

Reuben shrugged his shoulders, keeping his eyes hidden behind his cloak. "I'm afraid I don't follow cricket, sir."

Maestro shook his head. He walked calmly to the center of the room and clasped his hands behind his back in his usual fashion. "We live in a world overrun by Muggles. Unlike the rest of Wizarding society, we don't have the luxury of sticking our heads in the sand and going about our lives. Our job often requires going out among Muggles and interacting with them as if we belonged with them. So, I ask you, how can you expect to function in Muggleland if you don't understand them?" He took out his wand and aimed at the desk. One of the compartments magically opened, and four rolls of paper levitated out. They hovered through the air to rest at the foot of each cadet station. "From now on you are to read the Muggles' news literature as part of your daily routine..."

"Do you have any recommendations, Maestro?" Moody said with faux enthusiasm, careful not to look his teacher directly in the eyes.

"I didn't expect you could read, Scab Moody. In your case I was going to suggest that you purchase a wireless. Your very life may depend on keeping abreast of Muggle culture."

The paper unrolled itself at the foot of the spikes under Moody's station. He looked down, taking note of the Muggle publication called *The London Gazette*. He had heard of it, of course, but had never had occasion to read it in earnest, preferring instead to get the highlights of Muggle events from *The Daily Prophet*. He skimmed the headline.

BRITISH INTELLIGENCE HUNT FOR MISSING ATOMIC SCIENTIST

His interest was piqued, but his attention was soon drawn away by the maestro's next announcement.

"When you finish your cloaks, you're done for today. You'll be happy to know that I have granted you temporary leave for tonight in order to complete the following assignment: you are to go into the city and present yourselves as persons of mundane origin. Interact and strike up a conversation with no less than three Muggles. Keep a journal of your experiences and turn it in for discussion on the morrow." Satisfied, the maestro put his wand away and abruptly left the room.

Moody waited for the door to close behind the maestro. "He has got to be kidding."

Jeff lazily regarded Moody's reaction as he went back to work. "What're you brooding over now, Alastor?"

"Everything: the point system, the homework; it feels like I'm back in bleeding Hogwarts."

Angie looked at the two of them and nodded in the direction of the bed of nails resting directly beneath. "Funny, I don't seem to recall ever being in imminent danger of spikes impaling me bum at Hogwarts. Then again /was never sent to detention."

Moody rolled his eyes in response. "You know what I mean, woman."

Reuben listened on in amusement. "Well, I for one don't particularly mind the homework." He grinned, allowing his attention to wander from his work, and failed to notice when his cauldron started to float beyond his station. It tipped to one side, its contents coming close to seeping over the edge of the rim.

Before it spilled over Angie concentrated the cauldron back into place with Reuben none the wiser. "Of course *you* wouldn't mind, Reuben. Being a halfsie, it's not 'work' for you at all, is it?"

Jeff gave Angie a knowing wink. "How about it, Reuben? Got any advice for us pure-bloods on how to fraternize with Muggles?"

"I probably shouldn't, seeing as how it would be helping the competition."

Jeff frowned. "Bah, don't be such a ponce."

"I guess I *could* give you chaps a few pointers," Reuben said, reaching over to dip a new thread. He pouted in confusion as the cauldron was no longer positioned next to his knee. He shrugged it off and fished the next strand out of the pot without giving it further thought. "I'll do it in exchange for Angie showing me how to brew a decent *Anti-Confundus* Potion."

"Not bloody likely," she replied, exasperated.

"C'mon, Angie," Moody interjected with a smirk. "It's not like he has the mental faculties to retain any of it."

Reuben glared out of the corner of his eye. "You can go screw an old goat, Alastor."

"Wouldn't that make your father jealous?"

"Now, now, boys." Angie scolded over Jeff and Moody's laughter. "Reuben does have a point. How about we all share something to keep us on equal footing: Reuben can give us pointers on how to blend in with Muggles, I'll share my potion-making techniques, Jeff can coach us on charms, and Alastor can... well, I'm sure Alastor is good at *something*."

"It does looks like he can sew pretty good," Reuben commented. "If this Auror gig doesn't work out, he could probably fall back on being a seamstress..."

"Ouch!"

"... Or not."

The Vandamere Incident

Chapter 12 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 12

The Vandamere Incident

By the time Moody left the Auror training headquarters, the sun had already set. He walked down an unnamed street in London's East End, holding a paper with directions scribbled in Reuben's chicken-scratch. He turned down a seedy alley that stank of sewer and mildew from the day's rain. At the end of the alley, there was an unmarked wooden door. He stood outside briefly, listening to the sounds of merriment within. He opened the door slowly and stepped inside. He was greeted by the smell of tobacco laced with alcohol and cheap perfume.

Moody had never been inside a Muggle pub before, so he had no frame of reference to size up this new experience. He took out a small notepad and started making notes of everything he saw. Most of the tables were compressed along the periphery of the pub, making room for the crowded dance floor. The band on the stage played an odd sort of music, a syncopation of rhythm that pulsed through the air and made swirls and eddies out of the thick smoke. In the far corner stood a group of gents engaged in a game of arrows, managing no less with a pint in one hand and a dart in the other.

Moody meandered to the bar. While he waited, his attention was drawn to a couple walking up a stairway leading to a dark room veiled by beaded curtains. He felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to face the 'mature' redhead seated on a stool behind him.

"Would you like to dance, luv?"

Moody smiled nervously at her. "Maybe later."

After ordering a pint of Guinness, he retreated to one of the empty tables in a remote corner. The seat wobbled as he sat down to wipe the sting of the smoke from his eyes. When he took a sip from his beverage, he lingered on the acrid taste that rolled across his tongue. It was an unexpected sensation...a clear departure from the butterbeer he was used to. In the interest of remaining inconspicuous, he gulped it down rather than spitting it out. This assignment was going to be harder than he'd thought.

"Well, you're certainly new to these parts, Guv'nor."

He looked to the young woman standing across the table who smiled at him. Her blonde hair draped over her shoulders, a few random strands caught among her prominent cleavage. She walked around slowly, fanning her heaving chest, and rested a hand on the back of his chair.

Moody was careful to keep his gaze above her neck. "Is it that obvious?"

"Let's see," she said, tapping the fan's handle against her full, red lips. "Clean-shaven, tidy clothes, manicured nails... I would say you stick out like a sore thumb in 'ere."

"Really? And here I am trying to achieve the opposite."

"What for?" She folded the small fan and innocently stowed it away in her bodice. It was an impressive feat, considering how tightly the material clung to her body.

Moody cleared his throat and continued, "Truth be told, I'm trying to learn how everyday people such as yourself behave in a social setting."

"Like an experiment?" she asked with her head cocked to one side. "Are you a student?"

"Of sorts," he said with a slight grin. It was true enough.

"A bit of advice, then: if you walk into any place in Cockney, you'd best speak Cockney and not the King's English. It can be off-putting to blokes who just come in to relax after a long day."

"You don't seem put-off."

She leaned in closer. "It's one of my endearing qualities to be amenable to all types, regardless o' social persuasion."

These Muggle women are certainly a friendly lot. Moody's grin graduated to a smirk as he retrieved his notepad and pen and began to dictate aloud, "So, adopt the local raiment and customs of the inhabitants... *check*. Any other advice?"

She laughed. "You're cute." She pulled out the chair next to him, raising an eyebrow when Moody stood up to receive her. "And polite," she said, taking her seat. "Buy a girl a drink, dearie?"

"Of course." He flagged down a nearby barmaid and sat down. "Is this place always so lively?"

"More so when the sailors are on shore leave," she said with a wink. "So, what do you do for fun besides watching others having it?"

He snorted and took a sip of ale. He pursed his lips and swallowed. "It's hard to remember when I last had a good time doing anything."

"Good times are in short supply these days. People have to make their own."

He nodded in agreement. "That doesn't explain what a nice girl like yourself is doing unescorted in a place like this?"

"Well, I'm not alone anymore, am I?" She rested her chin in her hands and looked at him with eyes that sparkled in the dim light. "And what makes you think I'm a nice girl?"

"It's in your eyes." He took another sip. Fortunately, the smoke in the air had dulled his taste buds, making the beer more palatable. "Your eyes are by far your best feature."

Her brow lifted. "My eyes? Is that all?"

"A woman's eyes never lie."

She smiled and blushed. "I... don't remember the last time a gen'lleman complimented me eyes."

"Haven't spoken to many gentlemen, have you?"

"Blokes of your type usually go straight to the streetwalkers rather than suffer the ambiance of a place like this."

"I don't see why. I for one think this place has a certain charm. I'm actually glad I came."

"Me too." She reached tentatively across the table and placed his hand in hers. "Would you like to dance first? Or would you rather go up to my room now?"

The beer in Moody's mouth trickled slowly down his throat as he finally comprehended the significance of her words. He took another glance about. There was a girl either at every table or on the arm of every gent, all dressed seductively, and all smelling of that same cheap perfume.

He put the glass down and gulped hard on the remaining beer that swished in his mouth. "Don't take this the wrong way, but are you a...*working girl*?"

She looked up at him, amused. "I provide a service to the community, yes."

Moody felt his jaw clench. *Note to self: kill Reuben.*

She eyed him warily. "You didn't know?"

"No, and I apologize if I gave you the wrong impression, but I'm already spoken for," he said, presenting the engagement band on his finger.

She snorted. "So are the rest of my Johns, dearie. It doesn't matter to me. "

"It matters to *me*, I'm afraid."

She looked at him with that same glimmer in her eyes. She reached out and grazed his cheek with her fingertips. "Aww, you're in love. So why aren't you with her, then?"

"Strange as it sounds, I am just doing research. The fact that I wound up in this place was just the luck of the draw, I suppose."

She withdrew her hand. "You mean, all that playful banter... you weren't trying to chat me up?"

"Of course not."

Her brow furrowed. "Why not? You don't think I'm attractive?"

Moody averted his eyes. "No...I mean, I think you're lovely."

"Lovely? The last woman I heard a man call 'lovely' was me grandmum, and she had a wooden leg. Never, ever call a *girl* lovely!"

"I certainly didn't mean it like that."

She sat up straight with her hands on her hips and pouted. "Honestly. You're rubbish at this!"

"Really, I meant no offense, madam."

She looked down upon him with a stern expression, her bottom lip trembling before giving way to laughter. "Relax, lover-boy, I'm just 'avin' a bit 'o fun with you."

Moody laughed heartily. "You are a wicked little minx, aren't you?"

"Sorry about that, but as I told you, I'm not a nice girl." She took his hand in hers again, tracing the creases of his palm with her fingertips. "Y'know, they say there are no accidents. When a man is missing something in his life, his heart often leads his head without him realizing it."

He placed a gentle hand atop hers and replied firmly, "Trust me, this was an accident."

She bit her lip. "Well, isn't she the lucky girl?" She got up from her chair, smiling when Moody stood up as well. She started to walk away, but changed her mind and circled behind him. When he sat back down, she came about and slid into his lap nearly causing him to drop his drink. She nestled comfortably against him, crossing her legs and exposing the garter belt clasped to her fishnet stockings. She took the glass from his hand, had a sip, and placed it on the table. She leaned in; the wetness on her lips moistened his earlobe as she whispered, "If you ever grow bored, lover-boy, come back sometime and have spot o' tea with me." Satisfied, she left him without another word.

As he watched her walk away, Moody loosened his collar and finished his drink quite accustomed to its bitterness by this point. He left the bar shortly after, clenching his jaw again. He imagined that Reuben was having a good laugh at his expense back at his dorm. The night was still young, however, so Moody decided to take advantage of this rare night of freedom. Surely he could find a legitimate pub in the area to complete his assignment.

A bell tolled in the distance. Moody stepped lightly to avoid the puddles of dirty water between the cobblestones. He stopped briefly to check the bottom of his shoes. Satisfied, he looked up and noticed a sign at the foot of a small bridge; it read, "Vandamere Park".

It wasn't much of a park anymore, marked by a small plot of undeveloped land that had fallen into disrepair. The few trees that shot above the weeds swayed noisily in the night breeze. He mistook the sound of footsteps for windswept debris, so he was surprised when a young boy brushed past him. He turned with a start and inadvertently knocked the youth to the ground.

The boy looked up at him. "I'm sorry, sir."

Moody grinned. "Completely my fault," he replied encouragingly and extended a hand to help the boy to his feet. When Moody met the youngster's eyes, he was taken aback by the angelic features which shone even through the grime on the child's face.

The boy trembled as Moody continued to hold his hand. "Do you 'ave the time?"

The question brought Moody back to the moment. He let go of the boy and pulled out his watch. "About ten 'til the top of the hour."

"Crikey! I'm going to be late," the boy exclaimed before scampering off.

Moody put his pocket watch away and drew his jacket in tighter as he watched the boy disappear into the darkness.

Walking slowly down the lane, Moody shuddered in response to an unusual chill in the air. It made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end as if the Devil had tapped him on the shoulder. He thought he heard a voice but convinced himself that it was only the wind.

Taaaasty.

He scanned the area without turning his head. He reached slowly into his sleeve and curled his fingers around the hilt of his wand but continued along the path. He took no notice of the ice that crunched under his feet.

Waaaarm.

He lost his footing on the slick ground; the path's many puddles had suddenly frozen over. He could see his breath in the air. A sense of dread filled him as if something had sucked all the joy and hope from the world.

He curled his lip. *Fuck!*

Moody whipped out his wand and pointed it in the direction of rustling branches. He was a heartbeat away from summoning the exploding curse when the wand's light revealed the face of the boy that passed him earlier. His features looked even more angelic in the afterglow of the wand's light; his eyes were the deepest shade of blue Moody had ever seen.

The child's bottom lip trembled, tears streaming down his face. He had been hiding in the bushes in terror, living proof that one does not have to be magically inclined to feel evil in the air.

Moody lowered his wand. "Stay hidden."

Tasty... Warm... Tasty... Warm...

The foreign thoughts lingered in his mind like poison. He stood in the middle of the road to face their stalker. It was a Dementor: a predator of souls and the embodiment of despair. The thing drifted toward them slowly, quietly, shrouded in shadows. Moody stood his ground and calmly raised his wand while the Dementor came within range.

His stance was perfect, his grip sure. He knew the spell.

"Expecto Patronum!"

But nothing happened. He lowered his wand and closed his eyes, trying to concentrate on a memory any memory that could serve to stave off the anti-joy that infected him.

Druella.

He focused on her smile, her kiss, and the expectation of feeling the warmth of her body next to his on their wedding night.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

Nothing. "Bugger this!" He channeled his despair, turning it into anger. A stream of orange shot out from his wand and struck the Dementor in the chest. It lurched back and exploded. An eerie wail echoed through the air as pieces of dark matter splattered the ground.

The air was warm again. Moody heard footsteps and looked over his shoulder. He saw the boy running down the street. He started to follow but stopped upon hearing a second set of footsteps in the darkness. These footsteps were slow and methodical, like those of a hunter. Something was wrong. *Dementors don't have feet, do they?* He reached into his back pocket and gripped his backup wand tightly in his free hand, keeping it in reserve until he could determine the nature of the unseen stalker.

He shot at a blur that flashed past the edge of his peripheral vision. A loud "pop" preceded a hot, searing pain that caused him to scream. His left leg went numb, and he fell hard on his side. He rolled over onto his good leg and reached instinctively to feel his throbbing bum. He surmised quickly that the backup wand in his pocket had misfired: a dumb rookie mistake.

Ignoring the pain, Moody fired blindly at the sound of crunching leaves, stopping only when he noticed that he could see his breath again. His head snapped in the direction

of the fallen Dementor. The scattered remains had moved together to congeal silently in the middle of the road.

He gasped when a gray, desiccated hand broke the surface of the dark, soupy puddle. The shriveled skin hung loosely and slid formlessly about, revealing the sinew and muscle that flexed underneath. The grotesque hand probed the ground as a second arm shot out of the goo. The hands braced themselves on the surrounding cobblestones and managed to pull the rest of the body upwards. The top of a hood slowly rose from the puddle, followed by the dead eyes that glistened just below its brim. Within seconds, the Dementor had emerged in its entirety.

Kiss the wizard/ Make him cry/ Kiss the wizard/ Watch him die.

Moody sat up as best he could, propping himself up on his good knee. He wobbled, dazed by his own hex, but still raised his wands, ready to face both the unseen entity at his back and the fast-approaching Dementor.

"Expecto...." His eyes fluttered as a creeping blackness threatened to render him unconscious. *"Expecto Patro...."*

"Expecto Patronum!"

Moody was revived by the booming voice, and he looked on in awe as the ethereal semblance of a Hawk dove from above and surrounded the Dementor with a silvery mist. The dark creature swatted at it in vain but was eventually chased off by the mighty Patronus.

"Lumos Maxima!"

At a second voice's command, light banished the darkness. Two wizards, dressed in black trench coats, came to stand on either side of Moody. Their wands held at the ready, they shot hexes into the surrounding bush. Moody eyed the Ministry badges on their lapels which designated them as M.L.E officers.

As relief replaced his anxiety, Moody finally allowed himself to faint.

Growing Pains

Chapter 13 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 13

Growing Pains

"Reuben, what do you think you're doing?"

"I'm just having a look, Jeff," Reuben said as he lifted the bed sheet. "I didn't come all this way for nothing."

"You're going to wake Alastor," Angie scolded, taking a seat in the corner. She placed an arrangement of flowers on the table next to her. "He's had a rough night. Let him sleep."

Moody grunted, his head face down on his pillow. He lifted it up long enough to say, "Not to worry. His smell woke me up the moment he stepped in."

Reuben grimaced at what he saw beneath Moody's bed sheet. "Unsightly, that is."

Jeff walked by and, after peeking over Reuben's shoulder, merely shrugged. "I've seen worse."

"Angie, come have a look-see."

Angie was focused on sprucing up the flowers she had brought but had the presence of mind to respond, "Yes, that's lovely."

Reuben continued to gaze at Moody's mutilated bum. "It's completely gone."

"It's just my butt-cheek, you prat." Moody buried his face in the pillow. "The way you're going on, you'd think I'd lost me whole leg."

"But, Alastor, it looks like shriveled haggis," Reuben said, chuckling to himself. "How do you go to the bathroom on that thing?"

"Well, it's just the left one, Reuben," Jeff replied. "He can obviously lean on the right one to do his business; that one's still nice and plump, at least."

"When you're both done gettin' an eyeful, why don't you bend down and kiss what's left of my arse."

"At least you got your health, mate." Reuben draped the sheet over Moody's backside. "All's well that ~~ends~~ends well, I always say."

Angie had since walked over to place her vase on the nightstand next to Moody's bed. Jeff leaned over the bouquet to sniff one of the roses. "Flowers hardly seem appropriate now," he said. "I guess we should've bought Alastor a sidesaddle for his broom instead."

"You blokes lay off." Angie swatted Jeff's hand when he tried to pick one of the orchids out of the arrangement. "Can't you see that Moody doesn't want to be the ~~butt~~butt of your jokes?"

Jeff rubbed his hand. "Ah, it doesn't bother Alastor; he'll just turn the other ~~cheek~~cheek."

Moody didn't bother to lift his head from the pillow as he replied, "I've had quite enough cheek from you blokes already, thank you very much."

Loud footsteps marked the arrival of another entrant. The nurse, carrying a tray of salves and medical implements, walked briskly to the back of the room and placed the tray on a utility cart at the foot of the bed.

The nurse adjusted the glasses on her face, giving the visiting cadets a severe look as she did so. "I'm afraid I'm going to need some time alone with the patient."

Jeff, Angie, and Reuben said their goodbyes and left quietly.

When they were alone, the nurse picked up the clipboard attached to the bed's foot-rail and read it over thoughtfully. "So, how are you feeling this morning, Mr. Moody?"

The sound of her familiar voice encouraged Moody to look up from his pillow once again. He glanced over his shoulder and smiled when he recognized his caretaker. "Well, if it isn't the Head Girl. Fancy meeting you here, Miss McGonagall."

"It's nice to see you're in good spirits given the state that you were in upon your arrival." She replaced the clipboard and lifted the bed sheet to uncover his bum. "Do you have another giant-related injury for me today?"

Moody blushed and returned his head to his pillow. "Oh, you remember that, do you?"

"It was hard to forget. I also recall advising you to avoid the practice."

"Then you'll be glad to know that I took your advice," he said, grinning. "This time it was Dementors, those buggers."

"A Dementor did this?" she asked, raising a suspicious eyebrow. She examined the injury a while longer and finally lowered the sheet. "Well, you're lucky. The tissue seems to be regenerating nicely. You should be done by the end of the week."

Moody's head snapped upwards, and he winced. "A week? I can't stay in here a week! They'll bounce me out of the program. Is there any way to speed up the process?"

McGonagall looked down at him over the rim of her glasses. "Yes, but it's going to hurt like the dickens."

Moody returned her glare. "As long as it gets me back on my feet."

McGonagall continued to eye him but eventually backed down. "Very well."

He watched McGonagall close the door to the room. "So, you're a healer now?"

McGonagall walked over to the medicine closet, ignoring his gaze. "No, I still work at Hogwarts."

"Teaching medicine, I presume?"

She did not answer right away, continuing, rather, to rifle through the items on the shelves and finally managing to fish out three metallic canisters. "No, Transfiguration."

"Really? So, what are you doing here at St. Mungo's?"

She walked back to his bed, levitating the canisters along with her. "I'm undecided as to where I should continue my studies, so I'm keeping my options open."

"A wise policy." Moody hesitated upon closer inspection of the canisters, which were all labeled with ominous sorts of warnings. He was beginning to have second thoughts. "Not that I'm ungrateful, mind you, but do you have much experience with this sort of procedure?"

"I assure you that I am completely qualified. There's no need to be afraid," she replied with a sly smirk.

Moody looked away and rested his chin on his hands. "I didn't say I was afraid."

McGonagall removed the bed sheet and sat next to him on the mattress. She mixed the contents of the various canisters and sprinkled the resulting blue powder over Moody's affliction, causing it to bubble. "I've seen men twice your size cry over procedures such as this. There's nothing to be ashamed of if you need to belt one out."

"I see your bedside manner has at least marginally improved."

"Quite unintentional to be sure," she said, positioning her wand over the strange chemical reaction. "Maybe it will inspire you to review elementary wand safety practices."

"What's that supposed to mean...BLOODY HELL!"

"Are you okay?" she asked, more as an afterthought than actual concern.

"Peachy," Moody managed to grunt. "So, Transfiguration... wasn't that Dumbledore's specialty?"

"Yes, it was. In fact, I'm interning under him."

"Interesting." He felt his shoulders tighten. "So, how's it going so far?"

"Surely, you don't want me to bore you with the details of my continuing education, Mr. Moody."

"If you don't mind." He paused, struggling to keep the discomfort out of his voice. "I'd actually enjoy the diversion."

"I see," she replied with a knowing smile. "If you must know, I was intrigued to discover that there is a lot of overlap in principle between the practice of healing and that of Transfiguration."

"Really?" Moody swallowed quietly. "Fascinating."

McGonagall continued to work with her usual efficiency, paying no heed to Moody's occasional sounds of distress. After several minutes, which seemed more like hours from Moody's perspective, the task was completed. "There, now. That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Quite relieved, Moody sighed deeply and allowed his shoulders to slump. "Are you sure that wasn't a Cruciatus?"

"Don't be such a baby."

Moody could have sworn he had heard a chord of amusement in her voice. The notion was put aside, however, when her hands started to massage his newly regenerated bum. He felt his shoulders stiffen again. "Er... what are you doing?"

"Checking for symmetry. This is a critical step."

Her hands were soft and gently cupped his flesh as they switched from one cheek to the other. He tried his best not to focus on the sensation but inevitably found it necessary to shift his hips in response to a newfound lack of available free space beneath him.

"Lie still," she snapped. She placed a hand on each cheek and squeezed firmly. "Okay. Flex for me as hard as you can... very good... now release."

"Are we quite done?"

"Almost. Now sit up."

Moody blinked. "What?"

"I need you to sit up, Mr. Moody."

"... Why?"

McGonagall crossed her arms, looking slightly annoyed. "Before I recommend your release, I have to see if your bum can bear your weight."

Moody closed his eyes and concentrated. *Dead cats... drat, no good.*

"Come now, I have other patients to see."

A Nun riding a three-legged Centaur wearing Granny's knickers... Crap, I'm just making it worse.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Moody?"

He looked at her, his expression pleading. "Um, I think I need a moment to myself, please."

McGonagall sighed loudly and walked out. "Very well, but only a moment. You've already put me behind schedule."

Moody waited until the door closed behind her and then redoubled his efforts. *Let's see... Dumbledore... in a bikini... getting his legs waxed? Bingo, that's working!*

The sound of the door opening interrupted his concentration. "I said I needed a bleeding moment!"

"Why? Am I interrupting something?"

He turned on his side and looked towards the familiar voice. The woman he loved stood there, smiling at him with her piercing grey eyes. "Druella."

Druella came to his side and started to stroke the hair on his head tenderly. "I heard what happened. You had me so worried."

"No worries necessary, pet. Wave of the wand and I'm good as new."

She pouted and sat next to him on the mattress. "When we get married, I want you to take a desk job."

Moody took her hand in his. "Dru, I'm an Auror. There's no desk job for an Auror."

"Then come and work for Daddy." Moody rolled his eyes at her suggestion, but Druella persisted. "He likes you."

Moody snorted. "Yeah. Your dad likes it that some bloke wants to put his wand in his little girl." He sat up carefully.

"Marry me, and this little girl will let you," she replied with a mischievous giggle. Her pout returned when she noticed him wincing. "Why are you leaning like that?"

"This is my good cheek. I'm not supposed to put weight on my bum yet."

"Then lay back down, you silly git." Druella pushed him onto his stomach. She proceeded to rub the muscles of his back and shoulders. "I can't stay long, but I'll check on you later. In the meantime, you should get some rest."

"Can't you stay a bit?" Moody said between grunts of approval at her ministrations. "I'm practically at death's door."

"Aww, mon bébé, I'm so sorry." Druella's affectionate hands continued to caress his lower back until they found their way to his bum. "Shall I kiss it to make it feel better?"

"The fact that you feel the need to ask must mean that I *amnot* doing my job as a boyfriend."

Druella grinned knowingly and leaned over to kiss him on the forehead. "Feel better, love."

Moody watched her leave, taking in the sight of her gorgeous figure as she went. Alone again, he planted his face back on his pillow, the thought of her touch fresh in his mind. No sooner did he start to drift off when the door opened again. The sound of a woman's footsteps prompted him to look up from his pillow, half-expecting to see that Druella had changed her mind and decided to stay longer. He almost shrieked when he saw Nurse McGonagall standing over him instead.

"All right, then, Mr. Moody. Up you go, now."

Dumbledore in a bikini... Dumbledore in a bikini... Dumbledore in a bikini...

Polar Opposites

Chapter 14 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 14

Polar Opposites

It was a lazy afternoon. Ollivander sat in his shop, flipping through the pages of the *Sunday Prophet* and taking no notice of the ringing bell above the shop's entrance. He reached for his cup of tea, but his hand was blocked by a wand that was slammed suddenly onto the counter. He looked up from his paper to meet Moody's glare.

"This wand doesn't work."

Ollivander took off his spectacles, folded the paper and calmly took the wand from the counter. He balanced it on his open palm and concentrated. It rose a few inches and began to twirl, slowly at first, then faster and faster until it was nothing more than a blur. At Ollivander's command its motion was stilled, and it proceeded to emit a bright, white glow. The illumination ceased as he closed his fingers around the base. "Mhmm. Interesting."

Moody gave him a quizzical look. "What is it?"

"There's absolutely nothing wrong with this wand." Ollivander placed the wand back on the counter.

"I beg to differ. It damn near killed me!"

"It has been my experience that accidents involving wands generally have more to do with operator error than with the wand itself."

"It shot my left buttock clean off!"

Ollivander maintained a look of casual disinterest as he returned to his newspaper. "How the devil did you manage that?"

Moody placed his hand over the newspaper, prompting Ollivander to look up at him over the rim of his glasses. Moody's tone was calm, but his patience had clearly worn thin. "Look, I'm not a bloody first year, and I'm not stupid."

"I wasn't suggesting otherwise."

"I know how to hold a wand in my hand without causing it to go off willy-nilly."

"My apologies, sir." Ollivander took his glasses off and placed them in his vest pocket. "Tell me what happened."

Satisfied that he had Ollivander's undivided attention, Moody withdrew his hand. "I'm not sure what happened; it wasn't even engaged. I had it concealed in my pocket as a backup while I was using my primary wand."

"Primary?" Ollivander repeated, rubbing his chin. "What nonsense are you talking?"

"It's simple." Moody removed the wand that had been concealed up his sleeve and held it up. "I have a primary wand for everyday use and a secondary one that I bring out in reserve—"

"MY GODS! Are you daft, man? Nobody wields two wands anymore! It's uncivilized. Not to mention dangerous."

Moody was surprised by the rebuke but insisted, "Godric Gryffindor did it."

"You are *not* Godric Gryffindor!"

"If it was so dangerous, why on Earth did you sell it to me, then?"

"I assumed you were buying a replacement! I certainly wouldn't have sold it to you had I known what you were trying to do!"

At his request Moody handed Ollivander his 'primary' wand. He held it up next to the 'secondary' wand and slowly brought their ends together. The tips had almost touched when a spark shot out between them. Ollivander separated them immediately, having made his point.

"Placing two identical wands in close proximity is like putting two positive ends of a magnet together: they repel each other. No wonder you misfired—your poor wands were confused. In order to wield two wands properly, you must get two that are *polar opposites*, so to speak."

"I see." Moody stood up straight. "It appears I'm the one who owes the apology." He cleared his throat nervously and continued, "Moving on, then, which wand would be a suitable match for me?"

Ollivander snorted at Moody's perseverance. He reached beneath the counter, retrieved a stack of papers and placed them in front of Moody. "First, you must sign these."

"What are these?"

"They're waivers, absolving me of liability for any future damages. Furthermore, I suggest that you seek proper instruction. Dual wand combat is extremely difficult to master; most consider the disadvantages to outweigh the advantages of such an endeavor."

"Of all the bloody...." Moody trailed off, mumbling to himself as he mulled over the documents. After a few minutes he picked up the pen next to the register and signed them.

Satisfied, Ollivander bound the papers and stamped them; after which, they flitted magically into an open drawer of the enchanted file cabinet.

"So, about that wand," Moody continued after witnessing the display. "What kind would be compatible with Purpleheart?"

"Most likely something in the Beech family would do; I would recommend Chestnut. I'll have to do more research on the core needed." Ollivander retrieved his glasses from his pocket and began to polish the lenses using the flap of his vest. "In any event, it's going to be a custom job."

Moody averted his eyes. "Why does that sound expensive?"

Ollivander smirked. "Because it is."

"I'm afraid I'm a little short on funds. Can I exchange my first wand for credit?"

"No exchanges," Ollivander replied tersely. "That wand has already chosen you. Wands do not appreciate being cast aside like old pairs of socks."

Moody sighed, stuck his hands in his pockets and twiddled with the loose change therein. He regarded the newspaper that Ollivander had been reading, and a smile appeared on his face. "Maybe we can work out some other arrangement, then."

"What kind of arrangement?"

Moody turned to the front page where his picture was displayed prominently above a caption that read, *Heroic Auror to be Commended at Ministry Unveiling*.

Moody gave the shopkeeper time to skim the article at length and continued, "How much better would it be for business if it became known that the next giant I slay or Dementor that I repel will be done with the aid of an *Ollivander custom wand*?"

Ollivander glanced from the picture, to Moody, then back again. Slowly but surely, the corners of his lips curled upward in a smile.

In tacit agreement the two men shook hands.

The Avatar Effect

Chapter 15 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 15

The Avatar Effect

"Did you not understand the assignment as it was given, Scab Moody?"

Moody closed his eyes and sighed quietly. "Yes, I did, Maestro."

"And at what point did you decide that brandishing your wand in the presence of a Muggle was in keeping with the intent of the exercise?"

"I never suspected that it was, Maestro. However, it was the Dementors that changed the parameters of said exercise, not me."

"Yes, so Shackebolt has told me. You be sure to report to her after tonight's unveiling for a proper debriefing."

"Yes, Maestro."

Moody rubbed his hand nervously across his forearm, feeling the empty space under his sleeve that usually concealed his backup wand. He stood quietly next to the maestro in the small lift, grateful for the old wizard's penchant for minimal conversation. As they ascended to the eighth floor, he inserted a finger behind the collar of his dress uniform and breathed easier when the clasp loosened. He looked over to the maestro to see if his teacher had noticed this breach of protocol. The glimmer of the accolades pinned on the old wizard's chest caught his eye particularly the three Order of Merlin medals.

The doors parted and the two were greeted by the echoes of chamber music mixed with undecipherable conversations coming from the end of the hall. They exited the lift and proceeded to the antechamber that overlooked the atrium, which had been converted to a reception area.

When the maestro snapped his fingers, Moody felt his collar pinch his neck when the clasp magically reengaged.*The old codger doesn't miss a thing.*

They made their way down the grand staircase and were bombarded by members of the press. Moody squinted at the bright lights of the many cameras that assailed them.

During a break in the flashbulbs' onslaught, a young intern greeted them and offered to escort Moody onto the stage. He started to follow but was stopped by the maestro's outstretched arm.

"Get in, shake Pilliwickle's hand and get out," said the maestro. He withdrew his arm and added, "Speak only when spoken to, don't linger, and for Merlin's sake, don't stumble."

Moody gave the maestro a placatory nod and followed the intern. When he stepped onto the platform, the music stopped, and all eyes turned toward him. Ignoring the gaze of the crowd, he kept his attention focused on the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Justus Pilliwickle, who was standing next to the podium.

Pilliwickle had a gentle countenance, much like Albus Dumbledore's, which put Moody immediately at ease. When Moody approached, Pilliwickle stepped from behind the podium to greet him warmly amid a renewed influx of blinding camera flashes. "Cadet Moody, what a pleasure it is to meet an outstanding young wizard such as yourself."

"The pleasure is all mine..."

Pilliwickle took Moody's hand and shook it with enough enthusiasm as to nearly cause Moody to stumble. "Excellent job giving that Dementor the what for."

"Well I didn't exactly..."

"And all for the aid of a defenseless Muggle child, no less."

"Yes, but..."

He placed an arm around Moody's shoulder and turned to face the crowd. "You are proof that the next generation of Aurors is up to the task of meeting the challenges of the future."

Moody looked upon the sea of spectators and forced a smile through clenched teeth. "Thank you, sir."

The intern came to Pilliwickle's side and handed him a dark blue velvet case. Pilliwickle opened the case and presented Moody with the shiny gold medal within.

"The Order of Merlin is the highest award for valour that the Ministry of Magic can bestow. This medal is given for gallantry in the face of an enemy attack which is above and beyond the call of duty." With great ceremony, he pinned the medal to Moody's uniform. "This honour is a cherished tradition, and I am honoured to present it to our newest recipient: Alastor Moody."

The music resumed to the crowd's applause. The moments seemed to go by in a blur as Moody shook hand after outstretched hand extended by complete strangers. Before he knew it, he was being escorted offstage. Pilliwickle immediately began his oratory for the second portion of the night's presentation.

Pilliwickle's words registered dully in Moody's mind as his fingers grazed the unfamiliar weight pinned to his chest. He found his way to the exit where the maestro awaited him at the foot of the stairs.

"Good job, Scab. You might have a future in politics yet."

Moody shook his head. "I don't deserve this."

Maestro snorted loudly. "Of course you don't."

"What happened just now?"

"Institutionalized denial." Maestro took Moody by the shoulder and led him through the crowd to a remote corner of the room away from prying eyes. "People need to know that we are in control of things. They rally around symbolic gestures like this and dress them up with pomp so they can feel safe at night."

"Even if it's not entirely accurate?"

"Welcome to the world, young one. There's a lot at stake: old bloodlines and even older money."

Moody looked toward the stage. "I feel so...."

"Used? Discarded? Irrelevant?" the maestro interjected with a grin.

"I was going to say, 'Confused.' But I'm sure your words will apply *in forty* years or thereabouts." Moody tried his best to hide a smirk in response to the sneer that the maestro shot his way. "How many of these things have you been to, anyway?"

Moody wasn't surprised when the maestro didn't bother to answer. A waiter came by with a tray of spirits, and each of the two men took a glass of wine. Moody partook of a sip and, for the first time, took notice of the large red curtain across the atrium. It ascended halfway to the ceiling and served as a backdrop for the stage. Knowing that what the curtain concealed was the main draw for the night's crowd, he struggled to read the embroidery within the swaying folds of the scarlet fabric.

Fountain of Magical Brethren

Three wizards walked onto the stage. Piliwickle greeted them in the same warm fashion. Each of the three was presented with a plaque, the significance of which seemed to be related to the mysterious object behind the curtain. They gathered at the center of the platform to pose for more pictures. The crowd's applause was deafening.

Maestro took the opportunity to point out the identity of these affluent wizards, beginning with the one with greying blond hair.

"The Malfoy family...a relatively new bloodline but very wealthy. They practically bankrolled this entire event. They think money can curry favour." The maestro took a sip then smirked. "And they're right."

Moody already knew the second wizard as Druella's father; however, he saw no point in interrupting the maestro.

"The Rosiers...neither exceedingly wealthy nor influential, but their pristine pedigree is their currency."

The third wizard was younger than the rest. He looked familiar, but Moody could not recall if he had met him before.

"The Blacks have it all. They're a bunch of inbred aristocrats, that lot. I suspect they're on the prowl for fresh blood." The maestro snorted. "It plays like a bloody soap opera."

Moody eyed the maestro thoughtfully. "What's a *soap opera*?"

"Never you mind," the maestro replied with a sour expression. He was about to take another sip from his glass when he was interrupted by a gentle voice.

"It's good to see you again, Maestro."

The maestro turned to acknowledge the older wizard who stood humbly before him. "It's been a long time, Professor Dumbledore."

"You're looking very well," Dumbledore said, extending his hand.

"As are you." The maestro paused to regard Dumbledore and tentatively returned the handshake. "How long do you plan to let that thing on your chin grow?"

Dumbledore smiled and stroked his beard. "Up until I find a razor up to the task."

"Indeed." The maestro tried to smile in return, but judging by the preponderance of new wrinkles that formed on his face, it was clearly an exercise to which he was unaccustomed. "And however did they coax you out of your castle to attend such a gala?"

"I always try to make time to follow up on my students," Dumbledore said, glancing to Moody. "That, and the *hors d'oeuvres* are first rate." He turned his attention to the young wizard, who had been watching the exchange with piqued interest. "How have you been, my boy?"

Moody nodded graciously in response. "Fine, thank you, Professor."

The maestro took another sip from his glass. "So, this one is your doing, eh? I should've known."

"I wish I could take *all* the credit for this excellent young man." Dumbledore placed a hand on Moody's shoulder, and the young wizard flinched slightly. "But I see that he has flourished under your tutelage, Maestro."

"We'll see." Maestro finished the rest of his wine abruptly. "If you gentlemen will excuse me, I'm expected to mingle. Enjoy the rest of the party."

Moody looked on in curiosity as the maestro sauntered off and exchanged his empty glass for a fresh one at the nearest wait station. Moody had never thought that he would live to see the old warhorse make a tactical retreat.

"You are very perceptive, Alastor." Dumbledore said with a sombre voice. "There has been...*tension* between the Head Auror and myself for some time now." He chuckled softly when Moody glared at him. "Don't worry; it doesn't take Legilimency to read your body language."

Moody grinned in relief. "It has something to do with the final push against Grindelwald, I take it?" he asked, recalling his history lessons on the subject.

"You would be correct."

Moody nervously swished the contents of the glass in his hand. Even though he was of age, he felt uncomfortable drinking in Dumbledore's presence. "Is that one of those 'drawbacks' you tried to warn me about in my seventh year, Professor?"

Dumbledore averted his eyes and pursed his lips. "About that. I want you to know that, in spite of what I told you, I never had any doubt that you would make an exemplary Auror."

"I understand, Professor. It was sound advice for which I am grateful." He extended his hand to Dumbledore and smiled when his former teacher shook it eagerly.

A hush fell over the crowd, which prompted Dumbledore and Moody to turn their attention toward the stage. After a brief oratory, the curtain was drawn to reveal the statue that had been concealed behind it.

The sculpture reflected bright, shimmering light throughout the surrounding atrium. It depicted five effigies: a wizard, a witch, a goblin, a centaur and an elf. Spouts of water streamed from the sculpture. Moody looked in awe upon the sheer grandeur of the piece. It was not lost on him, however, that the wizard and the witch were the

centerpieces of the fountain while the other, non-human, creatures were depicted to regard them in rapt adoration.

Dumbledore leaned in and asked Moody, "So, what do you think?"

Moody examined the statue thoughtfully as he sipped his wine. "Beautiful, really. The craftsmanship is top notch, reminiscent of the Baroque period masters."

"Indeed." Dumbledore flagged down a passing waiter carrying a tray of *hors d'oeuvres*. After sampling one, he grabbed several more, putting a few in his pocket. "So, what do you *really* think?"

"It's a bit pompous."

"Quite."

The two smiled at each other knowingly.

A final round of applause diverted Moody's attention back to the podium. His eyes followed Mr. Rosier walking off the stage side by side with the familiar Mr. Black. They seemed particularly chummy as they navigated through the crowd to the far side of the room, where they were met by Moody's fiancée, Druella. After a brief chat, Mr. Rosier left the couple alone.

Moody couldn't hear their conversation from so far away, but his eyes narrowed at what he saw: the way he kissed her hand, the way he trailed a lingering stroke on her forearm, the way she laughed at his jokes. Moody's hand tightened around his glass like a vice.

When they had disappeared from sight, Moody finished his wine in a single gulp, said his goodbyes to Dumbledore and excused himself.

It took a while for Moody to make his way through the crowd. He caught up to Druella when he turned the corner of the adjacent hallway, but by the time he arrived, Mr. Black had already taken his leave of her. Seeing him up close, Moody finally recognized him as a contemporary from his time at Hogwarts. *Cygnus*.

Cygnus acknowledged Moody as he passed. "Congratulations, Moody. On both counts."

Moody made sure that Cygnus had left before engaging Druella. She wore the same dress from the night that they had gone stargazing.

Her eyes widened, and she blushed as he approached. "Oh my, you look very dashing..."

"What the devil is going on with you tonight?" he snapped.

She took a step back, surprised by the rebuke. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Don't act coy. You must have seen me in the crowd tonight."

She smiled. "I forget sometimes that you're not versed in these things." She took a tentative step closer and explained in a hushed voice, "Our engagement hasn't been officially announced. It would not have been proper to approach you without a formal introduction."

"And what about Cygnus, fawning over you like that?"

She waved him off dismissively. "It's nothing. He was just a suitor."

"Suitor?" Moody had no regard for the volume of his voice. "Did they change the definition of 'betrothed' while I was away?"

"It was my parents' idea. Why do you think I took him aside? So as not to cause a scene." A hint of a smile visited her lips. "I've never seen you like this before. You're jealous."

"I am not jealous." As if to prove it, he softened his voice but still retorted, "How would you like it if I came in with a tart on each arm?"

"I wouldn't like it at all, but it's different for you, being a boy." She placed her hand on his shoulder. "This is how the game is played, honey."

"Well, I don't like this game. And I don't like the way it changes you." Moody rested a gentle hand on her cheek, taking notice of the way it caused her hair to change to violet.

Immediately, Druella closed her eyes and willed her hair back to its natural color. "We all have to be a bit of a Metamorphmagus in that regard, I'm afraid."

"That's going to change once we're married."

At that, Druella opened her eyes and pushed his hand away. "Do you think I like getting an owl the first thing in the morning telling me that you've been hurt? Do you think I like the notion of sitting at home waiting, wondering whether you're on your way with a bouquet of flowers or bleeding out in some urban ghetto?" She calmed her voice and continued, "If you want me to be tolerant of the life you have chosen, then you have to accept mine, too."

Moody looked down at his feet. "You're right, of course."

She smiled, stroking his hair. Her other hand hovered over his accolade. "The Order of Merlin, Third Class. Daddy has to take you seriously now. He won't try this again."

Moody returned her smile. "You're sure?"

Druella lifted Moody's chin and met his eyes. "Trust me, darling."

"Druella," a voice boomed from down the hall.

The couple turned to see Druella's father, Mr Rosier, standing at the corner.

Druella stepped back from Moody, almost with a start, and broke their eye contact. "I'll see you later." She rejoined her father, and they left Moody alone in the hall.

Moody had had quite enough, so he decided to take his leave of the festivities. He took the lift back down to the second floor, which housed the Auror Division. He fumed all the way to the north wing where the training rooms were located. By this time of night, the halls were empty, so he had his pick of the rooms. He used his code to open what looked, from the outside, like a small closet door. He stepped into an expansive room filled with exercise equipment. He eagerly removed his uniform top and draped it over a small bench along with his wand.

After slipping on a pair of leather gloves, Moody began to operate the speed bag, slowly at first, then built it up to a furious rhythm. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the soothing sensation of the bag rebounding off his knuckles.

His concentration was interrupted by the opening of the door followed by the sounds of gentle footsteps. Moody looked over his shoulder and stilled the speed bag when he recognized the entrant.

"Auror Shackbolt?" he said in surprise. "May I help you?"

"You were supposed to report to me right away. Did the maestro not tell you?"

"Yes, he did. I just didn't realize he meant 'right away' as in 'tonight.'"

"I see." Shacklebolt came closer and stood at the edge of the mat. "I was just going over your statement with the patrol wizards. Everything seems to be in order. "

"That's good to hear." Moody removed the gloves and left them hanging on the station. He stood at relaxed attention with his hands clasped behind his back.

"In the future, I would suggest that when writing out your reports you don't make the language so flowery. Stick to the facts; it's not a poetry contest."

"Thank you. I'll keep that in mind."

Shacklebolt kicked off her sandals and stepped onto the padded flooring. "It could make someone think that you're leaving details out intentionally."

"Perish the thought." Moody eyed her as she walked around him. "Any other advice?"

"No, just a request. Conjure a Patronus for me."

Crap! Shit! Bollocks!"Er, pardon?"

She circled him slowly, tapping the tip of her wand across his shoulders to accentuate the words. "Conjure. A. Patronus."

Without turning his head, Moody kept his eyes trained warily on her. "No."

"Is that insubordination, scab?"

"Well, you did say it was just a request," he quipped with a grin.

Shacklebolt was not impressed. "Are you sure you want to play games with me?"

"I can't." Moody faced her. "You're going to throw me out of here, then?"

"Getting a little ahead of ourselves, aren't we?" Shacklebolt removed her headdress, allowing the locks of her braided hair to fall around her shoulders. She placed the headdress, along with her wand, on the bench next to Moody's things and stood with her back to him. "I want you to grab me from behind."

"Pardon?"

"Is there something wrong with your hearing?" When she felt his hands reach around her only tentatively, she snapped, "Tighter!"

Biting his lip, he squeezed her firmly. "Like this?"

"That'll do."

A shift in weight caused Moody to lurch forward. The world turned upside-down, and the next thing he knew, he was flat on his back, trying to recapture the wind that was knocked out of him.

"Get up and come at me again." Shacklebolt grinned as she stood over him. "Do you know what makes a Patronus so effective?"

"Yeah. Happy thoughts." Moody proceeded to rise painfully. "Which is all well and good... unless you don't have any."

When Moody reached for her, Shacklebolt parried the grab, kicked his foot out from under him and hip-tossed him onto his side with a loud, echoing *thud*.

When Moody tried to sit up, Shacklebolt pinned him down, her foot on his chest, and taunted him, "What's wrong? Mama didn't give you enough hugs? Daddy didn't get you that pony for your sixth birthday?"

Moody winked. "I wanted a puppy, actually." He grabbed her foot and twisted her off balance. He vaulted to his feet just as Shacklebolt rolled upright. "I just think it's silly to expect one to think of sunny days and posies when engaged in battle."

Shacklebolt nodded in approval, but persisted. "Grab me again."

With breakneck speed, Moody managed to get a hold of her by the neck. Shacklebolt dropped her weight and used their combined momentum to tumble Moody headfirst onto his back. Moody regained his bearings to find that Shacklebolt was straddling him, her elbow just short of smashing his throat.

Shacklebolt withdrew her elbow and rested her palms on either side of his head. Her many braids dangled just over his brow. "Your assessment shows a complete lack of understanding. A Patronus is a parasite. It feeds off the negative energy of dark magic and redirects it, turning it into something positive. We call it the *Avatar Effect*."

Moody sighed in frustration. "I don't understand."

She hopped off of him and waited for him to rise. "Come. At me. Again."

Moody angled toward her slowly. After a brief feint, he bolted towards her and managed to grab her wrist. Shacklebolt calmly spun under his arm and flipped him. Moody countered by somersaulting forward and coming about to grab her elbow, attempting to pin it behind her back. Shacklebolt rode on the strength of his push to whirl gracefully over his shoulders. She landed on her feet and changed the direction of the momentum to clothesline Moody on his neck.

Moody grunted when he fell on his back.

Shacklebolt knelt beside him so as to tap her fingertip on his forehead. "Use your opponent's negative energy, and ~~redirect~~ *direct* it to your advantage."

Moody considered the words and finally applied their meaning to the sparring lesson. It was like a light bulb illuminating the darkness. "Right."

She smiled and retrieved her wand. She pointed it toward a collection of mud bins stowed in the corner and levitated one to the center of the room.

"*Golem Surrectum*."

A pillar of wet earth rose from the bin. It took on a humanoid form, stepped out of the vat and trudged towards them, its arms outstretched in a menacing fashion.

Shacklebolt raised her wand, and a silver bolt shot out. It hung in the air and howled before attacking the golem. When the earthen beast had been smashed back into a pile of wet mud, the Patronus returned to Shacklebolt's side.

At first, Moody thought that the Patronus was an avatar of a dog. But as he made a closer inspection of its hunched, massive head and its prominent forepaws, he realized that it was anything but.

Shacklebolt patted her Patronus' head as it nuzzled against her leg. "Now you try."

Moody pointed his wand at the strange creature. "What the devil is that?"

Shacklebolt snorted. "It's my Patronus."

"Yeah, but what animal is it?"

"Fisi...a hyena."

"Aren't those scavengers?"

"As is the lion that you Gryffindors hold in such high esteem." She cocked an eyebrow. "What of it?"

"I meant no offense. It's just... odd, I suppose."

"Do you know nothing of the world outside of your Eurocentric bubble?" With a flick of her wand she dispelled the Patronus. "The Lion and the Hyena are the same in that both are eaters of death. Without the death eaters, the world would be overrun with pestilence."

"Right... Sorry."

Shacklebolt uttered an incantation to reconstitute the golem and ordered it to advance. "Stop apologizing and show me your Patronus already."

Moody took his guard and aimed at the slow moving hulk. "*Expecto Patronum*." He scoffed when he failed to summon a Patronus of his own. His stomach tightened when he felt Shacklebolt's hand on his abdomen.

Shacklebolt started to rub his belly. Her hand glowed a dull red as she did so. "Feel my magic? I'm simulating the euphoric effect of a Patronus."

Moody did indeed feel it. He stood erect as the warmth began to penetrate his core.

"Concentrate on it; let it pulse through you in waves like ripples in a pond. You should feel it getting stronger. Let those ripples turn into tides crashing on the surf."

Moody felt the warmth diffuse into his wand arm, causing it to stiffen until it was on the verge of cramping.

"Don't think of your wand as an extension of your arm but rather as an extension of the magic inside you." Shacklebolt moved her hands to his outstretched arm and started to stroke its length gently. "Do you feel it?"

"Yes," Moody chuckled quietly in response as the giddy sensation within him approached critical mass. "I feel it."

She released him. "Then say the words."

"*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*"

A silver, misshapen blob forced its way out of Moody's wand. It pounded the golem mercilessly and obliterated it. The sheer force of its assault blew Moody and Shacklebolt off their feet.

Moody wiped the mud from his face. His heart racing, he sprung upright and howled joyously. When he had regained his composure, he looked to Shacklebolt. There she sat, her chin trembling as she struggled in vain to pick the mud out of her braids.

Blushing, Moody extended a hand to help her up. "Sorry, that's... never happened before."

She glared at him and retrieved the rest of her belongings. "You'll have to work that problem out on your own, I'm afraid."

After she left, he looked upon his handiwork with pride. He pointed his wand.

"*Expecto Patronum!*"

Nothing happened, save for a single ember that sputtered from the tip of his wand.

"Bollocks."

Ninety-Eight and Seven-Sixteenths Pure

Chapter 16 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 16

Ninety-Eight and Seven-Sixteenths Pure

Moody stood outside the lecture hall. As he had feared, the maestro had already started the morning's lesson. Moody unfolded his invisibility cloak and tied it around his shoulders. When he found an opportune moment, he entered the hall and stepped carefully to the back of the room. He was relieved to see that no one seemed to notice his entrance, so he plotted a course to the lab table next to his partner, Jeff.

BLAM!

Moody felt a sharp pain in his bum and shrieked as he fell onto his side, grasping his left butt cheek tightly. He whipped off his invisibility cloak, and his classmates turned

with a start to see him curled on the floor.

Maestro pointed the gun away and blew the smoke from the barrel of the .45 caliber in his hand. "Scab Moody?" he questioned, apparently surprised to see him. "Terribly sorry; I didn't see you there. Whatever are you doing skulking around during my lecture?"

Moody braced his arms on the back of a nearby chair and picked himself up, keeping his weight off his left leg. Careful to keep the pain out of his expression, he replied, "I was practicing my stealth skills, Maestro."

"I see. Well done, then." The maestro opened the breech and removed the spent shell from the gun's barrel. "Take care where you decide to practice; I might have had occasion to demonstrate with live ammo rather than rock salt." He sneered. "Now, take your seat."

When Moody took his place next to Jeff, the maestro held up the pistol illustratively and continued the lecture. "The gun...arguably the single most significant advancement in Muggle technology to date. Though it may be primitive in concept, it remains both elegant in design and deadly in execution."

"Barbaric," Angie muttered under her breath.

The maestro raised an eyebrow at her. "You have a comment, Scab Prewett?"

Undeterred, Angie added, "What sort of creature would devise such an implement? It's monstrous."

The maestro smiled and nodded at her honesty. "The same 'creature' that rules the world today."

"Still, I'm not impressed." She gasped when she heard the cock of a hammer and turned to see the maestro pointing his gun at her.

"Did you feel that? The skip in your heartbeat, the sudden rise in blood pressure, the way you gripped the side of your desk a little tighter? It's an instinctual fear. That's a power unmatched by any wand. Don't think for one moment that a dark wizard is above using one of these. Underestimate this 'barbaric' tool at your peril." The maestro released the hammer and lowered the weapon.

Angie relaxed a bit after regaining her composure. "Of course, Maestro."

"I'm glad you agree." The maestro holstered the gun and took out his wand. He levitated four leather bags from the front of the room and hovered one next to each of the cadets. "Because for today's assignment, you will each get to put one together." When he snapped his fingers, the bags emptied their contents of various metallic bits and pieces onto the lab tables. "When you're done report to the targeting range. I'll be waiting behind the blast screens."

The room was quiet for several minutes after the maestro left, as the cadets attempted to suss out the puzzle of machine parts before them.

Jeff picked out a couple of pieces from his pile, at a loss, and turned to Moody. "So, what happened to you this morning, mate?"

"I got an owl from Dru during first meal. She said it was important."

"What was it about?"

"I don't know." Moody grunted and shifted his weight to lean on his right side. "I had to send a post back telling her I couldn't make it until after lunch."

Jeff, taking notice of Moody's discomfort, smirked. "Maestro really pegged you, didn't he?"

"Yeah." Moody folded his cloak and placed it under his seat for padding. "You don't suppose he saw me, do you?"

"How could he? I certainly didn't see you."

"Are you two going to keep cackling like a couple of hens?" Reuben said, glancing over his shoulder. "I'm trying to concentrate."

"Like it makes a difference, tosser!" Moody shot back. "And don't think I forgot about you sending me to that bordello!"

"Reuben!" Angie scolded. "Tell me you didn't send Alastor to a house of ill-repute!"

"That he did, Angie," Jeff confirmed with a grin.

"I did no such thing." Reuben said in defense. "It's a proper pub that just happens to...*diversify*." He smiled. "Besides, they have the best Guinness on tap in the East End."

Moody shook his head. He wadded up the empty leather sack and threw it at Reuben. "Are you daft? It tasted like Troll piss."

"Now you're just being silly, Alastor. Have you even tasted Troll piss?"

"Do we have to separate you two?" Angie said impatiently. "Honestly, to hear you blokes go at it reminds of my nephews, Fabian and Gideon."

Reuben shared a knowing wink with Moody and replied, "I take it because these nephews of yours are dashing?"

"And witty?" Moody added.

"Not to mention devilishly handsome?" Reuben finished.

"Yes." She rolled her eyes. "And they're also *six*."

"But / have an excuse, Angie. Reuben's antics almost scarred me for life. I may never recover."

Angie returned her focus to the assembly of her firearm. "I have the utmost confidence in your resilience, Alastor."

Moody chuckled and started to separate the pieces before him into more manageable categories.

Jeff still appeared to be either struggling with or disinterested in his pile of gun parts. He leaned over and whispered to Moody, "Yeah. The Order of Merlin. That's gotta put you in the lead now, don't you think?"

"I doubt it, mate. Maestro has it in for me."

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know," Moody said, rubbing his bum. "But I've got the feeling that somehow he saw through my cloak."

"You're being paranoid, Alastor."

By this time Angie had assembled half of her pistol. It levitated before her as she struggled to figure out what piece to attach next. The frustration was evident in her voice.

"Stay on task, you two. I would prefer *not* to spend the entire afternoon cooped up in here."

"Yes, Mummy." Jeff and Moody taunted in unison.

After they finished assembling their pistols, the four agreed to meet up after lunch and report to the firing range as a group. Moody was grateful since it gave him some time to keep his appointment with Druella.

He arrived at the ground floor, but Druella was nowhere to be seen. Struggling to sort through the faces of the many passersby, he failed to notice the footsteps of a woman hurrying toward him. Her attention was concentrated on the map she held tightly in her hand. When they bumped, her briefcase fell from her grasp and hit the floor; its contents scattering everywhere.

Moody turned with a start when she yelped. He started to apologize but was distracted when he recognized the woman scrambling to collect the papers strewn at his feet.

"Miss McGonagall?" Moody said with a surprised smile. "If we keep running into each other like this, I'm going to start thinking that you're stalking me."

McGonagall paused and looked up when she recognized him but quickly diverted her attention back to collecting her things. "Yes, because it's so unusual that two magical beings would cross paths in the Ministry of Magic."

Moody, quite accustomed to her sardonic wit by now, knelt down to help her. "So, what business do you have at the Ministry this fine day?"

She stuffed the documents hurriedly into her briefcase. "If you must know, I am applying for my Animagus certification."

Moody carefully stacked the papers he had collected and presented them. "You're an Animagus?"

She snatched them quickly and put them away without regard to their orientation. "That would be the prerequisite, Mr. Moody."

He stood up and stepped back, feeling slightly put-off. "Keeping more of those options of yours open, I see?"

"What?"

"For your internships," he clarified.

"Right." She sighed, allowing Moody to help her up. "Forgive me, but I really am in a rush, and I'm having trouble finding my way."

"I shan't keep you then." He took out his wand. After whispering the proper incantation, a glowing ball formed and detached itself from the wand's tip. "Just follow this orb."

"Oh." Her eyes widened as the floating sphere of yellow energy floated by. She started to follow it but stopped and turned gently. "Mr. Moody?" Upon Moody's acknowledgement she continued, "I'm..."

"Allie."

Moody turned from McGonagall to Druella's familiar voice. "Hello, love." He looked back to McGonagall, but she had already left, her footsteps echoing briskly as she proceeded to catch up to the orb.

With a furrowed brow, Druella watched McGonagall disappear into one of the elevators. "Who was that woman?"

"It's nobody," Moody said with a wave of his hand. "What's going on with you today, pet?"

"We need to talk, now."

Moody took Druella by the arm and led her to the empty waiting room he had reserved.

With the door closed and the blinds drawn, she finally felt comfortable enough to speak. "I registered us for the Pure Pool."

"Is that what this is all about? What'd you do a silly thing like that for?"

"Unlike you, I believe in the preservation of our culture."

Moody's eyes narrowed slightly. "Well, don't expect me to go to all those blasted meetings."

Druella shook her head nervously. "You don't understand. A *Certificate of Heritage* is required as part of the process."

At a loss, Moody shrugged his shoulders. "So, you need my consent or something?"

She snorted. "Please. When do I ever bother to get your consent for anything? Since you don't have any close family ties, I took the liberty of hiring an investigator." She reached into her purse and retrieved a carefully folded piece of paper. "I got the results this morning."

Moody folded his arms and sighed. "Dru, I don't have an enormous amount of time."

"It says you're a Mudbl..." She stopped herself, closing her eyes. "You're of Muggle descent."

Moody stared at her for several seconds, unsure if he had heard her correctly. "No I'm not. Both of my parents were full-bloods, as were their parents..."

"Only to six generations. You don't meet the required seven." She bit her lip.

Moody regarded her again. His first instinct...his only instinct...was to laugh.

"Don't make light of this."

"I'm sorry, but this is a hell of a thing to bring up weeks before the ceremony."

Druella averted her eyes. "I know."

"So what are you telling me? That we can't get married now?"

"You don't know my family. If this got out, they would never allow us to get married! I would be exiled!"

Moody shrugged. "So what?"

Druella looked up, glaring. "What did you say?"

"You heard me." He returned her glare. "I am sick and tired of this shite! Tiptoeing on eggshells and putting on airs!"

"Allie, please!" Her eyes widened and her bottom lip trembled. "You don't know what it's like!"

"Your father didn't like me when he thought I was a Pureblood which I am, by the way!"

"Lower your voice."

"I bet if I were wealthy, like Cygnus Black, this wouldn't be an issue!"

"Stop it."

"I could vanquish a thousand dark wizards, save the borough a dozen times over, yet I would never be good enough? That's rubbish, Dru! Rubbish!"

"You can't just ignore this."

"Watch me!" He snorted. "I will soon be an Auror. We don't need them, pet."

Druella placed her hands on his shoulders, stilling his anger with her gentle eyes. "Look, I know how silly this must seem from your perspective." When she took his hand, her hair changed to violet. "One of the things that I love about you is that, in here, I can be myself." Her hair returned to black when she looked toward the door. "But out there, in the world, there are other things to consider...like how this will affect our children, for example."

"For Chrissakes, Dru! Kids? We're not even wed yet. You're being unreasonable."

"And you're being selfish!" She released his hand and rolled the report nervously between her fingers. "My parents sacrificed everything for Evan and me. I can't repay them by marrying a...a..."

Moody snatched the paper and crumpled it. "I AM NOT SOME WAR-MONGERING MUDBLOOD!"

The violence of his outburst shattered all the glass in the room. Moody took out his wand and immediately repaired the windows to deter the curiosity of anyone who happened to pass by. He looked longingly at his fiancée. Druella had retreated to a corner with her back to him, her shoulders shuddering at every abbreviated breath.

"Dru." Moody withdrew his hand when she jerked away from his touch. "Pet. I'm sorry. I...I don't know what to do... tell me what to do."

Druella threw herself into him, sobbing. "I don't know, Allie. If only we could make it all go away with the wave of a wand."

Moody embraced her tenderly, stroking her hair and kissing the top of her head. "What if we're careful? Who else knows about this?"

"I've already paid off the investigator. Tomorrow I'll withdraw our membership with the SS. I'll say it's at your insistence; no one will question it."

"You certainly have all the answers, don't you?"

"I thought that was my line." She laughed through her tears. "We can make this work, can't we, Allie?"

"Just you and me against the world, pet."

She tightened her embrace. "No one can know. No one."

Moody continued to stroke her hair until she relaxed in his arms.

Druella breathed a contented sigh as Moody held her. "At least our children will be seven generations pure."

Seelischer Apparat

Chapter 17 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 17

Seelischer Apparat

Moody looked out onto the desolate open plain. The wind howled ominously between the forests that buffered either side of the grassy corridor. His mind reeled with strategies and tactics in preparation for the trial that was to come. He took a sip of his tea, grimaced and positioned his wand under the cup, chanting until it was once again warm to the touch. Distant voices brought him out of his thoughts. He looked over his shoulder, and regarded his classmates walking slowly out of the mist.

Jeff was the first to arrive. "You're here early."

Moody shrugged. "Who could sleep?"

"Right. Are you nervous?"

Moody shook his head. "All I've ever wanted is to be an Auror, and today is the day."

Jeff smirked. "So, the answer is yes?"

"Don't get ahead of yourselves, mates," Reuben said upon his arrival. He hooked his arm around the necks of both Jeff and Moody playfully and teased, "I'm sure maestro has taken great pains to ensure that we have an 'interesting' exit test."

Both Jeff and Moody elbowed Reuben off.

"Regardless of how this turns out, I can't wait to finally move into my own flat," Jeff said as he bent over to recover his fallen hat. "Something tells me that our friendship wasn't going to survive us all bunking together for too much longer."

Reuben rubbed the sore spot on his ribs and pouted. "Is this about leaving the toilet seat up again?"

Jeff rolled his eyes and replaced his bowler hat. After setting it slightly askew, he continued his conversation with Moody. "Seriously, mate, I know you've been through a rough patch with Dru and all, but promise me you're going to keep your head in the game."

"Don't worry about me, *Geoffrey*. Truth be told, I've been looking forward to working out a bit of aggression." Moody finished what was left of his tea.

"Good. Now I won't feel so bad when I give you all a pasting."

Reuben chuckled and knocked the bowler off Jeff's head. "Don't you know that nice guys like you finish last?"

"*Accio* hat." Jeff glared at Reuben. "I am not that kind of nice, you anally expulsive git."

Reuben folded his arms and persisted, "Sorry, mate, but you are; it's annoying as hell."

Jeff frowned and regarded Angie as she passed. "Angie, am I nice?"

Angie smiled and patted his cheek. "Of course you are, dear. That's what we love about you."

Moody slapped him on the back and added, "No worries, Jeff. All we have to do is pass the blasted thing and we're in. Six months from now who's going to care?"

"Ah, my naive Alastor. You underestimate the value of bragging rights," Reuben said, his gaze locked on Angie as she continued on. "Angie, you're looking particularly fetching today."

"Thank you," Angie replied, looking over her shoulder at the three of them. "And I hate to agree with Reuben, but he's right. No hard feelings when I come away with top marks, boys. The first round of firewhisky is on me when this is all over."

Reuben caught up to her and stood in her path. "Care to make a wager on that, love?"

She placed her hands on her hips, annoyed, but indulged him nevertheless. "What are the stakes?"

"If you win, I will take you to dinner at the fanciest bistro in London."

"You're on," she said with a smirk. "Although, I'm not so sure dinner with you sounds like a winning proposition." She stepped aside and proceeded to walk around him.

Reuben cut her off again. "Well?"

Angie sighed. "'Well' what?"

"What do I get if I win?"

She shoved Reuben aside and replied, "My sheer and utter disbelief."

Reuben raised an eyebrow but let her pass. He noticed Moody and Jeff snickering.

"Nice try mate," Jeff said.

"Piss off, choir-boy."

BAM!

The cadets were quieted by the crack of the maestro and Shacklebolt's apparition. They walked towards the cadets, levitating a large cardboard box in tow.

After instructing them to line up, the maestro began. "You four are here today because you have demonstrated *apassable* competence in magical law enforcement."

With a wave of his wand, the box opened. Four folders egressed and levitated toward them until each one hovered directly in front of a cadet. Moody noticed that the folder in front of him was labeled with his name. He assumed that the other folders were labeled in a similar fashion.

The maestro's booming voice captured everyone's attention. "Unlike your former peers, you have each weathered every obstacle that the program has thrown at you, as evidenced by these files which serve as a record of your progress, skills and aptitudes. You should all be proud; these written records represent the culmination of your hard work over the past three years. Unfortunately, it means precisely nil."

The elder wizard snapped his fingers and the folders promptly caught on fire. The cadets stepped back instinctively in surprise and watched, helpless, as the records were reduced to ash in a matter of seconds. The wind blew away any remaining evidence.

"I've decided to take only one of you this year. I don't see the Auror division being any more enriched with all four of you on. Therefore, today's exit test will determine who will join the ranks of the elite few. The rest will be sent home with our thanks and an open invitation to re-apply next term." The maestro stopped to regard the reactions of the cadets; they all looked down at their feet, crestfallen...all except for Moody, that is. "Does that not meet with your approval, Scab Moody?"

For once, Moody returned the old wizard's glare. "No, Maestro, it doesn't."

"Well, you can bypass the procedure entirely if you like." The maestro took out his wand and crossed his arms. "All you have to do is get by me." He addressed all four of them as he said this, but his eyes were on Moody. "No takers?"

Moody eventually backed down. "Not at the moment, Maestro."

Oblivious to this exchange, Shacklebolt took over the presentation and directed everyone's attention back to the open plain. "Welcome to *The Gauntlet*. The goal is simple: make a go for the bell at the far end of the quad. Unlike your previous challenges, the first person to ring the bell at the end will be declared the winner."

"And before you get any bright ideas, the area will be laced with anti-apparition jinxes," the maestro interjected. "You can try *tjump the jinx*, I suppose, but I wouldn't recommend it."

Moody squinted. When the sun came out from behind the clouds, he did indeed see a faint glint of metal in the distance about three football fields away by his reckoning.

"Well, good luck to each of you. Are there any questions before we begin?" Shacklebolt asked in closing. She smiled when all four cadets raised their hands. "Er, sorry, that was rhetorical."

BAM!

The two instructors disappeared and four wizards, dressed in black robes, threw off their invisibility cloaks. They fired at the unprepared cadets.

Moody suffered a total of three jinxes before he hit the ground. He managed to keep his bearings and pointed his wand at the nearest attacker.

"Expelliarmus!"

Their spells clashed. Moody tried to rise to his feet while keeping his wand engaged in the duel, but his legs felt like jelly. Unable to balance, he fell on his bum and lost his concentration, breaking out of the duel.

Moody sat up almost immediately, but his attacker was gone. He turned toward the sound of Reuben's familiar voice laying out a string of curses as he struggled against his opponents. Reuben was the only one left on his feet and was wrestling against two dark-robed wizards. He took two hexes in the chest and fell to the ground.

Eager to return the favor, Moody steadied himself on his knees and blasted one of the wizards off Reuben. The attackers responded in kind and sent three stun spells in his direction of which Moody blocked expertly. He pointed his wand to counter-attack but stopped mid-curse; the wizards had disappeared as quickly as they had come. By this time, Angie and Jeff had caught a second wind, and the four of them swept the area with their wands, keeping a keen eye out for more surprises.

Moody tried to rise to his feet, but his jelly-legs were useless. He looked toward his peers and saw that they were struggling similarly to achieve ambulation. Reuben had given up entirely and had started to crawl his way to the bell. Jeff and Angie took Reuben's lead and started to crawl after him. The race was on.

After taking one final look around, Moody reluctantly sheathed his wand and got on his hands and knees, but he did not give up on walking. They were about fifty yards out when Moody could feel his legs again. Moody steadied himself and rose slowly until he regained his balance.

Work, blast it!

Moody's tenacity paid off. He limped along at first, but he soon found himself almost back to normal. He quickly passed the other three cadets who were still crawling along.

Angie scoffed, "How is it that you're so nimble already?"

Moody shrugged in response. "The tea I was drinking was laced with essence of Murtlap." He tried not to smile too broadly.

Jeff laughed. "I wish I'd thought of that. Good show, chap."

"This isn't over yet, Moody." Reuben redoubled his efforts, even though he had no chance of keeping pace with Moody.

Moody took no joy in leaving them behind, but he had sacrificed much to be an Auror, so he took comfort in the notion that each of them would do the same in his position.

Although Moody had a good lead with excellent visibility, he remained wary of how easy this all seemed. *This can't be all there is to it.*

The sun returned from behind the clouds. The shadow of an oddly-shaped bird caught Moody's eye. *No, not a bird.* He looked skyward and gasped. The four dark-robed wizards, now mounted on brooms, were fast approaching. Moody's mind raced as he finally comprehended their strategy: an open field with high visibility, and hobbled prey with nowhere to hide. It was unlikely that any of them would make it on foot before being overtaken. This wasn't a test of skill as much as it was a turkey shoot.

There was no time; the four brooms were already angling in for a strafing run. Moody's only recourse was to seek refuge into the forest along the border. Moody began to run, but paused when he remembered his friends.

Friends, or rivals?

Moody curled his lip, raised his wand and levitated Jeff, Angie and Reuben to safety. When they were secure, he ran as fast as he could. He stumbled at first, but as he looked over his shoulder at the fast-approaching brooms, adrenaline steadied his gait. He ignored the jeers of his teammates while he made a run for the trees.

"Alastor, what the bloody hell do you think you're doing?"

"Settin' us up for failure, he is!"

"I never thought you'd sink this low!"

But when the others finally noticed the brooms, they quickly had a change of heart.

"FASTER!"

"THEY'RE ALMOST ON TOP OF US!"

"What are you pussy-footin' about for? GO! GO! GO!"

This first sortie clipped them just before the tree line. Moody's levitation spell failed, and they all fell on top of him in a pile. Jeff and Angie cast *Protego* charm while Moody and Reuben fired back to cover the four of them as they retreated into the forest.

Moody was the last to enter the trees. As he had hoped, the dense vegetation made it impossible for their pursuers to track them from the air. All was quiet, but Moody could see the silhouettes of the brooms circling ominously overhead. He joined the others at a small clearing only to find them glaring upon his arrival. They sat in silence for several minutes, waiting for the jinxes to wear off.

Moody had grown uncomfortable with their continued stares. "What is it?"

Jeff was the first to respond. "Alastor, are you daft? You're not supposed to help us."

"I didn't hear any complaints during the act," Moody replied. "They were about to pound all of us into the dirt."

Angie threw up her hands. "It's *supposed* to be hard; that's the point."

"You're going to bollocks things up for all of us!" Reuben added.

"You saw what happened out there," Moody said, feeling shocked that he had to justify his actions. "Is there any doubt in your heads that maestro wants ~~us~~ to fail?"

Jeff nodded. "Moody has a point. That's the Medusa squadron out there. I'm not partial to getting my arse torn to pieces, either."

Angie made her way back to the tree line. "I have no intention of throwing away three years of my life just because you blokes are afraid of getting knocked around a bit." With that, she took her leave of them.

The three men sat in silence and waited patiently, ignoring the sounds of battle that marked Angie's obvious entrance onto the field. Soon enough, silence returned to the forest. They heard footsteps and brought their wands to the ready. They lowered their guard when Angie stepped out from behind the bushes. Her hair was covered in ash and her clothing was singed.

She patted out the last of the smoldering embers on her sleeve. "Teamwork, then?"

The ensuing laughter was cut short with the arrival of a forest imp. At one meter tall its body was covered with dull green fur. Its head was disproportionately large, and vestigial wings protruded from its back. It entered the camp, hopping onto a rock to get a better view. It leered at the young wizards, pointing a thin, crooked finger and spoke in a raspy and gurgled voice.

"Out of bounds!" The imp threw an object that hit Reuben squarely on the chest.

Reuben raised his wand and snarled, "Scram, you little shit!"

A yellow spark hit the rock that the imp was perched upon. It screamed and threw its hands up in the air. Its wings flapped as it ran back into the bushes.

"Reuben, that was mean!" Angie scolded.

"Well, the little bugger threw a..." Reuben trailed off as he knelt to pick up the object at his feet. "A mushroom?" He chuckled and threw it away.

BOOM!

The mushroom exploded, covering the four of them in debris. Moody tried to ignore the ringing in his ears while he struggled to make out the whispers coming from the shadows.

Out of bounds...

The others joined Moody in tracking their wands toward the sounds of shuffling footsteps scurrying amongst the brush. The whispers became more numerous as they chanted in unison.

Out of bounds...

"I hope this teaches you a lesson about picking on small, defenseless creatures, Reuben." Jeff said.

"That it does," Reuben replied. "Next time I won't let the little piss-ant escape so he can fetch his friends."

Out of bounds...

More mushrooms were pitched at them from the shadows. The four cadets took cover behind the trees before the volatile fungi exploded and sent the leaves that covered the forest floor into the air. In the silence that followed, the leaves rained back down gently, obscuring their vision.

Moody fired blindly in the general direction of the whispers. His assault was answered with another volley of mushrooms. He retreated. "We can't stay here."

"Bah." Reuben pitched back a few of the mushrooms before they exploded. "We can take these little buggers easily; it's not like they're lobbing *boulder*-sized mushrooms at us."

Everyone's attention was drawn to the sound of rustling leaves and snapping branches. A boulder-sized mushroom came rolling toward them down the muddy embankment. The four wizards ran for the edge of the forest with Reuben in the lead but the mushroom not far behind.

"You were saying?" Jeff panted as he looked over his shoulder.

"Meh, it could be worse; at least they're not flinging big, stinky piles of..."

"SHUT UP, REUBEN!" Angie, Jeff and Moody had had quite enough.

They broke out onto the field just as the mega-mushroom exploded. The shockwave knocked them on the grass all to the triumphant cheers of the forest imps.

"Right." Reuben rolled up his sleeves and headed back toward the trees, eager for round two. There was a sudden flash of heat, and he hopped back, yelping. An impenetrable wall of fire had appeared, cutting off all access to the forest.

They dreaded to look up, but they had no choice. The Medusa squadron soared overhead in a foreboding "V" formation; their dark robes flapped loudly as they accelerated ever higher. As a single unit, they banked tightly and began their rapid descent with the sun at their backs.

"They'll be within range in seconds," Angie said, gripping her wand tightly.

"We should scatter," Reuben said in nervous anticipation. "Every man for himself."

"No." Moody grabbed Reuben's shoulder before he could run off. "We stick together and hold the line!"

Angie kept her gaze fixed on the fast-approaching brooms. "Alastor, need I remind you that the Auror's field guide advises ~~against~~ surface-to-air dueling?"

"No, but in for a penny, in for a pound, I always say."

Jeff arched a wary eyebrow toward Moody. "What are you thinking, old man?"

"Do you remember the lesson that maestro gave on firearms?" Moody said with a wry smile.

A grin appeared on Jeff's face and he snorted. "The Two-by-Two Cross-cover Formation? That's a Muggle tactic."

"This is bollocks!" Reuben exclaimed. "I always ended up on point!"

"That's because you're the fastest bloke," Jeff replied.

"But the man on point always takes the first hit!"

"For Merlin's sake, Reuben, don't be such a nancy-boy," Angie said. "I'll take point with you."

Reuben snorted. "But you're a girl."

"Don't worry." She winked. "I'll try not to leave you too far behind."

When the Medusas were within range, Moody took the initiative and shot his best jinx at the lead broom. Moody's spell met the other's jinx in mid-air. He held his ground and tracked the squadron leader as he flew by, marked by a tether of red versus violet. When they were out of range, Moody and Jeff made a run for the bell, appearing to leave Angie and Reuben behind. The Medusas stayed in formation and came about in pursuit. As soon as they started their strafing run, Moody and Jeff spun on their heels, dug in and fired a flurry of curses skyward.

As if on cue, Angie and Reuben started to run, following the path laid out for them by their teammates. They passed Moody and Jeff, who continued to cover them as they advanced the forward position. Fifty meters out, Angie and Jeff stopped and laid down suppression fire, allowing Moody and Jeff to start another leg of the relay.

It was working; the broomsmen scattered in confusion. The powerful tactic had allowed Moody, Jeff, Angie and Reuben to traverse two-thirds of the plain successfully. They were about to start another relay when the Medusas broke formation and split apart. They encircled their targets to pinch them from all sides. Before the wizards on the ground could adapt to this change in strategy, the Medusas fired into the earth. The ground shook.

The sudden appearance of a crevasse separated Angie from Reuben. She slipped and started to fall in. Reuben grabbed her arm, but the mini-earthquake made it impossible for him to maintain his footing and he stumbled. In the nick of time, Moody and Jeff leapt over and dove toward Reuben. They each managed to get a firm hold of one of Reuben's ankles. With a heave, all four were back to relative safety.

Another quake. A structure rose from one of the sinkholes, a large oblong tabernacle covered in vines. On instinct, the four wizards made a break for the edifice, but their footing was precarious. A large gap separated them from sanctuary.

Angie shot a yellow beam into the cracked earth and it slowly started to close...but not enough. Following her lead, Moody, Jeff and Reuben cast a similar repair charm that served to knit the earth back together. When the way was clear, they crossed the gap and proceeded to seek refuge within the structure.

Once inside they collapsed, relieved to have found a temporary reprieve from their exhausting task. It was hot in the narrow corridor. There was just enough light coming in from the ceiling to illuminate the vine-covered inner walls of the tabernacle.

Jeff removed his bowler and wiped the sweat from his brow. "You do realize, of course, that we've been corralled."

Moody nodded, resting with his palms propped on his knees. "Yeah. But anything they throw at us in here can't be as bad as what's out there."

"Agreed. And at least we'll be able to see it coming this time," Reuben said, resting his hand against the wall. He didn't notice at first, but his hand had slowly begun to sink into the vegetation that lined the wall. When he realized that his hand was held fast, he gave it good yank. In response, the surrounding vines shot down his arm and curled around his body.

The other vines in the hallway seemed to come alive. Before the others could react, they found themselves similarly ensnared.

Moody struggled against the tendrils. The barbs that lined the vines felt like fire when they pricked his skin, even through his clothing. The harder he struggled, the deeper the barbs dug into him. "I stand corrected."

"Bah, this isn't so bad," Reuben said. "As long as we don't resist we'll slip out of its grip." He stopped struggling and let his body slump, but this did nothing to relieve his apparent discomfort.

"You're thinking of Devil's Snare," Angie said, trying not to wince as she did so. "This species is Venomous Tentacula, but it's also a man-eater. It'll take us to the main vine where we'll be slowly digested."

"Well, it could be worse," Reuben said. "Tentacle rape, anyone?"

Angie glared at him. "Can you be serious for two seconds?"

Reuben waited precisely two seconds and replied, "You still have yet to tell me what I get if I win."

"Maybe you two should pick this up *after* we resolve our current predicament?" Moody suggested. He struggled in vain to free his wand arm. "First off, we have to free ourselves of these tendrils."

Reuben rolled his eyes. "Think of that all by yourself, Alastor?"

"That's not constructive, Reuben," Jeff scolded.

"You want *constructive*?" Reuben managed to angle his wand toward the ground. A silver effigy of a rodent with large, puffy cheeks and a bushy tail coalesced at his feet. It scurried quickly up the vine where it started to gnaw at one of the tendrils.

Jeff smiled. "A chipmunk? Your Patronus is a chipmunk?"

"Yes, what of it?"

He sniggered. "Nothing, he's just so damn cute."

Reuben glared in response to Moody's laughter. "Sorry, what is *your* Patronus, again, Moody?"

"Don't listen to them, Reuben," Angie said, tightlipped. "Your Patronus is very masculine."

"Thank you, Angie," Reuben replied. He turned to the other two gents and teased, "HAH!"

Jeff guffawed. "Reuben, when a girl has to *tell* you something is manly, chances are, it's anything but."

Reuben looked back to Angie with a furrowed brow and asked, "Is that true?"

She shrugged. "I'm sorry, Reuben. But he is so very cute. I wish I had one." Jeff and Moody's infectious laughter made it impossible for Angie to hide her amusement any longer. "Come now, Reuben. Why aren't you joining in the fun?"

"Because it's at *my* expense!"

She pouted. "Oh, right."

Still smiling, Moody diverted his attention to balancing the tip of his wand against the tendril that bound his wrist. "Y'know, far be it from me to be a party pooper, but I think we should all stay on task."

"I'm loath to admit it, but I agree with you," Reuben said.

Angie frowned flippantly. "Oh, pooh to both of you. You're no fun!"

For the first time, Reuben regarded Angie's odd behavior. He noticed her bloodshot eyes and general lethargy. At first he assumed it was from the ordeal of the trial, but he soon realized that Jeff was exhibiting the same symptoms. "Alastor?"

"What?"

"Is it me, or are Jeff and Angie acting a bit out of character?"

Moody was too focused on trying to free himself with the pruning spell to notice. "What are you going on about?" He cursed when the spell missed the tendril.

"They look drunk. And I know drunk."

"Are you sure?"

Reuben rolled his eyes impatiently and decided to illustrate his point. "Angie, love, what do you say we grab a show tonight and then head back to my place for an end away?"

Angie looked at Reuben and smiled seductively. "Mhmm... that sounds like fun."

That got Moody's attention. "Holy shite!"

"I told you.... and Jeff has gone completely bye-bye."

"Angie?" Moody looked into her reddened eyes. "ANGIE!" She seemed oblivious. He struggled to keep her engaged. "I need you to focus. What are the effects of Venemous Tentacula?"

"The venom... acts as a narcotic... makes the prey more tractable... for... digestion."

"Hence the name, I guess." Moody then eyed Reuben suspiciously. "The Murtlap is obviously still working for me, but why aren't you affected?"

"It's the Scot in me. You'll never meet a Ledley who can't hold his liquor."

Reuben's Patronus finished gnawing through his vines just as Moody managed to free himself. The two went to work in freeing an unconscious Jeff and Angie. After setting them down in the middle of the hallway, they remained motionless until the pulsating vines stilled.

Satisfied, Reuben joined Moody, eyeing the exit at the far end. "So, what now? It's going to take them a few minutes to sleep this off."

"Stay with them." Moody started down the path.

Reuben grabbed him by the arm. "Where do you think you're going?"

Moody glared in return until Reuben released him. "We won't make it out of this corridor unless one of us takes out the root."

"I disagree. When all of us are back on our feet, we should cut our way out by force. "

"No, you blokes can barely walk as it is. Besides, the vines are attracted to movement. The less bodies, the better chance I'll have of punching through." Moody brushed past Reuben and began to walk away. He detected a flash of red from behind and spun around, pointing his wand at Reuben. He reconsidered casting a counter-spell upon noticing the severed, twitching tendril at his feet. He clenched his teeth. "Thanks."

Reuben nodded but kept his wand at the ready. "We're not done here, mate."

Moody sheathed his wand. "We are not mates."

"Damn right we're not." Reuben likewise stood down. "How do I know you can be trusted not to make a go for the bell?"

"Need I remind you that if it weren't for me, you wouldn't have gotten this far?"

"Yeah, 'teamwork,' is that it? It works out well for you, too, doesn't it? That is, until you no longer need us. We all know how badly Alastor Moody wants to be an Auror."

Moody snorted. "Almost as badly as *you* in sending me to that whorehouse, I take it? Were you so desperate for points?"

"Get over yourself, Moody. We both know that, in the end, there's only one bell."

"We're not at that point yet. You're going on like I'm some back-stabbing Muggle."

Reuben's eyes narrowed. "And I am, is that it?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Isn't it? Then what did you mean?"

The discussion was interrupted when Angie stirred.

"Fabian... Gideon... please don't fight."

Reuben knelt beside her and let her rest in his lap. Moody took off his overcoat, folded it and placed it gently under Jeff's head. He was startled when Reuben threw a garment at him. He picked up the invisibility cloak and gave Reuben a curious look.

"You'll need that," Reuben said. "I tore this off one of those blokes at the start."

"Plants don't have eyes."

"But the Medusas, who are, no doubt, stationed at the exit, will."

Moody smiled in understanding, put on the cloak and made his way silently down the corridor.

It took all his skills at stealth to sneak to the end of the tabernacle without activating any more tentacles. He placed the hood of the cloak over his head and peeked outside. The ground ahead was carpeted with tendrils; stepping on even one of them would surely activate another attack. All of the vines radiated out from a single point in the center of which was a large, hideous plant. Its pulsating maw made visible its many rows of sharp teeth.

Moody nearly gasped when on the other side, just beyond the plants reach, he saw the golden bell floating above a mighty rock. He ventured further and stepped carefully over a vine. As he surveyed the area, he froze when he saw the Medusa squadron perched just behind the entrance to the tabernacle. Had he not been wearing his cloak, he would surely have been cut down where he stood.

He explored his options; no obvious solution came conveniently to mind. Taking out the root would expose his position to the enemy. On the other hand, even if by some miracle he could take out all four Medusas at once, he would be captured by the man-eating plant in the struggle.

A chill traveled down his spine as a tentacle slid slowly across his shoe. He didn't dare move as it curled around his ankle. The barbs raked across his skin. It wouldn't be long before it detected him as prey.

He smiled.

Ever so slowly, Moody levitated a vine around the ankles of each of the broomsmen. When the vines were within range, they latched on and jerked the wizards violently from their brooms. The struggling prey acted like an on-switch, calling the rest of the vines into action, assailing them faster than the Medusas could cut them down.

The tendrils around Moody shot vertically many meters into the air, exposing much of the ground. It was now or never.

Moody sped toward the root. He caught the attention of every tendril he brushed past, and they launched after him. Maneuvering through the maze of vegetation prevented him from running his fastest, so it was only a matter of time before he tripped. Grasping his wand in his teeth, Moody recovered by cart-wheeling out of the tentacle's reach. He maintained his momentum. Back-springs soon replaced cart-wheels; the world turned topsy-turvy, faster and faster until it was impossible to tell which way was up.

Moody grunted when the plant snatched him in mid-air. Fortunately, the root was within range. He spat out his wand, caught it in his hand and aimed. His spell shredded the root to pieces. Moody fell when the tentacle released him, and he hit the ground hard. Dying vines crashed around him; the *Protego* charm was the only thing that saved him from being crushed.

When all was quiet, Moody found himself cut off from the world. The darkness and heat were reminiscent of the training drills he had suffered at Stonehenge. The air was becoming stale, so he carefully cut a small air hole through the vegetation. He chuckled to himself, grateful that levitating objects was far easier with the use of a wand. It was fortunate considering that without a frame of reference, it could take him the better part of an hour to cut himself free.

It became easy to lose track of time as he worked his way through the vines. Moody heard sounds of activity above. He debated as to whether that was bad news or good news. There was a tapping sound, and a sudden bright light caused his eyes to snap shut. He breathed deeply, refreshed by the cool rush of air. When his eyes adjusted to the sunlight, he saw Reuben standing over him. For once Moody wasn't annoyed to see him.

"I found him," Reuben called out. A wicked grin broadened across his face. "Bad news: he's alive."

Reuben cut away the last of the fallen tendrils and offered his hand. Moody took it, and Reuben helped him up. They were joined by Jeff and Angie.

"Where's the Medusa squadron?" Moody questioned.

Jeff gestured to the massive pile of tendrils before turning back to say, "Let the sods dig themselves out."

They laughed and looked toward the hovering bell; no more obstacles stood between them and the end of their journey. In silent awe they walked the rest of the way unchallenged. The bell's brilliance was amplified by the noon-hour sun. It was the physical manifestation of all their toil and sacrifice.

Moody was mesmerized. The bell's glow reminded him of Gryffindor's Core and he wondered if this was the way Tom had felt about the amulet in the tomb. He shook his head and regarded his teammates. "So, what do we do now?"

"Duel for it?" Reuben offered.

"After all we've been through, how could you suggest such a thing?" Angie said.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm just sayin' what we're all thinkin'."

"But it's not fair," Angie persisted. "We all deserve a shot at the bell."

"Then let's do this... together," Jeff said.

They all looked at each other and smiled. In unison, they raised their wands and fired at the bell. It started to vibrate and glow. Before anyone could react, energy from the feedback spilled over and hit them all.

BAM!

The young wizards were surprised to find themselves back at their training plot at Stonehenge. The bell began to ring, prompting the arrival of the maestro and Shackbolt. Moody, Jeff, Angie and Reuben instinctively lined up. The maestro did not break his stride as he went straight to Moody and back-handed him across the face.

Combat à la Florentine

Chapter 18 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 18

Combat à la Florentine

Moody tasted blood and felt for the cut on the inside of his cheek with his tongue. He retained his composure as he looked to the maestro but couldn't stop his hands from shaking.

The maestro stood almost nose-to-nose with Moody and hissed, "This was your idea, wasn't it? Only you would so brazenly mock these proceedings."

"You're right." Moody straightened. "I take full responsibility, Maestro."

"So it's true?" The maestro paced up and down the line, hands clasped behind his back. He took the time to look into the eyes of each of the other three cadets. "If so, Scab Moody should bear the full brunt of this transgression."

"No." Reuben said, taking a single step forward. "It was all my idea."

Angie also stepped forward. "I'm responsible."

"It was me," Jeff said. He took his place next to the others.

The maestro blinked and regarded the three of them calmly for several seconds. "Interesting," he said as he looked to Shacklebolt. She replied with a smile, her eyes beaming. He nodded in return and faced the cadets once more, saying, "In that case, you all leave me no choice..."

Moody curled his lip and took two steps forward. "If you would suffer my indulgence, Maestro?" Upon receiving the maestro's attention, he continued, "As I recall, you offered an alternative to the standard admissions procedure?"

Jeff, along with the others, looked at Moody with apprehension. "Alastor, what are you doing?"

As the maestro comprehended Moody's intentions, he sneered and said, "You had better think carefully about what you're proposing."

Moody grinned. "'Thinking' has never been one of my strong suits. Therefore, I formally accept your challenge on behalf of all of us."

Shacklebolt walked over and stood between them. Confusion washed across her face as she asked the maestro, "Did you issue such a challenge to this cadet?"

"It appears I did," the maestro replied with a shrug. "Although, no one has ever taken me up on such a thing before."

She looked back to the young wizard. "Moody, this is all really unnecessary..."

The maestro gently brushed her aside. "Now, now, Shacklebolt. The boy's obviously put a lot of thought into this. We don't want to disappoint him, do we?"

In tacit agreement, Moody led the old wizard deeper into the henge away from the others. He stood out in the open, took out his wand and saluted formally. "What do you say, Maestro? Best two out of three?"

"Works for me, scab," the maestro said, taking out his wand. Instead of saluting in kind, however, he aimed; a flash of red knocked Moody to the ground.

Moody rolled over slowly, his hand clutching his chest. He could feel the effects of the Murtlap waning as he struggled to focus his blurry vision. The distant, muffled voices of his peers egged him on.

"What kind of bleeding cheap shot was that?"

"Somebody stop this!"

"Alastor, get up!"

Moody got to his feet and squared off against the maestro. He noticed his hands were empty, and he looked around to see that his Purpleheart wand had been knocked several feet away.

"Pick it up," the maestro said with a sneer.

Moody knew that the maestro was giving him a chance to stand down. He smiled; they both knew that wasn't going to happen. Moody made a feint toward his wand.

"*Stupefy!*"

Moody blocked the spell with his forearm. He spun around as he reached into sleeve to pull out his backup wand. He aimed in a unicorn stance.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Everyone gasped when the maestro's wand flew out of his hand. The old wizard massaged his affected wrist while he regarded Moody's new wand: a masterpiece fashioned out of Beech wood skillfully intertwined with a double strand of Yew. The Olivander sigil was carved into the hilt. It balanced beautifully between the fingers of Moody's left hand. "Ah, so that was your gimmick, eh?"

Moody nodded and Accio'd the Purpleheart wand to his waiting right hand. With both wands at the ready, Moody proceeded to return the courtesy that the maestro had accorded him earlier. "Pick it up."

The maestro walked casually toward his wand, unconcerned. "I have made it a point to teach you to lessen your dependency on your wand, yet your solution is to get two?" He stopped when Moody fired a warning shot at his feet.

When the maestro tensed, Moody fired three hexes. The elder wizard unclasped his cloak and whipped it over his shoulder to deflect the first shot. He knelt, and the garment snapped the air as the second shot ricocheted away while a Protego charm cancelled out the third.

All pretense was over; both wizards knew what was at stake. They ran inside the perimeter of the henge. The maestro took the high ground atop the nearest trilithon. Moody took cover between the stones from below.

Moody was surprised that the old man was able to keep pace with him. Spell after spell was deflected and countered...they danced a deadly wand-fight. Moody quickly surmised that there was no chance of defeating the maestro without a strategy. *The cloak!* He knew that dueling cloaks worked on the same principle as their invisible counterparts and were thus prone to shredding with continued use. Therefore, he kept the maestro on the defensive by hammering him with hexes.

The maestro's flamenco style of defense was a sight to behold. His reflexes were quick and instant. The cloak flowed around him like a sentient partner. Nevertheless, Moody kept up his two-pronged attack like a raging bull.

After the last exchange the preponderance of magic had rendered the henge unstable. The trilith that the maestro stood upon rattled, so he leapt onto the next trilith before it collapsed. He continued to outrun the ensuing destruction as the vertical stones toppled like so many dominoes, all the while deflecting Moody's ground attacks. The maestro vaulted off of the last trilith and levitated himself safely to the center of the henge. When the dust settled Moody approached with both wands aimed; his heels dug into the ground as he prepared for one final charge. The plan worked; the maestro discarded his tattered dueling cloak.

Expelliarmus! Moody cursed when the maestro easily swatted the spell aside, using his bare hand, no less.

Moody soon discovered he didn't have the means to summon another volley of curses. His chest heaved, and his arms felt like lead weights. Exhaustion had taken its toll.

The maestro sneered and stood tall with one hand rested behind his back and his wand lowered. "I trust you now see the obvious disadvantage with combat/a *Florentine*: two wands equals two taps on your reserves." With sudden ferocity his wand cut the air. Moody was blown back to the other side of the henge.

Moody lay on the ground, cursing the way he allowed himself to be outmaneuvered like some dumb animal. The ground shook again but in a different way. He looked up, mouth agape.

The monoliths flew into the air. The swirling vortex of rocks started to clasp together from the ground up: legs stacked on top of feet followed by a torso. When the final piece formed the head, the rock-monster stood erect with its arms outstretched, its two-story frame blocking the sun. It took a step toward Moody, and he could feel the shockwaves in the earth. Between the creature's legs Moody had a clear line of sight to the maestro, who conducted his wand in time with the monster's movements like a master pulling the strings on a grisly puppet.

Moody leapt aside just as the other foot came crashing down. When the behemoth made a grab for him, Moody stilled its motion with his Purpleheart wand.

Impedimenta!

Moody kept his wand raised, but he could only manage to slow the rock monster's advance. He pointed his secondary wand at its feet.

Aguamenti!

A stream of water mixed with the dirt. Moody dove between the monster's legs and slid on the mud. The goliath reached for him and slipped. Broken rocks rained down as the monster collapsed under his own weight.

Mud splashed everywhere.

From a standing leap the maestro levitated himself atop the remaining pile of rocks. All was quiet as he scanned the area. His head snapped in the direction of the faint sound of rustling grass. He pointed his wand ahead of the mysterious indentations of footsteps forming in the sod.

"Stupefy!"

The spell found its mark. An invisible figure slumped in the grass. With a sadistic chuckle, the maestro levitated himself down to ground level. He stepped carefully around the mud to his waiting victim. "You use your invisibility cloak like a crutch, Scab. Now get up." The figure did not move. "I said get up!"

The maestro kicked off the cloak and gasped. The muddy remnants of a golem were already dissolving back into the earth. He cursed and bolted upright but stopped when he felt the warm tip of Moody's wand pressing against the back of his neck.

"Impossible," the maestro uttered, and he lowered his wand. "How did you sneak up on me?"

Moody spoke with a calm that made his voice tremble. "I believe the word is 'stealth', Maestro."

"So, it appears as though you have the advantage."

"Yes. Fortunately for you, I am the sporting sort."

Moody ignored the jeers from the sidelines when he discarded his backup wand of Beech and Yew. He kept his Purpleheart wand trained on the maestro as he circled around to face him.

"Alastor, you've won. What are you doing now?"

Moody clicked his heels, brought up his wand and saluted formally.

"For Merlin's sake, Alastor, don't let him...Oh, bugger!"

The maestro sneered in understanding. He raised his wand in salute. "Noble...*foolhardy*, but noble."

"Expelliarmus!"

"Expelliarmus!"

Their opposing magic begat light that eclipsed the sun itself, banishing all colors, save for a blinding white. The grass below the point of impact started to strip away outward from the center to create a bald spot of earth. Bits of grass and dried mud swirled around, riding on the currents and eddies of force.

Moody felt wetness on his upper lip. He licked at it and tasted his own blood. Each passing second seemed like an hour. Moody's head was pounding, but he poured it on ever harder. The duel had degenerated into a struggle of wills; if he was going to lose, it wasn't going to be because he gave up.

A third flash of light came over the periphery and interrupted the duel. The backlash knocked both men off their feet. The wind died and the debris settled. After wiping the grass and mud from their faces, the two wizards regarded the lone witch that stood between them. Shacklebolt's arms were folded, akimbo, and her foot tapped the ground angrily.

The maestro brushed himself off and stood tall, combing his hair back in place with his fingers. He calmly took out a handkerchief from under his lapel and used it to wipe the blood from his nose. "Looks like Shacklebolt's not going to let us play anymore." He put his wand away. "Women."

Moody grinned and likewise sheathed his wand. "Indeed."

The maestro returned Shacklebolt's glare with a smile and then turned back to Moody. "I suppose congratulations are in order." He sauntered toward the other three cadets, hands clasped behind his back, and he paused when Jeff, Reuben and Angie stood at attention. The maestro nodded their way a courtesy he only afforded to Aurors and he stepped off the edge of the henge.

BAM!

...oOo...

The sun dipped lower into the horizon. The cooler air brought a welcome change in temperature at Stonehenge. Moody drank the last of his water and poured the rest over his bare torso to wash the sweat off his body. He looked out over the pile of rocks and sighed heavily. *Only halfway done.*

Moody hefted the last chunk into place. After using the Reparo spell, he levitated the repaired monolith to its home atop two vertical stones. He chuckled, relieved that he got it right on the first try. A sound prompted him to look behind him; he was no longer alone.

"Auror Shacklebolt," he greeted.

"Auror Moody." She smiled. "Still at it, I see."

"I'm afraid so." He grinned. It felt strange having her address him by rank. "Are you here to help?"

"Heavens, no. I happen to be working late myself, actually; your little stunt has cost me a none-too-trivial amount of paperwork."

"Care to trade?"

"Tempting, but I think I'll stick with my air-conditioned office." With a smirk, Shacklebolt sat down on the nearest convenient rock.

The twilight sun gave the skin on her legs a bronze color; she crossed them. The breeze flowed through her locks and made it appear as if her hair was woven with fibers of gold; she ran her fingers through them. Moody looked away when he caught himself staring. Feeling a bit self-conscious, he put on his shirt and continued his work. "Well... since you're here, I suppose you could at least help pass the time?"

She arched an eyebrow. "How?"

"For starters you can tell me how my being zapped, poisoned, blown up and nearly crushed could possibly be a source of tedium for you." Moody almost blushed she had a bubbly way of laughing. He'd never had occasion to speak with her in such a casual context before. Thinking of her as a peer was going to take some getting used to. Maybe that was her intention.

"Your solution to the gauntlet was... *unique*. There are quite a few details I have to work out before I turn in my final report in the morning."

"What sort of details?"

"For one, what on Earth was going through your head when you challenged the maestro?"

Moody grunted as he levitated the next stone into place and then answered, "Apparently nothing."

"Apparently."

Moody found it increasingly difficult to concentrate. She looked almost regal in the way she regarded him. Nevertheless, it provided him with a unique opportunity. "Am I out of line in asking how I fared?"

In response, Shacklebolt held up her hand, extending her fingers as she enumerated, "You're reckless. You need to work on your Patronus. You're reckless."

"You've already said reckless..."

"It bears repeating, doesn't it?" She glared as she continued, "You're arrogant. And you rely too much on your natural agility when technique would be more appropriate."

He smirked. "So you didn't care for the 'flippy' parts?"

"No."

"Would you deign to grant *me* any redeeming qualities?"

She pursed her lips. "I don't recall any off the top of my head." She snapped her fingers, and a stack of files appeared out of thin air. Using her wand she cycled the papers about. "Ah." A look of recognition crossed her face when she came across an envelope. She snapped her fingers again, and the envelope spoke in her voice.

"Although Alastor Moody is not exceedingly brilliant in anyone area of magic, he has demonstrated a pleasing balance of skill sets. On this basis alone, it is my recommendation to approve his application for admission into the Special Branch of the Magical Law Enforcement Corps The Aurors."

Moody watched the envelope return into the stack of files. "When was that written?"

Shacklebolt shrugged. "I believe I submitted that six months ago."

"Six months ago? What about the exit test?"

"What about it?"

"Are you trying to tell me that I've been an Auror for six months?"

"If you want to get technical, you had the tools. All of you did."

"So... what was the purpose of today, then?"

"You should already know."

"I'm afraid I've been too distracted to absorb the lesson."

At her command, the files disappeared. She rested her wand in her lap. "Does this 'distraction' have a name?"

"No," Moody answered rather quickly.

"Very well." She stood up and folded her arms, assuming the air of formality to which Moody was accustomed. "The Gauntlet is designed in such a way that it cannot be defeated without teamwork. *Teamwork* is what being an Auror is all about."

Moody cast the levitation spell on the heaviest stone yet. "Then why set the rules to play us against each other?" The pitch of his voice rose as he struggled to raise the mega rock into position.

"Life *is* opposition." Shacklebolt pointed her wand and helped him ease the rock into place. "Those who fail to learn that people need each other to survive... don't."

"You could've just told us all this before."

"Perhaps." She smiled mischievously. "But we wanted to make sure the lesson stuck."

"So, the moment Reuben, Angie, Jeff and I rang that bell, we were *bona fide* Aurors?"

"Correct."

"Why did the maestro act like he wanted to expel us, then?"

"We were watching the entire time. Since you were the one that rallied everyone together, I suspect he wanted to test Prewitt, McKinley and Ledley's resolve apart from yours."

Moody rubbed the area on his cheek where the maestro had slapped him. "Did he have to hit me to do it?"

"I suspect that part was for fun." She smiled.

"And the rock monster?"

"Well, no matter how old they get, boys do like to play with toys, don't they?" With that, she took her leave of him. "Goodnight ~~Auror~~ Moody."

Moody grinned once again at the designation and called to her, "I never got a chance to thank you for your help... I mean ~~for~~ your help."

"You want to thank me?" She stopped and glanced at him over her shoulder. "I'm curious to see how long you hold on to that sentiment."

Moody caught himself staring as she walked away. He went back to work repairing the henge. It would be several minutes before he had the presence of mind to wonder,

What did she mean by that?

Forever Hold Your Peace

Chapter 19 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 19

Forever Hold Your Peace

Today was truly a day of rejoicing.

The fairies circled overhead and sprinkled their pixie-dust atop the most beautiful woman they had ever seen. The dust-enchanted hair began to flourish about, dancing to the melody. A house-elf wrangled the raven locks and tamed them, using magic to weave her mistress' hair into a pattern truly worthy of her grace.

A diamond tiara levitated across the room and found its place atop her crown. The magical creatures attending to this Venus on Earth bowed and sang her praises. *This must be the happiest day of your life!*

So, why didn't their goddess smile?

The beautiful bride gazed forlornly at her reflection in the mirror. The songs of the nymphs did little to move her spirits. The red puffiness under her eyes was starting to show through her makeup. She reached for the open jar of concealer, dabbed a bit on the tip of her finger and began to apply it under her eyes. As she blended away any evidence of grief, a glimmer drew her attention to her finger. She stopped to regard the jewel. It was without a doubt the finest diamond that money could buy.

The sound of metal clanking on the vanity stole her attention. She picked up the familiar gold ring before it stilled on the countertop. The embedded diamond was miniscule by comparison and obviously came from someone of modest means. Its presence puzzled her; she was sure that she had returned it. She sniffed the air to take in more of an oddly familiar scent and bolted from her seat. The fairies scattered in surprise and retreated behind the chandelier.

"Allie?"

No answer. She looked around and wondered how long he had been watching. The drapes by the window swayed, and she rushed over, probing the area with her hand but finding only empty air.

She regarded the humble ring again. *He does everything for a reason.* Her thoughts went back to the night that she was proposed to for the first time, and she gasped, "Portkey!" She stared at it for what seemed like an eternity. Her mind was empty, yet she found her finger inching closer and closer to the diamond, shaking as it did so.

All she had to do was touch it.

Her faithful house-elf peeked out from behind the potted fern, noting her hesitation. "Mistress should go to him... Mistress was happy with him."

The bride glared, clenching her teeth. "What did you say to me?"

The elf shrunk behind the plant. "Nothing, my Mistress."

...oOo...

Moody paced along the sidewalk across the street from the church. He waited for over an hour but clung to the hope that Druella would Apparate at any moment even as the ivory, horse-drawn carriage pulled up to the entrance.

The bells rang in the steeple, and the doors opened. Cygnus Black descended the stairs with his bride in arm. Family members from both the Rosiers and the Blacks pelted the newlywed couple with rice until they reached the sidewalk. Cygnus held the door open for the blushing Mrs. Black and helped her inside.

Moody would never forget her face as they rode out of sight. *She looks... happy.*

Moody just stood there even after everyone had cleared out. The buzzing of the streetlamp distracted him as the light flickered on. He blinked, put his hands in his pockets and left. He stared at his feet as he walked the pavement, pondering where it all went wrong and what he could have done differently. He had no mind of the brisk footsteps that approached from behind. A whistle prompted Moody to look over his shoulder.

Pain. The world went black.

Moody forced his eyes open to find himself on his hands and knees; blood dripped from his broken nose to form a puddle between his palms. His teary-eyed vision cleared enough to see the shoes of his attacker. He looked up to see Evan Rosier sneering down at him, brandishing his cane tightly in both hands.

"I've been waiting a long time to do that, Gryffindor. I knew you couldn't resist coming here."

"Evan." Moody snorted and winced from the resulting pain. "Whad a wonderful moment thith muth be for you." He didn't even flinch when Evan swung the cane.

"I always saw through your *flim-flam!*"

The blow from Evan's cudgel knocked Moody onto his back, but he did nothing to defend himself.

"Fight back, you coward!"

Moody grunted when Evan kicked him. He could feel a bone in his ribs snap.

Evan reared back for another kick. "I bet you thought you could get away with hiding your dirty blood."

Moody caught Evan's foot and threw it off. Cradling his ribs, he forced himself upright. He spat out a wad of blood and mucus so he could speak. "How did you know about that?" His eyes narrowed. "It was you... *you* told her parents about my Certificate of Heritage."

As Moody stepped closer, Evan ran away and looked back over his shoulder to say, "If you come near my sister again, I'll kill ya!"

Evan was gone. Moody tightened his arms around his sides. After a few painful gasps of air, he was off again.

It was a long walk back to his flat. Moody opened the door and went inside, not bothering to close the door behind him.

His flat was as empty as his soul.

Moody could have healed himself at any time, but his outward pain was the only thing that kept his mind off the pain in his heart. He opened the shutters overlooking his study and sat at his desk. He opened his private journal, turning the pages until he came to one of his unfinished sonnets. He dipped his quill in the inkwell and began to engage in the only thing that might give him solace in this moment. Usually, he found the scratching of the feather-tip across the paper soothing. But this day the words only mocked him.

My goddess, my goddess, why hast thou forsaken me?

Anger curled his lip. *Rubbish!* He wadded the paper and threw it away.

Moody stared blankly out the window as the sun slid behind the skyline. It was soon dark inside the flat. All was quiet until a closing door and gentle footfalls broke the silence. He would have had occasion to at least turn to see who had intruded upon his domicile...if he had cared, that is.

The smell of jasmine betrayed Druella's identity before she even spoke. "I... saw you at the Oath of Enlistment ceremony. Congratulations."

Moody remained seated in his chair and kept his back to her. "And I saw you coming out of the chapel today. Congratulations to you, too, Mrs. Black."

"Thank you. We're going to Italy for our honeymoon tomorrow..." Druella fidgeted nervously with her fingers as she paced about slowly. "Cygnus is still at the reception, forging political alliances and making financial contacts with Daddy."

"Shouldn't *you* be there as well?"

"I... wasn't in the mood to play the game, so I excused myself early. I'm expected to await him in our bedchamber..."

Moody's patience for small talk was far past its end. "What are you doing here, Dru?"

"I don't know. I..." She walked around and gasped when the light cast from outside revealed the state of his bloodied face. "Who did this to you?"

"Does it matter?"

Druella left the room, and after a few minutes she came back with a washbowl. She set it atop the desk, took out her wand and slowly sat herself in his lap. She waved the wand over Moody's face, and he flinched when his nose popped back into place. Her gentle fingers brushed aside the hand guarding his ribs. Another wave of her wand set his broken bone back together.

Druella reached for the washcloth and wrung it out in the warm water. She began to clean his face, starting with his teary green eyes, and worked her way slowly down to his chin. By the time she was finished, the water in the washbowl was red.

She placed a hand on either side of his head and gently turned his eyes into hers. They looked upon each other in a manner beyond the intimate...a silent language in which they told each other things that they were forbidden to utter by mouth. Her hands slid down his face and found their way to his shoulders. At her gaze, the buttons on his shirt magically separated. Biting her lip, she opened his shirt and felt along his rippling midsection, spurring its flexion with her sharp nails.

He dared to allow himself to believe, if only for a moment, that she was his: his *Druella Moody*.

Druella closed her eyes and parted her lips as she leaned in.

Moody turned away, giving Druella his cheek. "I'll have *all* of you... or *none* of you."

Druella regarded him with a look that could only be described as disappointment. She rose from him and placed an object on the desk. Moody gazed upon the ring, taking no further notice of Druella as she left the flat. She quietly closed the door behind her.

Moody pocketed the ring and watched Druella disappear down the street from his window. With his wounds healed, he needed another avenue to dull the pain, so he grabbed his coat and stormed out.

It was a long walk, but in his reverie, the time passed so quickly that he might as well have teleported to his destination. Moody opened the rusty metal door and slowly went inside. The stink of smoke greeted his nostrils once again, as well as the strange music. He went straight to the bar, ordered a pint of Guinness and downed it on the spot...it tasted good.

He ordered another pint and made his way with it to the far side of the room on the lookout for an empty table as he navigated his way through the crowded dance floor. He found a chair as far away from the loud band as he could. He set his drink down and noticed the ripples in the liquid, pulsing in time with the heavy bass rhythm of the music. It wasn't long after he settled in that he felt a gentle hand stroke his hair.

"Loverboy. I 'aven't seen you in ages." The lady walked in front of him and waited next to the empty chair. "Are you 'ere doing more research?"

Moody grinned and pulled the chair out for her. "Not tonight."

She giggled as she took her seat. "So, 'ows the 'true love' workin' out for you?"

"Not as well as advertised, I'm afraid."

"Aww. Don't tell me you're bored with her already?"

"It's the other way around, actually. T'would appear that *I* am the bore."

She rested her chin in her hand and smiled. "I seriously doubt that."

"The truth of the matter is, I don't make enough money for it not to matter."

"And they call *me* a whore?"

He met her eyes. "I would never call you that."

"You're sweet, but it's not a dirty word." She pursed her lips when she noticed his downward gaze and uncrossed her legs to allow him a better view. "Some women negotiate long-term contracts while with others it's 'pay as you go.' In the end, it's only a business arrangement."

Moody took a sip of the bubbly ale, unwittingly leaving behind a frothy mustache. "Is that what we're doing now?*Negotiating?*"

"Loverboy, that's all we've ever been doing." She traced her fingertips along his upper lip and took the moisture in her mouth. Her full lips caressed her fingers and suckled every drop. "It's a shame we 'aven't done anything else."

He cleared his throat. "Frankly, I think I've had quite enough of negotiating."

She grimaced, looking slightly annoyed and started to get up. "Well, I'll leave you be, then."

Moody chuckled as he grabbed her arm, pulling her into his lap. "You misunderstand me. I'm saying that I want to take you up on that generous offer for tea... for the night."

She laughed, recalling the occasion, and once again stroked the hair on his head. "I'm certainly willing, but that much tea is expensive, dearie."

Moody took her hand in his. "It doesn't matter; I'm very thirsty."

She felt him slip her something and opened her palm. The ring glistened in the dull light. She regarded the diamond with a weak smile and stored the ring on her finger.

Taking Moody by the hand, she led him though the crowd and up the stairs.

o~o~o~o~o~O~o~o~o~o~o

"Moody?... Oh, Moooddy?"

Her moans were replaced by a masculine voice. The smell of her perfume turned into a stench of stale shit. Water splashed his face, and he grimaced as diluted urea washed away her acrid yet slightly sweet taste.

Another splash of cold water brought Moody back to the present. He bolted upright, screamed and slumped back down, exhausted from the effort. A house-elf turned his naked body over; Moody was too weak to protest as the creature went to work scouring off the dried fecal matter encrusted on his skin. The elf rolled him back, and he caught a glimpse of its glazed eyes. *The Imperius curse.*

Another splash of water rinsed off the grime; brown shit-mud caked the walls. After finishing with Moody, the elf continued to clean the inside of the trunk. Moody's stomach grumbled in disgust, but it was a hollow threat, considering that it was empty.

"Sorry, Mad-Eye. I just couldn't bring myself to watch any more of that." Crouch threw a towel and a change of clothes into the trunk. "Here, I don't want you to catch your death... just yet."

The elf finished in due course, and Moody had enough room to dry off and dress himself, though the task sapped the rest of his strength.

Crouch looked on in satisfaction. "So, how does it feel? Waking up in your own waste, confused, disorientated, your powers depleted." He sneered. "That's just a sample of what I had to endure in Azkaban."

"Really?" Moody looked up at him and smiled broadly. "Good."

"I would prefer to let you sit there in your own filth, but I'm afraid the smell would attract too much attention."

"I can only imagine how unsatisfying that must be for you."

"You have no idea." Crouch took a sip from Moody's hip flask and scowled as his features contorted. "But I must say, this would all be much more pleasant if you would simply bestow upon me the same respect which I have for you." By the time he finished his sentence, the Polyjuice Potion had taken effect.

Somehow, Moody found the strength to laugh. "Come again?" His laughter continued.

Crouch, now the doppelganger, joined in. It was an eerie cachinnation in stereo. "Don't get me wrong, I will kill you when this is all over. But there's no need to be captious just because I got the drop on you."

"Let's get one thing straight, kid. The only thing you got 'the drop' on was a broken, old man."

"No, no, no." Crouch shook his head. "Have you forgotten who my father is? I know your Auror tactics." He levitated another goblet down. "You must have known that after being tortured and starved you would have eventually succumbed to the Imperius curse. So, rather than resist and burn yourself out, you save your strength. Rather than cloud your past, you show me all of it in a blizzard."

The amusement was gone from Moody's face. "Then we seem to have an understanding, don't we?"

"Aye." Crouch stared him down. "Of course, you realize you can't win."

"Bring it on, boy."

"*Imperio!*"

Second Rotation

Chapter 20 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Second Rotation

Moody forced his eyes to remain open, fixed on his opponent. His head was pounding and his throat felt scratchy, yet he refused to relent as his fingers grasped tightly around his weapon of choice. He regarded the determination in his opponent's bloodshot eyes and bowed. The enemy across from him merely licked his lips in anticipation of the duel.

"GO!"

Moody tossed his head back to receive the liquid in the shot glass. The Firewhisky burned as it glided down his throat. They slammed their empty glasses down on the table at the same time. The wizard sitting across from Moody smiled stoically and seemed unfazed. Moody's vision blurred, and he struggled to remain upright. He shook his head, and the world came back into focus on that same frozen smile that remained etched on the now unconscious wizard's face, the drool dripping off his bottom lip to form a puddle on his chest.

The crowd that had gathered around to witness the contest was in an uproar. Half of the attendants threw their money on the table and walked away in disgust while the other half eagerly divvied their winnings.

After taking his cut, Moody rose from his seat and grasped the back of his chair for support until he regained his balance. The room seesawed as he meandered toward the bar. The Firewhisky swirling in his blood made it easy to ignore the band's loud music to which the go-go girls danced seductively in their cages.

Moody sat on the nearest stool and hailed the bartender for a club soda. He gulped it down quickly to soothe his grumbling stomach and ordered another. When he looked up, he noticed a familiar reflection in the mirror behind the bartender and glanced to the far end to see Reuben nursing a glass of gin and tonic. Moody was the only one in the room who noticed when Reuben slyly tugged his earlobe. Moody acknowledged the signal and took the bowler hat off his head to set it next to his drink. He reached into his vest pocket and, when no one was looking, placed a slug into his ear. The feeling of the gastropod sliding down to his eardrum was unnerving and snapped him back to sobriety.

Reuben's voice boomed in his head. *Can you hear me, Alastor?*

"Yeah," Moody whispered. He placed the glass to his lips to conceal their movement. "How long have you been sitting there?"

Right around the time you started lapping rum shots out of the barmaid's navel. You do realize that we're on the clock?

"Of course. It's called 'staying in character'."

Well, stay sharp. Fletcher and his goons are setting up in the back. Two of his men are hiding in the northeast corner of the alley behind a Confundus Charm. He's on his way inside, so be ready.

"Just make sure you hold off till you get my signal, Reuben. If we bugger this up, the maestro will tear us each a new bunghole for sure..."

"Alastor, is that you?"

The familiar voice hastened Moody to end his private conversation. He put the club soda down and replaced the bowler atop his head. He turned to the girl behind him...a short, stout witch with flyaway hair. She wore a green body suit knit together with vines and various leaves. "Holly, it's good to see you again..." he couldn't help but look down to her bosom, packed into a brassiere two sizes too small for her robust frame, "...all *three* of you."

Holly replied by slapping Moody across his face. "You've got a lot of nerve coming in here, Alastor!"

A friend of yours, Alastor? Reuben's voice stung like another slap.

"Perhaps," Moody replied, rubbing his jaw...though it was unclear to whom the reply was intended. "Was it something I said?"

Fuming, Holly placed her hands on her hips. "You know bloody well what you told everyone about me! I have a reputation to uphold."

"Reputation?" Moody leered as he eyed her. "But aren't you a whor..."

Another slap from Holly served as her rejoinder.

Alastor, she's going to blow your cover! Get rid of her!

"I am a *performer*, you git! And I told you never to come back here!"

"No, you didn't, you silly cow. You said if you ever saw me again that you'd cut off my..."

Reuben barely had enough time to step in between them before the discussion escalated. He pushed Moody back against the bar, saying, "You, sir, are a cad to speak to a lady in such a manner!"

At this, Holly regained her composure. She tore off one of the large leaves sewn into her dress and proceeded to fan herself with it briskly. "Finally, a gentleman!"

Moody played up to Reuben's subterfuge. "What's it to you, friend?"

"I think you should apologize to her," Reuben said. He pointed with his eyes to the back exit.

"Do you now?" Moody looked to see his contact, Fletcher, enter the bar. The thin, bow-legged wizard, dressed in an expensive silk robe, quickly spotted Moody at the center of the commotion. The two burly wizards that escorted Fletcher pushed everyone aside in order to plow a path through the crowded room. Holly's outburst had grown from a simple nuisance into a real threat to the undercover operation. As a result, Moody placed his hands on his chest and acquiesced. "Right. Holly, please accept my sincerest apologies. I had no right to say that you were so loose that you could make a house-elf disappear without the benefit of magic." He chuckled, recalling the comment, earning himself another glare from Reuben. "Er...let me buy you two a drink and call it bygones, eh?"

With Holly placated, Moody left Reuben to her eager attentions just as Fletcher approached. The well-dressed Fletcher came out from behind his bodyguards and eyed Moody suspiciously. "You certainly 'ave a way with the ladies, *Milfred?*"

Moody acknowledged Fletcher by taking out his pocket watch in feigned indignation. "Just like you have a way of being late, Fletcher?"

"I told you it takes time to put together the kind of order you placed. Are we going to do business or not?"

Moody put his watch away and smiled in relief. "You're lucky my boss is a patient man."

Moody followed Fletcher through the exit in the back of the bar leading to the alley outside. When the doors closed behind him, his ears continued to ring until they became

accustomed to the relative silence. He crossed the threshold of Fletcher's Stealth Charm to find two more goons guarding a wooden chest that sat upon a dingy crate. At Fletcher's command, the chest opened to reveal a pile of wands arranged neatly therein. He reached inside, picked one out of the pile and presented it to Moody, saying, "As I promised, fifty wands...all unregistered and untraceable...good for fifteen spells, or thereabouts, before burning out."

"I see." Moody took the proffered wand and rolled it between his fingers. The wood felt grainy to the touch, a sign of inferior craftsmanship. "I wonder if that wizard I read about in the *Daily Prophet* last week was aware of the contraindications?"

Fletcher snatched the wand and placed it back inside the case. "It ain't my fault if a bloke don't follow the instructions. Fact is, these're the best wands yer gonna get outside of a wand-master."

"Yes, but your price is steep for fifteen shots apiece especially without an assurance of quality."

"If you want a guarantee, go to Ollivander or one of his competitors," Fletcher snapped. When Moody refused to back down, however, he arched an eyebrow, smiled and reached into his pocket to pull out a thin leather bag. "You drive a hard bargain, friend. I was gonna save these for another buyer, but you look like a discerning sort. 'Ows about I throw these in ta sweeten the deal?"

Moody reached into the bag and pulled out the two wands within. The wood on these specimens was smooth and polished. He suspended one in his outstretched palm. The speed with which it began to spin was conclusive. "These are genuine."

"Yes, and gently used," Fletcher said with pride. "So, do we 'ave a deal now?"

"That we do." Moody smiled and tipped his hat ostentatiously.

Fletcher waited patiently as Moody placed the wands with the others and took possession of the crate. "Well?"

"Pardon?" Moody tipped his hat again.

"Where's my money? You didn't think this was going to be free, did ya?"

"Of course not," Moody said, tipping his hat yet again.

Fletcher motioned to the guards standing behind him. "What's wrong with your neck?" They crowded around Moody.

"Nothing..."

Before Moody could tip his hat once more, Fletcher grabbed Moody by the shoulder and punched him in the stomach, causing him to slump to his knees. "Boys, suddenly I don't think Milfred 'ere is on the up-and-up."

Moody remained hunched. He placed the chest down next to his fallen hat and cradled his rumbling stomach. "Is that the way we're gonna play this, Fletcher?"

Fletcher hiked up his robes so as not to soil them on the dirty cobblestones as he knelt to face Moody. "I'm afraid so, mate. A sum was promised."

"Right." Two goons grabbed each of Moody's arms and hoisted him to his feet. His stomach rumbled louder. "Just... give me a moment... please?"

Fletcher shook his head and waved his finger in Moody's face. "Light 'im up, boys."

Moody couldn't hold back the wave of nausea any longer. With a heave, Fletcher's gaudy suit was soiled with bile-flavored Firewhisky.

Fletcher covered his nose with his hand in disgust. "Kill 'im."

The order was delayed by the sounds of squeaking in the darkness which drew everyone's attention to the alley's entrance. Five glowing, silver streaks shot out of nowhere to attack Fletcher and his goons. The feral rodents nipped and clawed mercilessly until the wizards were disarmed.

Reuben threw off his invisibility cloak and pointed his wand. Ropes appeared out of thin air and bound Fletcher's gang where they stood. He snapped his fingers, and the chipmunk Patronuses vanished back into the vapor. When the area was secured, Reuben approached to help Moody up, grimacing as Moody wiped the gunk off his chin. "You alright, brother?"

Moody shrugged off his partner's arm and spat out the remnants that coated his tongue. "What the devil took you so long?"

"Are you daft? I pounced as soon as you gave me the signal."

"No, you didn't!"

"Of course I did. You said not to make a move until you gave the signal. I'm just amazed you were able to puke on demand like that. It was a brilliant distraction."

"What are you talking about?" Moody bent down to recover the bowler, the top of which rested inverted in the chunky puddle of his stomach contents. "That wasn't the signal!"

"Er... now I am confused. What was the signal, then?"

After putting the bowler on, Moody bowed his head in answer. "That."

"What?"

"I very clearly tipped my hat."

Reuben stared blankly for a few seconds. "What kind of god-awful signal is that?"

"It's something subtle that the baddies wouldn't pick up on."

"You got the *subtle* part right, seeing as how I didn't pick up on it either."

"For fuck's sake! How many times have you ever seen me tip me hat?"

"About the same number of times I've ever seen you honking all over someone," Reuben said with a smirk. "But I guess it's deceiving, the amount of alcohol a barmaid's navel can hold." He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "And isn't that Jeff's hat?"

"Right." Moody clenched his jaw as he removed the vomit-caked bowler on his head to assess the damage. He ignored Reuben's looks of disgust and took out his wand. "I'm sure this'll come right out."

Reuben looked on as Moody tried in vain to Scourgify the hat. "Had the corn chowder for lunch, did you? How was it?"

"Pretty good, actually. You should try it." Moody shook off the excess water and placed the bowler back on his head."

After Moody caught his breath, the two Aurors stood over the prostrate Fletcher, who struggled in vain against Reuben's binding curse. When Reuben waved his hand, the rope that served as Fletcher's gag disappeared, enabling him to speak. "Don't you *wand-bobbies* have anything better to do other than shakin' down a bloke trying ta make an 'onest galleon?"

"*Honest?*" Reuben kicked over the wooden box, scattering the wands across the floor of the alley. "Is that what you call the illegal commerce of unregistered wands?"

Fletcher shrugged. "What can I say? There's a market, and I got kids ta feed."

"It makes me shudder, the thought of *you* procreating, Fletcher." Moody squatted in front of Fletcher, looking him in the eye. "Now let's talk about your supplier."

"You'll never get me ta talk, Milfred...if that's your real name."

"It's Moody. And we don't want *you*, Fletcher. You're just the middleman."

Reuben pointed his wand threateningly. "Make things easy on yourself; tell us who the Guv'nor is."

Fletcher was not intimidated. "Stupid wand-bobbies. Nobody rats on the Guv'nor and lives."

Moody waved Reuben off. "Don't bother. Maybe some time in Azkaban will give him cause to reconsider."

"Azkaban?" Fletcher guffawed. "You're gonna 'ave ta do better'n that. Azkaban's a country club. I'll be out in a week."

"Have it your way, Fletcher." Moody stood up and joined Reuben. "The second patrol should be around any minute to take you in."

"Wait." Fletcher called out before they left. "Maybe we can work sum'n out?" When he got their attention, he continued, "You wand-bobbies are lookin' for those two missin' students, right?"

"The Weasley brothers?" Reuben questioned.

"Yeah, that's them."

Moody folded his arms and started to stroke his chin. After a confirming nod from Reuben, he said to Fletcher, "Keep talking."

"It has to do with those two proper wands I was going to sell you: I've been gettin 'em pretty regular from this bloke who moonlights as hired muscle down by the docks. I don't normally ask where a seller gets his product, but after a few 'questionable' transactions, I noticed this... *pattern*."

At Fletcher's hesitation, Moody coaxed, "C'mon, what pattern?"

Fletcher shrank under the Aurors' glares and finally answered, "That whenever a disappearance is reported in the *Prophet*, he happens to have a wand for sale."

"And you agreed to be his fence?" Reuben scoffed. "You intestinal parasite!"

Fletcher shrugged. "I got kids to feed."

"You got a name?" Moody questioned.

"That depends." Noticing an opportunity, Fletcher's sneer returned. "Isn't there some kind of reward?"

Moody was out of patience. He pointed his wand and levitated Fletcher upside down, positioning him headfirst over the puddle. "NAME!"

Fletcher wisely opted not to press his luck. "Stoker. You can check his rap sheet." He was relieved when Moody righted him, only to be subsequently bound on the adjacent wall. "Hey! I thought we had a deal!"

"Relax, Fletcher. If your tip pans out, we'll be back to peel you off." Moody put his wand away and returned Fletcher's glare with a mocking sneer of his own as he walked off. "Until then, stick around."

Reuben accompanied Moody to the alley's entrance. He waited until they were out of earshot to say, "Do you believe him?"

"Fletcher is a lot of things, but *imaginative* isn't one of them." Moody snapped his fingers. After a few seconds, two brooms appeared out of the sky, one of which alighted to his waiting hand.

"You realize, of course, that we should go back to headquarters and notify the maestro of these developments?"

"Are you daft? As soon as he finds out the source of the tip, he'll throw us out of his office." Moody sat on his broom and, after a wobbly start, hovered next to his partner. "Besides, I'm in no condition to do paperwork at the moment."

By this time, Reuben's broom had descended upon him, waiting for its master. "You *do* remember what happened the last time we broke protocol?"

"Do you want to be on *second rotation* forever, mate?" Moody began to rise higher into the air. "Besides, if what Fletcher's saying is true, the clock is ticking."

Reuben sighed and mounted his broom. "Sure... one can't have too many bungholes, I suppose," he muttered to himself before following Moody into the night sky.

Old Wounds

Chapter 21 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Old Wounds

Moody and Reuben flew low and fast over the forest. They spied a clearing just before the moon hid behind the clouds. Silently they alit on the ground and dismounted. Moody immediately cast a Confundus Charm and secured the area while Reuben stood still in the middle of the clearing. Reuben balanced the two Weasley wands loosely in his open palm and waved his own wand over them, chanting as he did so.

After giving the area one more sweep, Moody was confident that it was safe to speak. "Which way do we go now?"

Reuben opened his eyes and stopped chanting. "I've lost the trail. Do you have anything?"

Moody shook his head. "There are no humans in the general vicinity, apart from us."

"The location charm has obviously exhausted the energy from the psychic impressions left from the owners of these wands."

"In other words, it's a dead end." Moody tossed his broom and paced about, running his fingers through his hair while he curled his lip in thought. "We could try triangulation."

Reuben smiled in understanding. "That'll only work if they're within range." He tossed one of the wands to Moody. "And if they're still alive."

Moody caught the wand and walked to the opposite end of the camp. "Don't be so dramatic." He knelt and placed the wand on the ground in front of him.

"I got a lock," Reuben said after a few seconds. "What about you?"

"Not yet."

"Hurry."

"I know." Moody struggled against the buzz brought on by the Firewhisky, cursing himself for his lack of focus. He emptied his mind and fixed his gaze upon the wand in front of him. Eventually, it rose a few inches from the ground, pointed to the northwest and settled back to earth. He sighed in relief. "Got it." And he arose to join Reuben in the center of the camp at the spot equidistant from the wands.

Reuben, noting the position of the wands, said, "Now, how does that Law of Sines equation go?"

"After all this time you're still thinking like a Muggle?" Moody held his wand overhead. At his command a beam of light lay before them, using the Weasley wands as vertices to reference a location to the north. With brooms in hand, they followed the lighted trail that was visible only to themselves.

Were it not for a well cast Silencing Spell, negotiating the dense brush with any degree of stealth would have been impossible. A branch grazed the side of Moody's face, and he rubbed his cheek, reminded of the spot where Holly had struck him earlier that night. He came to realize that it had been itching all this time. His buzz was definitely starting to wear off, but he resisted the urge to dip into his hip flask.

A snort from his partner alerted Moody that his reverie did not go unnoticed. "Something amuses you, Reuben?"

"No. I was just wondering what was up with you and that girl back at the club?"

"Nothing. She was just a bit of temporary companionship."

"It didn't look that way from where I stood."

"Which is exactly the reason why I'm starting to prefer the company of Muggle women. They're far simpler creatures to deal with than witches. Er...I'm sure your mother was an exception."

"No doubt." If Reuben was irritated by the comment, he didn't show it.

They stopped when they heard voices in the dark. They drew their wands and crouched back-to-back. It was quiet for several seconds before they heard the voices again, but this time they sounded more like whimpers. The light from their Lumos Spells revealed two women huddled together, sheltered in the shallow curvature of a boulder. They were dirty and their clothes were tattered, but they seemed well-off otherwise.

Keeping his gaze on the women, Reuben laid down his broom and elbowed Moody. "I thought you detected no humans in the vicinity?"

"I didn't. Then again, this place is rife with interference from dark magic."

Reuben lowered his wand and ventured closer to get a better look. "They look like the two women who were captured shortly before the Weasley brothers." He reached out and offered a hand to one of the women, saying to her, "Are you two all right, Miss?"

The woman with blonde hair jerked away. "Leave us alone!"

The woman with dark hair clung to her companion. They retreated with their backs against the boulder. "We'll do anything you ask, just don't hurt us!"

Reuben lowered his wand but kept his hand proffered. "It's all right. We're not going to hurt you."

The blonde wiped the tears from her face and regarded Reuben. "You're not... one *of them*, are you?"

Reuben smiled encouragingly. "No. We're M.L.E." He showed them his badge. Moody approached and did the same.

Relieved, the blonde leapt into Reuben's arms. "We're saved!" she cried into his shoulder.

The brunette likewise ran to Moody and clung to him. "You came for us?"

"Well, not exactly," Moody said. He tentatively placed his hands on her back to comfort her. "We were on the trail of two young boys who were taken shortly after you. Have you seen them?"

The blonde shook her head; tears welled in her eyes. "There are no other survivors. It's just us. They did unspeakable things to us! We barely managed to escape with our lives and have been wandering the forest ever since...left all alone to fend for ourselves..."

"With nothing to protect us from the cold... except what's left of our itty-bitty clothes and our shared body heat," the brunette added. "It was horrible!"

"Well, we're going to get you two out of here." Moody stroked the brunette's hair to calm her. "But first we have to be sure there are no more survivors."

"No, you can't go back there!" the brunette pleaded.

The blonde clung even tighter to Reuben. "Don't leave us, I beg you!"

"It's okay. We're not going to leave you," Reuben soothed. "We'll get you home."

"You can't imagine how frightening it was." She buried her head back into Reuben's chest and again wrapped her arms around his waist. "Just hold us... for a little while." She relaxed in his arms. Her embrace softened and she caressed her hands up and down his back. "Thank you."

Reuben cleared his throat nervously. "It's quite all right. It's our jobs."

"We feel so safe with you." Moody flinched when the brunette started to undo the buttons on the top of his shirt and slowly work her way down to his belt buckle.

Looks like it's going to be one of those missions, brother. Reuben's voice echoed through the magic-slug lodged in Moody's ear.

Moody looked over to see his partner was getting a similar treatment as the blonde nipped tenderly at Reuben's lips. *Aye. This definitely rounds out my top ten fantasy list... top five, if you were absent.*

Fair enough, but there's only one problem.

Leave it to you to see the 'half empty' glass, Reuben.. "Bloody!" Moody yelled at the touch of her cold hands. He looked down to regard the top of the brunette's busy head and found it difficult to maintain his balance.

Sorry, Alastor, but you have to admit that luck like this never happens to sods like us.

Moody sighed. *You know, mate, I hate it when you're right...*

"Expelliarmus!"

The women were flung violently from them. They bounced off the giant rock, and their bodies contorted like rag dolls when they hit the ground. There they remained: still as the air, as still as death. Moody and Reuben stayed their ground with wands at the ready. Their bodies tensed when the women's eerie echoes of sniggers and cackles broke the silence.

The blonde was the first to move. Her head shot straight up to scan the area with eyes like onyx. Her back arched as the joints in her limbs popped backwards; her foremembers grew long and spindly. Her attractive face split down the middle, where two mandibles uncurred and then snapped together loudly.

The brunette underwent a similar transformation. Her abdomen began to swell to monstrous proportions. Propping herself up on her haunches, she rubbed her thin claws together hungrily. Her two sets of breasts, with their scabbed-over, blackened centers, stared back at the astonished young wizards like two pairs of dead eyes.

Saliva dripped from the brunette's maw, primed by the magical appetizer she had just sampled at Moody's expense. Her voice screeched as she forced her words through a throat no longer conducive to human speech. "These wizards are strong, sister."

"Yes-s-s," the blonde hissed in excitement. "Not like the others."

"They will keep us strong for a long time."

Two jets of goo shot from each of the spider-women's bellies. Moody instinctively blocked with his broom, but it became ensnared in webbing and was pulled from his grasp. Reuben's fire-shield burned the rest of the webbing away. The two Aurors formed up and shot back. With ferocious agility the sisters took to the air, dodging the wizards' hexes as they leapt from tree to tree. All the while, they shrunk the perimeter with their webbing. They retreated to the shadows; their laughter taunted the Aurors.

Reuben shot blindly at random whispers in the dark. Hitting nothing, he chuckled nervously. "You know, I never thought I'd hear myself say this, but the idea of two sets of tits on a woman is more fetching in concept than in practice."

"And to think you let that thing kiss you?"

"You're one to talk, Alastor: another second and your pants would've been around your ankles." He eyed a leaf trailing slowly to the left.

When the she-devils leapt, Reuben managed to catch them in a vortex of wind while Moody summoned the boulder and flung it with deadly accuracy.

The sisters pushed against each other to separate in mid-air, joined by a tether of webbing that caught the boulder as it flew by. Upon landing, they dug in and the giant rock was hurled back toward the wizards like a slingshot. Moody and Reuben Disapparated out of harm's way only to be descended upon by blonde's waiting clutches when they reappeared. Before they could react, her silk web ensnared them both. She jumped, jerking her prey into the air so hard that they dropped their wands. Moody and Reuben swung about, helpless, as she strung them up on a branch high above the earth. The brunette watched below, chirping with glee.

"This is embarrassing," Reuben said.

Moody looked down at their wands far below. The thick spider-silk cut into his skin like piano wire, yet he tried desperately to work his left arm. At the same time, he noticed that Reuben's broom was twitching unnoticed on the ground. *Do you think you can summon your broom?*

Can't you see I'm trying?

The blonde tauntingly plucked the string of webbing that suspended them. It made for a chilling hum in the air: a chord in the key of death.

On the ground far below, the brunette paced about impatiently, her prey out of reach. "Don't be greedy, sister. You must share."

"Very well," the blonde chirped through her mandibles. "Do you want the pretty one, or the *gamy* one?"

At that, the two Aurors looked to each other, saying in unison, "Did you hear what she called you?"

The moon came out from behind the clouds as the blonde descended slowly from her perch, dangling gracefully from a nigh invisible strand of silk. Her pinchers made a loud clicking sound...or was it cruel laughter?

Moody continued to wiggle his left arm; slowly he was able to work his backup wand out of its sleeve-compartment to the base of his wrist. He was only going to have one shot at this.

The blonde spun them back and forth, alternating between the two men at a loss to decide which was to be her food.

Moody cupped his palm to catch the hilt of his Beech-wood wand and slowly worked it between his fingers, taking care not to drop it. He waited until he could see his reflection in her dark compound-eyes. "NOW!"

Reuben's broom launched skyward. It darted about uncontrollably but made for an excellent distraction nonetheless. With a flick of his wrist, Moody burned through the silk, and they were free. As they started to fall, he came about and aimed; from this range, he couldn't miss.

"Diffindo!"

From Moody's perspective it seemed like the three of them were falling in slow motion. However, he knew he had only seconds before hitting the ground. He managed to catch himself and Reuben by arresting their momentum, and he levitated the both of them to safety. With another flick of his wand, the Aurors were fully rearmed.

The blonde was not so lucky. She lay on the ground at her sister's feet, looking up at her spider-abdomen still suspended on its line high above, swaying in the calm night breeze. Her sister held her hand while she struggled to breathe even as her innards oozed from her severed thorax. The look left on her face when her chest stilled was one of shock.

The monster glared with bloodthirsty abandon at the wizards that bore down on her. Outgunned and outnumbered, she took in a deep breath and screamed. Her cry was ear-splitting agony for the humans. The wizards covered their ears to no avail; even the Silencio Spell was no match for her cacophonous wrath. The magic-slugs writhed in their keepers' ears and slid out to die.

The screeching stopped. She crouched on her haunches and sprung skyward, landing on a nearby treetop. She cursed the wizards in a foreign tongue before bounding off into the night.

When silence returned to the scene, Reuben massaged his ringing ears. Half deaf, he said loudly, "You think she was miffed?"

"A tad," Moody replied with a smirk. He scraped the remnants of the slug from his cheek and wiped his hands clean on the side of his trousers. "Those ~~succubusses~~ were strong. They had to have fed recently."

"They often take the form of their last meal. Which means the girls they doppleganged are most likely dead."

"But it also means the boys could still be alive."

Reuben snorted. "Leave it to you to see the glass as half full."

"We'll never catch her on foot." Moody paced about looking for his broom.

"We don't have to."

"How do you mean?"

"Didn't pay much attention in advanced tracking class, did you?" Reuben stood over the blonde's remains. He waved his wand over her forehead and her eyes popped open, a reflex that gave them both a start. Reuben cleared his throat and continued working his magic. "Psychic residue between a killer and his victim can keep them linked for some time even after death."

"Thus, serving as a point-to-point conduit for Apparition," Moody said, finishing Reuben's thought, a task he found difficult between the ringing in his ears and the Firewhisky pummeling his head. "Just pray we don't run into more succubuses."

"That's the second time you've said that word, 'succubuses'."

"What of it?"

The Location Charm complete, Reuben knelt down next to the corpse with his wand in a defensive position. "I dunno, I was always partial to the rendering 'succubae', myself."

"Oh, really?" Moody said annoyed. He assumed a similar position along his partner's flank. "Shall I tell you what I'm partial to at the moment?"

"It wouldn't be that homely witch in accounting with the lazy eye and eczema, would it?"

"She has eczema?"

BAM!

The Aurors Apparated, along with the blonde's remains, into a musty, dark cavern, the walls of which were coated with cobweb-covered pods. Moody walked up to one of them and scratched it open with his fingers. He covered his nose with his hand upon seeing the dried husk of an unidentifiable victim. There wasn't time to search them all by hand. Fortunately, they didn't have to.

"Homenum Revelio"

They tracked the spell to the last pod left in the clutch. They worked quickly to rip it open and found one of the Weasley brothers still dressed in his school robes. His lips were blue, and his skin was clammy to the touch, but he was alive. Reuben put two fingers on the boy's neck.

Moody continued to cover Reuben while he fed the boy water from their provisions. "How is he?"

"Bad. Completely used up, he is."

Moody noticed that the pod next to the boy had been freshly ripped. There was no occupant inside. "She took the other boy."

After they stabilized the youth behind a Protection Charm, they cast another locator spell and continued on. Moody took point while Reuben covered their rear. The stench worsened the farther they ventured into the cave. When they arrived at the main chamber, the dim light of their wands was insufficient to provide proper reconnaissance.

"Lumos Maxima!"

Moody gasped at the sight of the intricate web that spanned the breadth of the cavern in the center of which lay a pulsating egg sac. They waded through the floor, littered with desiccated bones, fecal matter and other refuse. The sound of their shuffling brought the succubus out of hiding. She scurried out from behind one of the large stalactites and perched herself between the intruders and her unborn babies. She held the missing Weasley boy in her spiky grasp. Her pincers were plunged into his neck, supping the youth's sweet life's blood.

Moody grabbed Reuben's wand arm before he could fire. "No. She's tied into his life force. Any harm she sustains will be transferred the boy."

"He's dead anyway if we don't do something now!" Reuben lowered his wand. He grimaced when Moody cast aside his Purpleheart wand and started to disrobe. "What kind of hair-brained idea is rattling around inside that oxygen-deprived brain of yours this time?"

"I'm going to offer her a tastier alternative," Moody replied, kicking off his kecks.

"Are you insane? Once she latches onto you, she'll suck you dry...and not in the good way."

He smiled and tossed Reuben his hat. "That's why I'm counting on you to save my arse."

"Wait. Let me do it. Your Exploding Curse is better than mine."

"And your aim is better than mine. It has to be me."

Reuben started to protest, but when he saw Moody's determination, he sighed. "See you on the other side, brother." He withdrew to take cover in a narrow crevasse.

Moody stepped out slowly into the clear, wielding nothing but his boxers and his backup wand. He knew the succubus wasn't stupid, but he also knew what a tempting target the young pink flesh of a wizard in his prime posed. "Is that any way to tease and run?"

The succubus eyed him warily and tightened her grip on her helpless prey. However, she couldn't help but hiss hungrily when she smelled his essence.

All he had to do was give her the proper incentive, so he threw his wand to the far side of the cavern. "It's bad manners for a girl not to finish what she started."

She withdrew her pincers and moaned. She spotted Reuben from one of her eight eyes and threw the boy toward one of the stalactites. Reuben broke cover just as she dove for Moody, but there was no time to save both. She cackled when Reuben cursed, knowing that he would try to save the boy.

Moody saw her coming and braced himself. The succubus flew into him and they rolled on the ground. She pinned him down with her weight and thrust one of her spikes into his shoulder. Moody screamed and jammed his free arm into her neck just in time to keep her pincers at bay. Her abdomen bobbed up and down, coating his lower body with her pungent goo which hardened into a sticky shell. The coarse skin on her four breasts chafed as they mashed against his chest. The saliva that dripped from the end of her mandibles stung when it touched his skin. He wanted to fight, but he was spent. He considered casting a wandless Exploding Curse; it would kill him as well, but that was better than the alternative. Moody closed his eyes and started to chant, but a familiar voice gave him pause.

"Allie."

Moody opened his eyes and froze when he saw *her* face. "Dru?" *No. You're not Dru.*

"It *is* me, Allie." He remembered those gray, soulful eyes. He never thought that he would ever stare into them again. "Why don't you love me anymore?"

"I...I've never stopped loving you, pet."

"Then come to me, my love." She inched in closer as he gave in. Her lips parted, baring her fangs. "We'll be together... forever..."

"Confringo!"

The last thing Moody saw before he slipped into unconsciousness was Druella's pretty head bursting into paste.

No Small Consolation

Chapter 22 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 22

No Small Consolation

"Druella!"

Moody bolted upright with a start and grunted painfully. He grabbed his throbbing shoulder and noticed that it was bandaged. The air smelled like antiseptic. He rubbed the sleep out his eyes and regarded the curtain that was drawn around his bed. Noting the fabric of the thin hospital gown that clothed him, he swung his feet over the edge and sat upright. His jaw clenched when his bare feet touched the cold floor, but the sensation wasn't nearly as jarring as the sound of the curtains being suddenly drawn aside.

A young matron came from behind the curtain, dressed neatly in her hospital uniform. By the look of her, she couldn't have been more than twenty, although she tried to carry herself as if she were much older. "Ah, I thought I heard signs of life about."

Moody got a lay of open room. He didn't recognize the surroundings, yet it had a familiar feel to it. "This isn't Mungos?"

"No, you're in Hogwarts."

"Hogwarts?" Moody repeated, nonplussed. He then smiled and thought aloud, "Because Hogwarts is closer."

She went about her duties, retrieving a clipboard from the edge of the bed. "It's a good thing you came here first, if you were any later, the Weasley brothers would not have survived."

"The boys," he said, recalling last night's ordeal. "Are they alright?"

The matron smiled in answer. "They'll make a full recovery, Auror Moody."

Moody regarded her with a raised eyebrow. "You know my name?"

"It says so right here in your chart, that according to the gent who brought you in."

Moody nodded in understanding. "I hope you don't think me too forward, but you've taken my clothes, and I don't even know what to call you, madam?"

"Pomfrey." She offered her hand, and Moody reached out to shake it, wincing as he did so. She apologized and sat next to him on the bed to examine the wound under his

bandage. "A creature of dark magic did this, so you're going to have to heal up the hard way, I'm afraid." She replaced the bandage and rose from the bed to make a notation on the clipboard. "I hope you'll forgive me, but I've never had occasion to make a proper field dressing outside of the classroom."

"Am I your first?"

"No." Pomfrey blushed and stopped writing. "Not technically."

"I'm honored just the same," he said, working the kinks out of his shoulder. "Now, about my clothes?"

"Your partner said he would come back with a fresh change, so I took the liberty of burning them." She grimaced at the thought. "They were imbued with all manner of contaminants, even your pants."

"My pants?" Moody sat erect and felt along his hospital gown. He was indeed wearing nothing underneath.

Pomfrey folded her arms and gave him a rather stern look. "It's nothing I haven't seen before."

Moody chuckled and stood to face her. "I'm going to have to respectfully disagree with you, Madam Pomfrey."

She took a step back, as Moody towered over her, and hugged the clipboard to her chest nervously. "Really, Auror Moody, I'm not as inexperienced as I appear."

"Then tell me, Madam Pomfrey, have you seen my wand?"

"Er, sorry?" she said barely above a whisper.

"My wand." He then made a spell casting motion with his hand.

Pomfrey bit her lip. Her face was beet red when she answered, "Your belongings are stowed under your bed."

At her instruction Moody retrieved the tote under his bed. He opened it and was relieved to see that everything of import was in there, namely his two wands and especially his hip flask. He closed the tote when he heard the door open. Moody and Pomfrey turned to see Jeff as he strode through the open doors carrying a cloth bag.

As Jeff approached closer he reached into the bag and palmed a wad of clothes before he addressed Moody. "Imagine the horrors that sprang to mind when your partner asked me to stop by Hogwarts on my way in to bring you a change of raiment?"

"No doubt." Moody replied, catching the bundle that Jeff tossed him. He smirked at Jeff, who paused to give the young matron more than a passing look. "Madam Pomfrey, allow me to introduce Jeff McKinley..."

"Auror First Class Geoffrey McKinley." Jeff took Pomfrey's hand and kissed it. "At your service."

Stammering over her words, she curtsied and excused herself. Jeff watched her as she went, even as Pomfrey closed the door behind her, giving Jeff a parting glance as she did so.

A shrill cough from Moody caused Jeff to blink. He cleared his throat and straightened his tie while he waited for Moody to finish dressing. "So, what the devil have you been doing last night?"

"A little bit of this." After concealing his wands, Moody unscrewed the cap on his hip flask. "And a smidgen of that." He took a swig and replaced the flask in his vest pocket.

"Well, let's get you back to HQ before Auror Murphy gets his claws into you." Without further delay Jeff turned to leave.

Moody kept pace beside him as they exited the hospital wing. "Bah, don't tell me that ponce Murphy is miffed."

"It is his case, Alastor."

"It's about the victim, not Murphy's ego."

"Er, sorry? You have the nerve to lecture about ego?"

"Wait a bloody minute." Moody stopped when they crossed the threshold to the hospital wing. He found himself looking down upon the grand staircase leading to the common area. "What are we doing on the third floor?"

"They've moved the hospital wing to the third floor in recent years." Jeff brushed past him and continued on. "You really should make some of the homecomings, old man."

Moody didn't follow right away. It had indeed been several years since he had last been in Hogwarts. Everything looked as grand as he remembered it, if not a bit smaller. He grinned as he placed his hands on the mahogany staircase and thought how he had taken this place for granted in his childhood.

Jeff's voice interrupted the moment as it echoed across the atrium. "C'mon, we're already late. I've secured a temporary Floo chute in the teachers retreat, but we have to hurry if you don't want to leg it back."

Moody walked briskly to catch up after nearly bumping into Nearly Headless Nick. He followed Jeff through the thick wooden door to the teacher's lounge. Without missing a step Jeff grabbed a pinch of Floo powder and disappeared through the magic chute in a flash of green flame. Moody started to follow but paused when he noticed two people in the back corner. He immediately recognized Minerva McGonagall sitting with a man wearing the symbol of the Wizengamot embroidered on the lapel of his coat. The couple sat in uncomfortable silence, as if they were having a conversation that had just been interrupted. Moody felt it odd that McGonagall did not even acknowledge him when he waved to her. The man she was with turned back to regard the Auror. Moody narrowed his eyes but decided not to keep Jeff waiting any longer.

Moody reappeared on the other side of the chute located on level two at the Ministry of Magic. Jeff was there waiting, sporting an annoyed expression but said nothing as they continued in haste to the Aurors' offices. Once inside they walked past the maze of open desks. Moody took off his coat and threw it over his chair in passing. At the end the far wall, he picked up his copy of the morning's mission assignments from his mailbox and scanned the page, looking for his name. It was there that they found Reuben standing by the coffee maker. He was reading the morning reports as a cup levitated beside him; the spoon inside stirred slowly.

Reuben looked up from his reading to take his coffee in hand. "Managed to bring my partner back in one piece, did you?"

Jeff nodded. "It would've been sooner, but I had a devil of a time trying to find my hat this morning."

Reuben gave Moody a knowing glance and, after taking a sip of his coffee, said, "You had it in your locker the last place I saw. You might want to check there."

"Thanks for the tip," Jeff replied while he mulled over his copy of the report. "Sorry I can't stay long mates, but it looks like Angie and I are on the task force assigned to repel giant aggression in the Northern Country."

Moody snorted. "This bloke makes first rotation and suddenly he forgets all about his mates."

Before Jeff could respond, a young maiden walked up to the three of them. She tapped Moody on the shoulder; when he turned to greet her, she slapped him and walked away. The slap echoed, and everyone in the immediate vicinity stopped what they were doing to regard the stunned Auror. Moody rubbed his cheek in the same area

where Holly had slapped him the previous night.

Jeff was the first to speak after everyone around returned to their duties. "I felt that from here."

"Another one of your 'temporary companions', Alastor?" Reuben said with a grin. "She's a little young, isn't she?"

Jeff frowned. "Please don't tell me you're shagging the interns, Alastor?"

"Of course not! What kind of cad do you two take me for?" Moody poured himself a coffee, acutely aware of Jeff and Reuben's continued stares which prompted him to elaborate. "It was her sister..." he took a sip, growing more annoyed as they continued to regard him, "...and I may have broken up with her via owl."

Reuben snorted. "Has a death wish, he does."

Moody pursed his lips when he read to the end of the first page. "Why aren't our names on the list, Reuben?"

"Probably because the maestro wants us properly debriefed."

"The codger certainly has a woody for standing on ceremony doesn't he?" Moody spat. He failed to notice when Jeff slinked away. "I mean, doing things by the book didn't exactly lead us to the Weasleys did it?"

Reuben averted his eyes. "Er, Alastor..."

Moody ignored Reuben and continued, "If the old warhorse didn't have his wand shoved so far up his arse, maybe we could've saved more lives." He paused when he noticed Reuben giving him the kill sign and gritted his teeth. "He's standing right behind me, isn't he?"

"No. Right beside you, actually." The maestro's contentious voice made Moody flinch. The elder wizard waited for Moody and Reuben to stand at attention, circling behind them. "It's good to see you two have graced us with your presence this morning. By the way, how did the Fletcher deal go last night? Did you track his supplier?"

Moody hesitated in answering, "Er... no, sir, on account of us cracking the recent string of kidnappings."

"Cracked?" the maestro said with a loud snort. "Well no matter. I've turned the case over to Prewett."

"But sir, that's our case," Reuben felt compelled point out.

"I have decided to divert your energies towards tasks better suited to your talents." The maestro handed them each a colored envelope and waited patiently as the young Aurors opened them to read the letters sealed within.

"The State of the Commonwealth Gala?" Moody read aloud. "I don't understand."

"M.O.M. wants to leverage the momentum gained by that stunt you two pulled last night in order to push her legislation platform through to the Wizengamot."

"So we're going to be paraded around like a couple of show ponies?" Reuben queried.

"Unfortunately, my nurse said I shouldn't engage in any frivolous activities on account of my injury," Moody said, massaging his affected shoulder.

Not to be outdone, Reuben added, "And I'm pretty sure I'll just be a bad influence all around."

The maestro held up a hand in warning. "I don't seem to recall giving you two a choice. I'll look forward to reading your final reports." Without addressing them further he left.

Reuben sighed and waited until the maestro was out or earshot to say, "If there was ever a third rotation, I guess we're in it now, brother."

Moody crumpled the invitation in his clenched fist. He followed the maestro out of the office, and he caught up to him waiting by the lifts. "Permission to speak candidly, Maestro." He took the maestro's raised eyebrow as assent and went on to say, "Have you given any consideration whatsoever to the fact that Ledley and I are the reason those two boys are alive?"

The maestro glared as he approached Moody in the still hallway. His hands remained clasped behind his back, and his voice was quiet yet stern. "That is precisely the reason I have deigned to keep you and Ledley on as Aurors." When he saw that Moody had nothing further to say, he entered the elevator and, as the doors started to slowly close, ended with, "Now, do yourself a favor: sober up, shave and take a proper date, like you have some semblance of normalcy."

Moody stood alone in the hallway for several moments, rereading the details of the crumpled invitation in his hands. He went back into the office quietly and found his way to his desk. Reuben, who sat across from Moody, eyed him as he took his seat, then continued dictating to the magic pen. Moody continued with his morning routine and picked up the Muggle newspaper on his desk. The headline read:

PEACE TALKS FAIL.

DEMILITARIZED ZONE ESTABLISHED ALONG THE 38th PARALLEL.

The words hardly registered, but he read them just the same. He sniffed the air at the scent of a familiar perfume.

Angie arrived soon after. She pulled one of the files from Moody's out-box and, as she skimmed it over, said, "Why do you two look so sullen? I would think you'd be pleased with yourselves."

Moody smiled at her practiced nonchalance. He retired from reading the paper and folded it atop his desk. "What are you doing slumming on this side of the wing, Angie?"

"Did the maestro not tell you that I have been asked to take on some of your slack?"

Reuben stopped dictating to comment, "Are you sure you're going to want our leftover case load?"

"Well, let's just say I'm glad that you two aren't part of the case load."

Moody eyed her suspiciously. "Is that your veiled way of saying that you're happy we came out of it alive and well?"

Angie rolled her eyes. "If that helps get you through the day, Alastor."

"I think Alastor is right." Reuben rose from his chair. He thoughtfully stood next to Angie, waiting for her to acknowledge him with her eyes. "You know what I like about you, Angie? You only have *one* pair of breasts."

Angie folded her arms. "Been playing with succubae again, have you boys?"

Reuben slapped Moody on the shoulder, ignoring his partner's painful yelp. "I told you it was 'succubae'."

Moody shrugged off the waves of pain, deciding instead to avail himself of a sudden opportunity as he rose to join them. "Angie, love, what are you doing tonight?"

Angie glanced at Moody over her shoulder in reply. *Not* going to the State of the Commonwealth Gala."

"Crash and burn, brother." Reuben smirked. "Word spreads fast, doesn't it?"

"Honestly, you two blokes make it really hard for a girl to garner any sympathy for you."

"It's a defense mechanism, love." Reuben said, taking her hand. "Would you take that into consideration when you decide to be my date for the gala?"

Angie curled her lip to hide her amusement but relented under Reuben's gaze, "Alright."

"Hey, what the bloody hell, Angie?" Moody said, exasperated.

She merely shrugged in reply. "His plea was more pitiable than yours, Alastor."

"Hah!" Reuben teased at Moody. Upon introspection, however, his brow furrowed at her comment. He looked up when he saw Jeff enter the office.

"There you are, Angie." Jeff said, tipping his bowler in greeting. "The morning tactical meeting is about to start."

"Jeff, you found your hat." Reuben said with a lopsided grin.

"Yes. And you were right; it was in my locker all along. Thanks a ton, mate."

Moody slapped Jeff on the back and returned to his seat. "That's what friends are for, mate."

"Keep your chins up, gents. I'll see you at the gala tonight, yeah?" When Reuben released her hand, Angie turned to leave with Jeff. "Why does it smell like rotten clam chowder all of a sudden?"

The Deadliest Battlefield

Chapter 23 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 23

The Deadliest Battlefield

"I appreciate you squeezing me in on such short notice, Holly."

"Save it, Alastor. This is business, so don't expect any hanky-panky."

"I just wanted to make sure there were no hard feelings about the other night."

"That all depends. Did you bring me my money?"

"Of course.... Er, am I paying you for the night or by the hour?"

"By the hour, cheapskate."

"How much time does these four Galleons buy me?"

"Til about nine o'clock."

"Let's not tarry, then."

Moody opened the gilded door for his date which led them into a grand ballroom. They walked the polished, blonde-marble floors which reflected brilliantly the ivory and gold treasures that decorated the walls. Two majestic columns served to support the dazzling forty foot high ceiling. An arrangement of crystal teardrop chandeliers, suspended magically in midair, floated as billowy clouds that seemed to dance to the tempo of the orchestra. It was truly a venue worthy of the wizarding elite.

Holly took Moody's arm as the couple sought to navigate through the crowd. "So, what does one do at these things, exactly?"

"Try to remain invisible. If anyone engages you, just grin and nod. Think you can handle that?"

Holly tried to suppress a smile. "I think so."

Moody scanned the sea of strange faces, trying desperately to find either Reuben or Angie. He failed to notice the affluent-looking couple standing beside him and regarding him intently.

"Excuse me. Are you Alastor Moody?"

Moody turned to acknowledge the distinguished red-haired man. On his arm was an attractive older woman with black flowing hair, wearing a tiara that matched her diamond-laced gown. "I am," he answered apprehensively.

"Septimus Weasley." He shook Moody's hand firmly. "Thank you for bringing my boys home." He presented the woman on his arm in introduction. "This is my wife, Cedrella."

Cedrella hugged Moody with tears of gratitude in her eyes. "Bless you, sir."

Moody tried his best to hide his discomfort. To his chagrin he saw the display had attracted the attention of those standing nearby. "Really, it's nothing, madam."

"Nonsense," Septimus replied. "You have my eternal gratitude. If there is anything you need,*anything*, don't hesitate to look me up."

"Eh now, Septimus, just because you're the wealthiest man in the room doesn't mean you get a monopoly on the guest of honor." A young wizard who about Moody's age stepped in and offered his hand, introducing himself as Edgar Bones.

Edgar was accompanied by another couple whom Moody recognized: Minerva McGonagall, along with her companion...the same man who was with her at Hogwarts earlier that day.

Moody's eyes were drawn to the fine Wizengamot embroidery on the lapel of his jacket when he introduced himself. "Benedict Billings. We haven't met formally, but I believe you already know my fiancée, Minerva?"

"That I do." Moody nodded to acknowledge McGonagall, and she curtsied in response. "I'm sorry, did I hear 'fiancée'?"

"Yes," Billings answered, looking to Minerva. "I finally wore the old girl down."

"You're a lucky man." Moody sought to engage McGonagall again, saying, "And congratulations to you as well, Professor McGonagall. It is Professor by now, isn't it?"

"Not for long," Billings replied before McGonagall could answer. "No wife of mine is going to have to work for a living."

"And in this economy? You must do pretty well," Moody said.

"Not as well as Septimus here, but give me a few years."

Edgar snorted. "The bloke pushes through *one* initiative, and he already has his heart set on being Chief Warlock."

"Well, I'd have to get rid of you first, Edgar." Billings' retort garnered a laugh from the group.

"Say, Moody, maybe you can settle a debate for us?" Edgar queried. "As an officer on the front lines, we wanted to hear your take on the recent glut of black-market wands, and the commensurate crime, as justification for wand registration."

Much to Moody's relief, a waiter happened by and offered the group spirits. He promptly grabbed a large glass of wine from the steward's tray and downed half of it in one gulp. It didn't have the same sting as firewhisky, but it would have to do. "I don't think I'm qualified to comment, sir."

Holly watched Moody twist in the wind with some amusement and could stay quiet no longer. "Rubbish! You're completely qualified, *Allie-kins*."

Moody gave his date a sideways glance. "Thank you for the vote of confidence, Holly dear, but I really don't have much of an opinion on the matter."

"Don't be shy, Allie-kins." She clung tightly to Moody's arm when he tried to pull away, almost causing her to spill her wine. "Just on the way up here you were telling me how you think all these stuffed shirts, with their old-world platitudes, are serving to create the very malcontent that they're purporting to prevent."

"Finally! Someone with stones!" Billings said, slapping Moody on the back. "Play your cards right, Moody, and you'll be heading the M.L.E. one day."

Moody clenched his teeth as the pain pulsed through the wound in his shoulder. "Well, I rather enjoy just being an Auror, Mr. Billings."

"Of course you do. I really admire your nose-to-the-grindstone approach, Moody. Just know that it never hurts to have the proper connections."

"Leave the man alone, Benedict," Septimus said. "Not everyone likes to play the game."

"Says the man who is the head of the business guild," Edgar's muffled voice teased behind his glass.

Billings continued to press the issue. "So, Moody, about the minister's new initiative. Edgar thinks it's a sign for tighter controls. I'm on the fence, myself. I know the minister likes her pet projects, but she doesn't think of the associated costs to maintain them."

"It's easy to criticise, Benedict," Septimus interjected. "But we need some of those 'pet projects'. Take the Hogwarts Express, for example..."

"The Hogwart's Express is a cash-bleeder, Septimus," Billings argued. "It's eventually going to go broke."

"But, you can't assign a price tag in the case of wand registration, Benedict," Edgar said. "A Dark Wizard is more manageable without his wand. Ergo, control the wand, and you control crime..."

"And the wizard," Holly said under her breath.

Edgar raised an eyebrow at her. "Excuse me?"

"A wizard is defined by his wand, is he not? Do you realize how demeaning it is to get along without one? It makes one feel like a bloody house-elf."

Edgar shrugged. "There's nothing to stop any law-abiding citizen from obtaining a proper wand..."

"As long as they can afford one." Holly's irritation was manifest in the volume of her voice.

Moody was already working on his third glass of wine. "Holly, remember, invisible?"

"Let her be, Moody," Billings said, grinning. "It's refreshing to hear a woman speak her mind for once, especially when it's in my favour." He failed to notice that McGonagall had then extricated herself.

McGonagall's absence, however, was soon trumped by the arrival of another wizard. "Pomona? I thought I heard your voice."

Holly turned abruptly at the mention of her real name and nearly froze. "P-Professor Dumbledore."

"Pomona?" Moody said as he leaned in closer to his date to whisper, "I thought your name was Holly...Ouch!" He had forgotten how sharp her nails were.

Dumbledore embraced her. "How wonderful it is to see you again." He regarded his former pupil with pride and went on to proclaim to those standing around, "Pomona here was one of Hufflepuff's top students. She excelled in Herbology, if I recall correctly."

"You don't say, Professor," Moody said with a broad smile. "You've never told me that,*Pomona*."

Pomona smiled nervously. "There was nothing to tell, really."

"She's being modest," Dumbledore said. "Pomona loved to work with her hands. Her lush garden could make anything grow."

Moody raised his glass and chuckled, "I can certainly attest to that."

"What are you doing with yourself these days, girl?" Dumbledore winked as he leaned in closer. "Running your own successful business, I imagine?"

"Well... uhm... I'm between ventures right now, sir."

Moody took a break from nursing his beverage to add, "Nevertheless, there is no one who plants more seed in Godric's Hollow than Pomona."

"I would expect nothing less." Dumbledore placed a hand on Pomona's shoulder and whispered, "You know, I hope you don't think it too forward of me to ask if you would be interested in a position at Hogwarts? I think your talents in Herbology would round out the curriculum quite nicely."

Moody couldn't resist commenting yet again, "That's not the only thing she can 'round out'...."*Meh, that one was rubbish.*

Pomona tried to shy away, but Dumbledore was very persistent. "... don't think that would be a good idea..."

"You should do it, Pammy," egged Moody. "She'll do it, Professor."

"No, Alastor."

Dumbledore frowned. "I don't want to impose..."

"Nonsense, she wants to do it. She's just shy's all." Moody put an encouraging arm around his date. "When Pomona opens up, she can be extremely accommodating...Ouch! Bloody hell, woman!"

Dumbledore smiled. "Will you please just think about it, then, my dear?"

Pomona curtsied and said, "O-of course, Professor."

Moody grinned in satisfaction when Pomona glared at him. His good humor soon faded, however, when he caught a glimpse of Reuben and Angie mingling with Cygnus and Druella Black. His gaze locked on Druella like tunnel vision. She was stunning in her silver sequined gown and matching hat, the smile on her lips visible just below the brim. To his horror she turned to regard him, as if she knew she was being watched, and he promptly looked away, trying to pretend he didn't see her.

It suddenly got warm in the room. His heart thumped against his chest angrily. His breathing was labored. It was a sensation he experienced many times in the field: Fight or Flight.

Moody chose the latter. "Will you all excuse me?"

As Moody turned to leave, Pomona clung to his arm. "Where are you going? Don't leave me with these people."

Moody gently forced himself free. "I'll only be a moment; you'll be fine."

"I hate you," she whispered.

Moody kissed her hand. "I know, love. I know."

"Don't worry, Moody; we'll keep her company while you're away," Edgar said as he stood between them. He offered Pomona his arm, saying, "We would love to hear more about your views on wizarding economics, milady."

Pomona took Edgar's arm tentatively. "Y-you would?" She smiled at Edgar's encouraging nod.

The remainder of their conversation was drowned by the surrounding ambient chatter as Moody made his way across the room. He headed straight for the balcony, trading in for a fresh glass as he passed another wine steward. Once outside, he breathed in deep the cool night air. He clenched and unclenched his hand until the tingling in his fingers abated. The alcohol finally started working to slow his rapidly beating heart.

When his breathing returned to normal, he noticed that he was sharing the balcony with McGonagall. She looked down to the street below, seemingly oblivious to his presence. For the first time that night he took notice of her: the way her silk stole draped around her shoulders, the way the night breeze played upon the hair at the nape of her neck. He found himself approaching her unsolicited. "I suspect you're out here for the same reasons I am, Professor."

"I'm not a professor." McGonagall did not turn to acknowledge him when she responded, "And I wouldn't presume to know your reasons for being here, Auror Moody."

"You and Billings, eh? When's the big day?"

"If you don't mind, I'm not in the mood for small talk right now."

"Right. I can't stand these things either." He paused to sip his drink. "Normally I wouldn't intrude, but since this is the only balcony available, I'm afraid we're going to have to suffer each other's company for a bit."

"Then I would appreciate it if you would suffer it on the other side, in silence."

Moody finished the last of his wine. This time he chose the former. "So, are you a bitch to everyone you meet, or do I just bring it out of you?"

McGonagall sighed and shook her head. "Typical."

"Pardon?"

"Still the same selfish git who prides himself on being contrary to everything around him."

"I haven't noticed an evolution in your character, either, Ms. Teacher's Pet. It seems fitting that a stuck-up, humorless prude like you would end up with a self-aggrandizing snob like Billings."

"You are the last person I would expect to dole out relationship advice, seeing as how your 'date' just left with one of the barristers."

"You don't say?" Moody looked back inside to see Edgar opening the door to the exit with Pomona on his arm. He pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time. "Is it nine o'clock already?"

"Ill-mannered beast!"

"Now I'll drink to that," Moody said, holding up his glass. Noticing it needed refilling, he started to leave, but paused upon seeing a rash of purple spots suddenly appear on her arm. He peered closer unsure if what he was seeing was merely a side effect of the alcohol. "What the hell?"

McGonagall gasped when she saw the bruises and covered her arm with her stole. Unfortunately, removing the shawl revealed even more bruises newly manifested on her pallid shoulders.

"When improperly healed, stress can cause the wounds to reemerge, remember?" Moody brushed back her hair to get a better look. They were in the shape of palm prints. "Who did that to you?" His eyes narrowed.

She jerked away, not looking him in the eye. "Th-they're accidents."

Moody calmly set his glass on the ledge. He watched her briefly while she waved her wand over her forearm. "You surprise me, McGonagall."

She tried to reach for him as he went, but he shrugged her off. "What are you going to do?"

Moody stormed from the balcony, ignoring the clacking of McGonagall's heels as she struggled to keep up. It didn't take him long to find Billings by the stage speaking privately to an older, distinguished witch wearing a sash. Moody arrived just as Billings flagged down a waiter and snatched the wine glass out of Billings' hand.

Billings looked on, half amused, while Moody gulped down his drink. "I beg your pardon?"

"Of course." Moody wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He handed the half empty glass to the person next to him, unaware of the fact that it happened to be the Minister of Magic herself. "Hold this for me, would you, love?"

"Is everything alright, Auror Moody?" Billings said.

"Actually, I was wondering if you could answer a question for me."

Billings paused when he saw a flustered McGonagall approach, almost tripping over her shawl. "What question?"

"What does it feel like when a man grabs you like this?"

Billings winced when Moody grabbed him by the shoulder and started to dig his fingers in hard. It took all of his strength to free himself from Moody's grip. Enraged, Billing's swung at the Auror. Moody ducked the punch and countered with an uppercut that sent Billings to his back, knocking him out cold. The music stopped; everyone in the room had eyes on the scene.

"Ah, that's where I put that," Moody said as he retrieved his wine glass from the shocked minister. "Thank you."

...oOo...

The late night hours dragged on in the holding cell. The granite slab that Moody lay upon was becoming increasingly uncomfortable without the warmth of alcohol's numbing embrace. He reached into his vest for his hip flask, grateful that the guards did not bother to search him more thoroughly. He rattled the scant liquid contents inside.

Moody put his flask away when the rusty steel door unlocked. Light from the entrance spilled inside as the door creaked open. It made him squint, so he was scarcely able to make out the silhouette of an entrant wearing a long pointy hat. When the light dimmed at the door's close, he was surprised to see Albus Dumbledore standing across from him. The old wizard looked about, at a loss for a place to rest his bones. Dumbledore removed his hat and let it fall; by the time it touched the ground, it was transfigured into a plush chair.

"Hello, Alastor." Dumbledore took his time settling in his new chair, "Are they treating you well down here?"

"Still observing the niceties, Professor?" Moody said, rubbing his tired eyes. "Even now, at a time like this?"

"Especially at a time like this, my boy."

"Please don't tell me you're here to lecture me, Professor."

"No... No lectures. Although I do have something I wanted to ask you."

"I certainly have the time." Moody sat up to face Dumbledore. He rested with his back against the wall, sure to keep his weight off his bad shoulder. He massaged his bruised knuckles.

"So, how did it feel?"

"Agreeable," Moody replied, grinning as he curled his affected hand into a fist. "I imagine that McGonagall must be furious with me."

"If she is furious, I think it may be with herself."

Moody unscrewed the cap on his hip flask. "I just don't get how a powerful witch like her can allow herself to become victimized by someone like that Billings tosser."

Dumbledore sighed, stroking his considerable beard as he collected his thoughts. "Being in love can make us do things outside of our nature. This can be a good thing when that love is returned. However, when it isn't, it can destroy a person"...he regarded Moody; the young Auror's head kicked back, drinking the last drops of firewhisky in the flask..."if you let it."

"Yeah," Moody said. He screwed the cap back on. "Some people just don't know how to cope, I guess."

The old wizard grinned. "So, about my question..."

"You mean, that bit about how it felt wasn't it?"

"No. That was just another nicety, I'm afraid," Dumbledore said, his grin turned into a genuine smile. "I'm leading a delegation to the Northern Country tomorrow, and I wanted to ask if you would like to join me."

"Northern Country..." Moody thought aloud, recalling recent intelligence on the subject. "Is this about the giants?"

"Yes. It is my hope to defuse hostilities before they escalate. And I think your presence will send a powerful statement to both sides."

"That's a generous offer, but I suspect my calendar is going to be full for the next few months."

"About that. I've spoken to all the interested parties, and I don't think there will be a need for any 'official' action in regards to tonight's events."

Moody eyed Dumbledore warily. "I hope you didn't do anything extraordinary on my behalf?"

"Not at all. I just made the suggestion that to dismiss a decorated Auror for striking an ambitious junior member of the Wizengamot would invite the question, *why* would a decorated Auror strike an ambitious junior member of the Wizengamot in the first place?"

Moody's laughter echoed in the small cell. "In that case, I would very much like to join your delegation, Professor."

"Excellent." Dumbledore slapped his knees and rose from his seat. The chair then magically floated above him and, with a snap of the old wizard's fingers, transfigured into

that same pointy hat to float gently back onto its master's head.

The rusty door creaked open once again at Dumbledore's command. With a sideways nod, he beckoned Moody over and the two men left.

Tall Order

Chapter 24 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 24

Tall Order

It was quiet in Dumbledore's Wizengamot office. Moody had resorted to counting the holes in the ceiling tile to pass the time. He wanted nothing more than to take out his hip flask, were it not for Edgar Bones sitting across from him, drumming his fingertips on the tabletop.

Perceiving Moody's annoyance, Edgar took his hands off the table and placed them in his lap. "Sorry. I feel like I've been sent to Dumbledore's office for detention."

"We *are* in Dumbledore's office."

"True. At least we're not having to write lines in those rickety chairs."

Moody gave Edgar a knowing smile. "I didn't mind the chairs so much, but what was that smell?"

"My mates and I had this theory." Edgar snorted at the memory. "That the proctors gassed the rooms with slothbrain pollen to make us more docile."

"Meh, that's an old rumor. It didn't work in my case, besides."

"Nor mine." Quiet returned to the room and Edgar's grin disappeared. "Say, Alastor, about last night..."

Moody rolled his eyes. He was hardly in the mood to rehash the previous night's events. "I know what you're going to say, and while I appreciate that you and Billings are mates..."

"Billings and I aren't mates," Edgar chuckled. He leaned in as if someone were going to eavesdrop and said, "Between you and me Billings can be a bit of an arse."

"Sorry," Moody said with curious amusement. "What were you talking about, then?"

"I... took the liberty escorting your cousin Pomona home last night."

"My *cousin* Pomona?" Moody repeated, unsure if he had heard Edgar correctly.

"I just wanted to assure you that my intentions toward her are strictly honorable."

"Right." Moody smiled upon remembering that Edgar had indeed left the gala early with Pomona and was, therefore, unaware of last night's altercation. "She's a good woman, my 'cousin' Pomona, and I wish you both the best." He tried his best to look serious as he continued, "A bit of advice: my 'cousin' prefers to be addressed by her nickname 'Holly'."

"Thanks, Moody. I owe you one."

The young wizards looked to the opening doors. They rose when Dumbledore and Shackbolt entered the office. The phoenix perched on Dumbledore's shoulder flew to its familiar roost in the ceiling. With a flourish from Dumbledore's hand, the doors magically closed.

Shackbolt did not bother to stand on ceremony and got right down to business. She threw the scroll on the table, and it unrolled itself to reveal a topographical map of the Northern Country. She hovered her wand over the map while the other wizards looked on. "As sworn Ministry officials everything you hear from now on should be regarded *Most Secret*. You may have heard reports of increased giant activity in the forests of the Northern Country. Recent intelligence suggests that they are organizing in some fashion. Worse yet, it is getting to the point where concealing their movements from Muggle eyes will soon become untenable. Members of Wolf Squadron have led expeditions into their territories, but we have not heard back from them since. We fear the worst."

Edgar looked up from the map and raised his hand timidly. "Er, sorry. What exactly ~~are~~ going in for, then?"

"To prevent war, Edgar," said Dumbledore.

Shackbolt nodded in agreement. "Professor Dumbledore claims that the giant migrations are altruistic in nature and unrelated to the recent string of violence in the area."

Edgar was unconvinced. "That flies in the face of what we know about them."

"Have any of you ever heard of the First Tribe?" Dumbledore queried. He smiled when no one volunteered to answer. Nevertheless, being a teacher for so long, it was hard for him to pass up an opportunity to entertain with a lecture. "In giant lore the First Tribe is known as the 'Tribe of Tribes'. It is believed to be the progenitor from which the twelve major tribes are descended. They were informally known as the Tallest of the Tall or the Wisest of the Wise, depending on the translation."

"It sounds like a myths and fairy tales," Edgar muttered with his arms folded.

Dumbledore smiled and replied, "Myth or not, an open invitation was extended to me along with three guests for an audience with their Gurg, Ozymandias."

Shackbolt held up her arm to present the bracelet around her wrist and added, "This Portkey will teleport us to a secure jump point from which we will Apparate to a random location within half a kilometer of the giants' camp." It remained quiet in the room as she collected the scroll. "Any questions?"

Edgar timidly raised his hand again. "Am I the only one who finds it worrisome that we're taking all these precautions?"

"I'm sure this is just standard best practice, Edgar," Dumbledore said.

"What's wrong, Bones?" Moody smirked. "You plan on living forever?"

"Not 'forever', but I would hope getting to next week isn't too much to ask?"

Shacklebolt continued to roll the scroll between her hands tighter and tighter until it magically disappeared. "Nobody wants a war. As long as nobody takes any provocative action, we should be fine."

"Define 'provocative'?" Edgar said, concerned.

Shacklebolt eyed Moody slyly and answered, "Getting so drunk as to have no qualms about punching our host would qualify."

Moody felt his jaw clench but did not otherwise react. Dumbledore maintained his usual air of detachment while Edgar furrowed his brow thoughtfully at Shacklebolt's oddly descriptive comment.

Shacklebolt took out her wand and tapped her bracelet with it. A wave of energy engulfed them all.

BAM!

Moody opened his eyes. They were in an open clearing surrounded by several teams of Aurors. He noticed the maestro among the group along with Reuben, who sported a surprised look on his face...presumably at Moody's presence. Shacklebolt tapped her bracelet again.

BAM!

All was quiet and dark in the unfamiliar forest. Moody took out his wand. He, Edgar and Dumbledore stood alone under the shade of the many trees.

Out of habit Moody began to look about when he felt an odd energy that caused his wand to shake. *Only one thing could make it do that.* He looked to the trees and gasped, realizing that he was surrounded by mature Purplehearts. He placed his hand on the nearest specimen; the energy from the tree shot through his arm down to his wand, causing it to glow as if it were saying hello to an old friend.

Though the strange phenomenon caught Edward's attention, he felt it more prudent to point out that they were one member shy. "Where's Shacklebolt?"

"Concealed behind a secondary Confundus Charm, no doubt." Moody put his wand away, satisfied that the area was secure. "Protocol demands a certain redundancy when Apparating into hostile territory."

Edgar did not find comfort in the word he parroted. "Hostile?"

"Just a turn of phrase, Edgar," Dumbledore said while kneeling over to examine the flowering bush at his feet. "I am sure we are perfectly safe here."

"So, what do we do now?"

"We wait," Moody replied. He knelt next to Dumbledore to see what held the old wizard's fascination. "Is that what I think it is?"

Dumbledore nodded in answer. "Dragonsbane."

"I didn't think this species grew in the wild anymore."

"Neither did I."

"Not only that but we appear to be standing in the shade of wandlore-grade Purplehearts," Moody said. "They shouldn't be able to thrive in this soil. I wonder what else is growing around here?"

Dumbledore clipped a sample of the dragonsbane and stashed it in his robe. "A treasure trove for any herbologist, I suspect."

"Too bad it's in the middle of the giants' territory," Edgar deigned to comment, although he didn't seem to share their fascination. He failed to notice Shacklebolt when she walked through the stealth charm, and he flinched at the sound of her assertive voice.

"This way, gentlemen."

At full stride Moody was the first to come to her side. "Auror Shacklebolt, you are the superior officer; so, I should be the one to take point."

"Your role in this mission is strictly in a diplomatic capacity, Mistah Moody," she replied formally. "Therefore, you will please take your place with the others and follow my lead."

Shacklebolt maintained a brisk pace through the woods. No one spoke as they followed her single file. All the while Moody made a mental note of the various species of magical-grade flora that the forest supported.

Halfway through a steep incline, everyone stopped when Shacklebolt froze in her tracks. She raised her arm with her palm open. In understanding, Moody and Dumbledore spread out and took cover among the trees.

Edgar, on the other hand, allowed his curiosity to get the better of him and opted to stand next to Shacklebolt to gaze in wonder at the quiet, odd shadows that interrupted the rays of sunlight peeking through the bush. He took a step back when an arm the size of a full-grown man bent the trees as easily as a child would brush aside an annoying twig.

A huge figure stepped into view. He wore a vest of thick, polished leather over a fine linen shirt dyed emerald green. His pants were neatly pressed; the shoes he wore were of smooth, tanned dragonhide. He stood erect, taller than any house. His dark hair was short and kempt, save for a single braid of hair that hung down on the left side to just above his waist. In spite of his menacing size, his exquisite square jaw and fair features put everyone at ease.

Moody and Dumbledore stepped from behind the trees and joined the rest of the group to regard this Adonis who stood over them as one worthy of their worship.

Edgar cleared his throat to steady his wavering voice. "Professor, what is that?"

"That, Mr. Bones, is a giant," Dumbledore said.

"But, he looks like one of us...Er, aside from his stature, I mean."

Dumbledore grinned. "You're very perceptive, Edgar."

The giant looked down on the four humans. A smile slowly appeared, showcasing his perfectly aligned teeth. "Titaija, look; it's little people!"

Hearing her name, a young giantess appeared from the opening left behind in the trees. Her satin dress glistened in the dull rays of the afternoon sun. She stood next to her giant companion and beamed with joy upon seeing the small humans. "They came? Splendid!"

"Titaiaja," Dumbledore greeted. "Come, let me have a look at you, child."

Giggling, Titaiaja twirled gracefully before the old wizard. "Uncle Albus," she said with a pout. "I'd give you a hug, but you've grown so short."

"Oh, I think I've remained pretty much the same, my dear."

The male giant knelt in front of the humans and bowed. "Hello, I'm *Rogg*."

"Rogg?" Dumbledore repeated, quizzically.

"Yes. Forgive its rather guttural quality, but I've recently discovered that most humans find my birth name unpronounceable. Hence, Rogg."

"Quite understandable, Rogg," Dumbledore said. He removed his hat and bowed in kind. "I am Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore."

"Your reputation precedes you, sir. My cousin Titaiaja here has told me a lot about you. I must say it's bloody good to finally be able to put a face to the name!" Rogg looked to the witch standing next to Dumbledore. "And who might you be, madam?"

"Queenie."

"Jolly good!" Rogg bellowed. He then acknowledged Edgar. "And you, sir?"

"...Uh."

"Bloody jolly good to meet you, Uh! I have an uncle Uh in Finland. You two would get along well."

Tataiaja peeked over Rogg's shoulder. She smiled when Moody regarded her. "Are all wizard males as handsome as you?" She stepped closer and leaned over to get a better look. "We would make pretty children."

"Manners, Titaiaja. Don't embarrass our guests," Rogg scolded. He turned back to the wizards to say, "Titaiaja is not as versed in human greeting customs, I'm afraid."

The giantess averted her eyes. "I have caused offense. For that I am sorry."

Moody bowed to her saying, "Don't be... I'm not." He returned her blush with a smile.

Rogg eyed the curious young Auror. "And you are?"

"Alastor Moody."

"Alastor Moody?" Rogg slowly rose to his feet. "*The* Alastor Moody?" He placed his hand over his heart and bowed respectfully. "Peace and reconciliation. Come with us, please. Ozymandias awaits."

The giants led them to the top of the embankment. At its summit was an encampment...a grand, elaborate arrangement of shiny silk tents and robust temporary structures. They were allowed through the main entrance, guarded by two stout giants brandishing spears as thick as tree trunks.

The wizards were given a tour of the bustling tented community, escorted by Rogg and Tataiaja. Despite the nature of their camp, the underlying infrastructure proved to be deceptively cutting edge.

Moody had never felt so insignificant: an ant among gods.

Their tour ended at the guest tent. At Rogg's command two giants meekly attended to him. These giants were of the sort to which the wizards were more accustomed, being more brutish in nature with disproportionate limbs and prominent foreheads.

After giving the docile brutes their instructions, Rogg said, "You may refresh yourselves here. These ~~snatives~~ natives will see to your needs. They're a bit slow, but they're well trained."

Edgar's eyes narrowed. Although these more familiar giants seemed well ordered, he did not venture any closer. "Are these your slaves?"

"No, they pay us tribute of their own free will," Tataiaja answered matter-of-factly.

"Ozymandias commands the respect of all the other gurgs," Rogg said.

"And in return we provide them with clothing, medical treatment and basic literacy," Tataiaja elaborated.

"So, your tribe is not native to England?" Edgar said.

"No," Titaiaja snorted. "The last time we were on this island was about...." She trailed off, struggling to remember.

"Eight years ago," Rogg said, completing her thought. He, along with Tataiaja, left the wizards to attend to their duties.

Dumbledore greeted their brutish attendants and entered the tent. Moody, Shacklebolt, and Edgar, however, were more circumspect in their ambition and opted to remain outside at a respectful distance.

"Interesting," Shacklebolt muttered to herself.

Moody gave her a sideways glance while keeping one eye on the brutes. "Something you care to share, Auror Shacklebolt?"

Shacklebolt kept her voice low when she replied, "There is an obscure theory that posits the notion that the First Tribe is nomadic. Furthermore, they must survive on the 'hospitality' of whosever territory they encroach upon at the moment."

"This is not a popular theory, I take it?"

Shacklebolt nodded. "It was always discounted because it was assumed that they operated at a comparable level of technology as competing subtribes. But, to see their level of sophistication...not to mention their dress and manner...the evidence is incontrovertible."

"WHAT THE BLOODY HELL!"

A young girl, easily four meters tall, held a screaming Edgar in her arms as she disappeared between the tents. Moody, Shacklebolt and Dumbledore, roused by the commotion, gave chase, but they had trouble keeping up with the youngster who was able to skip along with a stride several times that of a human.

A stern voice stopped the child in her tracks. "Ingrboda, put him down this instant!" The little girl turned to the giantess who glared down at her and spoke with a series of serene clicks to which the giantess replied, "You're supposed to speak English, remember?"

"Sorry, Mummy." The child-giant presented the human in her arms. "Can I keep him?"

"He is not a toy. Release him or you'll get no grilgagrish for dessert." When Ingrboda put Edgar down, the mother softened her voice. "Now apologize to the man."

Ingrboda looked down at Edgar, crestfallen, and said, "I'm sorry."

The mother sent the child on her way and knelt in front of Edgar. "Sorry about that; you know children."

Visibly shaken, Edgar continued to brush himself off. "It's quite all right."

"Did she injure you? I'd be happy to carry you to the hospital tent." She leaned forward to offer her hand, unaware that her chest was at his eye level.

Edgar stood mesmerized but had the presence of mind to hop back before he was knocked over. He averted his eyes, and his face turned a bright pink. "That won't be necessary, madam."

The mother continued to regard Edgar and smiled weakly when the human acknowledged her stare. "She's right; you are adorable. We would make beautiful babies." Twirling her hair, she rose and placed her other hand over her heart, an awkward task given her large bust. "Peace and reconciliation."

Eyeing her as she went, Edgar failed to notice Moody, Shacklebolt and Dumbledore as they gathered around him. Edgar blinked when Moody waved a hand in front of the stunned wizard's blank expression.

"Are you all right, Edgar?" Dumbledore said with a smirk.

Edgar cleared his throat. "No worse for wear, Professor."

Moody folded his arms, trying not to snigger as he said, "Our fault, I suppose, for being so adorable."

Shacklebolt put her wand away and rolled her eyes at the three men, who continued to gaze in the giantess' direction. "All of these...*females* appear to be in estrus."

Edgar nodded. "Well, fatherhood proposals aside, these are hardly your normal everyday giants. "

"Why? Because they can form complete and coherent sentences?" Dumbledore said. He turned to Moody. "What say you, Alastor? You have yet to comment."

Alastor pursed his lips in thought. "I'm... reserving judgment, Professor."

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "Fair enough."

A shadow cast upon the wizards prompted them to look up. A giant, dressed in formal robes, stood over them with an ominous countenance. His birth-braid hung down to his chest. Though the sun was at his back, it was easy to reckon the glower in his eyes.

Dumbledore was first to speak. "Hello, Ysbaddaden. It's been a long time."

"Professor," Ysbaddaden greeted aloofly. He regarded the other three wizards, his eyes resting on Moody the longest. "You and your party are to come with me now. My father, Ozymandias, is ready to receive you."

The giant, Ysbaddaden, escorted the humans to the largest tent, located in the center of the city-camp. Once inside they were instructed to take off their shoes. The curtain to the entrance was drawn, and they were greeted with the scent of sweet, fragrant spices. The giantess at the threshold plucked an exotic stringed instrument. Their feet sank into the plush rug as they followed the path to the throne on which sat Ozymandias, the king of all giants.

The muscular frame that bulged underneath his surcoat belied Ozymandias' advanced age, made evident by the thick birth-braid that draped over his shoulder and looped several times around his massive forearm. On his left sat Rogg and Titaiaja. The other attendants of the court had their places along the periphery. He sat relaxed on his throne with his chin rested atop his fingertips. Ysbaddaden approached and kissed the jeweled ring on the king's hand. Ozymandias waited until Ysbaddaden took his place at the right of the throne before speaking.

"Young Albus Dumbledore. Still little, yet all grown up."

"Live forever, Ozymandias, Gurg of Gurgs."

"And you, wise Albus." Ozymandias smiled. "Now, who have you brought before me this day?"

Upon introduction Edgar stepped forward with confidence. "On behalf of the Ministry of Magic, I send you greetings, Gurg Ozymandias. It is my hope that the alliance we forge today will usher in a new era of peace for our two peoples..."

Ozymandias raised his hand, cutting Edgar off. "Well spoken, but we can talk politics later, Mr. Bones." He pointed, then curled his finger at Shacklebolt; she approached him warily. "Did Albus bring you here solely to drive the women of my tribe to jealousy, my child?"

"That, and to protect us from you," Dumbledore said with a smirk. "No offense intended."

"Oh?" The old Gurg chuckled as he stroked the stubble on his chin. "Then this must mean that you are obliged to dine at my pillow tonight in order to keep a close watch on me with those beautiful eyes?"

Shacklebolt curtsied. "That is correct, your majesty."

"In that case, no offense is taken." Ozymandias' eyes settled on the next wizard in line. He didn't need an introduction for this one. "Alastor Moody."

Moody stepped forward and bowed formally. "I am honored, sir."

Ozymandias put his hand over his chest and bowed in return. "Peace and reconciliation."

Moody looked around, perplexed, as all the other giants in the tent bowed in a similar manner...all except Ozymandias' son, Ysbaddaden.

Retrovirus

Chapter 25 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 25

Retrovirus

A pair of hands clapped twice, and the music began to play. Domesticated brutes carried trays of food and placed them on the large revolving table lined with plush pillows. The guests were led in and seated around the table, each according to their station, with a special place reserved for the four guests of honor. Ozymandias came in last and reclined on the largest pillow. When the king took his first bite, the feast began.

Moody pulled his sleeves down, as they were starting to ride up into his armpits. His formal dress uniform was clearly not designed to be worn in a reclining position. He resigned himself to forsake any comfort and pretended he was enduring one of the maestro's torturous training exercises. He eyed the odd delicacies that passed by. The outer rim of the table was lined with foodstuffs that were readily reachable by the small hands of a human while the inner tiers were obviously prepared for giants. *They've certainly thought of everything.* He grabbed a blue sphere from the table and sniffed it.

The giantess, Titaiaja, watched the young wizard's trepidation with some amusement. "You don't want the blue ones, Alastor Moody. Trust me."

Dumbledore, who was seated between them, shrugged. He picked out one of the blue samples for himself and added, "They are an acquired taste, to be sure."

"Do you have any recommendations?" Moody said.

Dumbledore thought for moment. "Anything green will do." He popped the sample into his mouth and swallowed without chewing.

Titaiaja grimaced. "Unless it has splotches of yellow on it."

"Quite," Dumbledore said in agreement. "Those do make for an explosive combination."

Moody smiled. "Thanks for the tip... and the visual."

Moody relied on his usual trick of pretending to be sufficiently fascinated with his food so as to not invite idle conversation. Interestingly, Edgar Bones did enough talking for the four of them. Moody began to see why Dumbledore had brought Edgar along. Edgar seemed to be in his element once he warmed up to the idea of intelligent giants and engaged Ozymandias at every opportunity, although the king's attentions remained more focused on Shackbolt. Between courses Rogg charmed the attendees with stories of old about mighty men of valor. Ysbaddaden, who sat diametrically from Moody, hardly seemed interested in eating at all...something he and Moody had in common.

After the fifth course the dinner party broke according to custom, and everyone left the dining tent to retire to more intimate venues. Moody ventured beyond the camp's perimeter to be alone with his thoughts. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, yet it was difficult to see any stars due to the bright lights of the spires that bordered the camp. Moody started to reach for the comfort of his hip flask when he was interrupted.

"What a clear night," Dumbledore said suddenly standing next to Moody.

"I had no idea that eating could be so exhausting, Professor."

"Quite. Though you only seemed *mildly* annoyed tonight."

"Only slightly," Moody said with a smirk; however, pretense was not in his skill set. "Why did you bring me here?"

"There isn't a 'single' overriding reason, my boy."

"Then pick one."

After some deliberation Dumbledore finally said, "History."

"You say that as if we're going to accomplish something here."

"Really, Alastor, you're far too young to be this jaded."

"Not jaded, just realistic. I admit that this is all a lovely distraction, but I fear that there will always be enmity between giants and wizards."

"All the more reason to let go of the indiscretions of the past. That's the only way the healing can begin."

"I wonder if the families of the missing Aurors from Wolf Squadron would share your optimism, Professor."

"I believe they would... in time."

"Time." Moody snorted quietly. "At the rate things are going, it's more likely that *in time* there will only be a handful of them left, clubbing each other to death over scraps of carrion." He snorted again and looked away from Dumbledore's reprimanding gaze. "Sorry, Professor. I guess that's an improper viewpoint to take along on a peace mission."

"Not at all," Dumbledore said in agreement. "But it is an understandable viewpoint."

The trees nearby swayed and parted. The two wizards were no longer alone as a familiar voice from the darkness said, "It is a viewpoint I wish to avert, gentlemen."

Ozymandias stepped out of the shadows and joined them. The rainbow-coloured gem on his finger glowed when he stretched his arm out. After a brilliant flash of light, the forest was gone.

Surrounded by darkness, Moody flailed about desperately trying to get his bearings. He stilled when Dumbledore put a calming hand on his shoulder. Though he perceived a firmament beneath his feet, when he looked down all he saw was a tiny blue planet amidst an ocean of space. Moody reached out, grasping at a trail of dust left from the wake of a passing comet; it merely passed through his hand undisturbed. *An illusion.* "What magic is this?"

Dumbledore winked at him. "It's not magic."

From the vastness aethereal beings of energy, riding on wings of mist, shot past them towards the Earth. With a wave of Ozymandias' hand, they gave chase, following

them as unseen observers. At impossible speed they descended somewhere in ancient Africa where the beings of aether coalesced into human form.

Ozymandias spake:

In the time before your people discovered writing, the Sons of God walked the Earth. They took for themselves the fairest daughters of men and begot my ancestors, the Mighty Ones.

As if on cue the scene changed. Great cities of diamond and steel were erected. The inhabitants rode the airways in fantastic constructs of metal. They spoke the word, and bolts of lightning shot from the heavens, the energy dancing on their fingertips.

The Mighty Ones held dominion over the land. Their knowledge was vast, and with it they held the keys to the universe... and the microverse.

A being of physical perfection entered the scene and stood among them. A syringe injected the paragon with a glowing liquid that infused him with power. The paragon started to grow until he was as tall as Ozymandias. The multitudes of peons at his feet dropped to their knees and prostrated themselves.

Their arrogance grew along with their knowledge. They allowed themselves to receive worship without any regard to He who made us all. They even manipulated their blood in hopes of making themselves like the Creator...

Then came The Great Flood.

The scene segued into a large room with a meeting table that hosted various heads of state with each trying to talk over the other but, as a group, could only manage unintelligible clamor.

It was a flood of ideologies; it was a flood of conflicting beliefs. Everyone was right in their own eyes, and no quarter was given to opposition or competing creeds.

In the scene that followed, the great cities of the Mighty Ones lashed out at each other with beams of energy that made the earth tremble. Their violence scorched the skies. The polar ice melted.

Many died. Curiously, for all the damage that came about from the Flood, something far more sinister laid in wait.

The paragon returned. Ozymandias waved his hand again, and they were pulled inside the automaton's body the view zooming in through skin, muscles and vascular tissue down to the microscopic. In the bloodstream an intruder wandered unchallenged...something alive yet not alive. It seized a lone cell and impregnated it with something that caused the cell to twitch and eventually rupture, giving birth to more intruders.

The view panned back out. The paragon began to hunch. His skin turned calloused and pasty. Hair covered his body, and his features became more simian...more base...resembling that of a modern-day giant.

It turned out that we were too clever for our own good...our blood being corrupted by our own hands. We quibbled over how to save ourselves. The more we quibbled the sicker we got, and the sicker we got the more we quibbled until we were unrecognizable from our former glory.

In a flash, they were back in the forest. The jewel in Ozymandias' ring dimmed.

Moody was silent as he pondered the incredible revelation that Ozymandias had shared with him. "Who are you? Who were you?"

"We are the Last of the Last, born from the mighty who have fallen. My family line was believed to be immune from the Sickness, so we've kept our blood pure and passed our knowledge of the ancients from father to son in the hopes that one day we would reason a cure. But I fear our time has run out; it appears that the blood of the First Tribe, itself, is corrupt."

"Why? What's changed?" Moody said.

"Eight years ago in the English West Country, my heir, the one who was supposed to take my place and guide my people to a cure, was struck down. The Sickness overcame his reason, but before I could restrain him, he was killed by a young wizard." For the first time Ozymandias looked down to regard Moody.

"You mean me?" Moody averted his eyes under the giant's teary gaze. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"We are dying, Alastor Moody. I fear the only way to survive is with the help of your people."

"How can we possibly be of any help? By the looks of things, you're far more advanced than we are."

The wizards looked on as Ozymandias stretched his hand out again. The ring on his finger glowed, and images of curious writings scrolled before them, yielding esoteric chemical equations and complex mathematical models. The images slowed to showcase three effigies of increasing size: a human on one end, a giant at the other extreme and something that was neither in the center.

Ozymandias spake thus:

"The Sickness is manifest in patrilineal bloodlines...through the males; but, matrilineally the disease merely sleeps. Wizard blood is too far removed to be useful. However, *hybrids* are not only immune, but their blood can be used as a baseline to help extrapolate the factors that cause the Sickness. As a proof of concept, I have clandestinely authored a longitudinal study where, through the women of selected tribes, a sampling of wizards were... *approached* in order to sire suitable test subjects."

"You're talking about half-giants." Moody gave an exasperated chuckle when he came to a realization. "Hagrid." He looked to Dumbledore, saying, "When I was a kid, we always made fun of him because of his height, fed by rumors that his mother was a giant.... They weren't rumors, were they?"

Dumbledore simply shook his head.

"Is this why you brought me here, Professor? As some sort of political tactic to guilt wizardkind into going along with anything he has to say?"

"He doesn't understand," Ozymandias muttered to himself.

"What's not to understand?" Moody replied calmly. "I'm sorry that this is happening to your people, but you'll forgive me if I decline to play the part of your poster child."

Ozymandias shook his head and left.

Moody stood there alone with Dumbledore. Neither spoke, but as the seconds passed, the young wizard began to sense his mentor's disappointment like a great weight. "Ozymandias doesn't need me, besides," he offered unsure of who he was trying to convince. "By the looks of that light show, I figure a bit of that ancient lost knowledge will be a persuasive bargaining chip, eh?"

"Not everyone plays the game like you've *seen* the game played, young man."

"Just the same, next time I'll thank you to leave me in the cell."

Moody left Dumbledore and ventured further from camp, forestalling the urge to say something that he would later regret. In certain respects Dumbledore had proven to be just as overbearing as the maestro. However, at least with the maestro, he knew what to expect.

Beyond the periphery of the spires, the stars twinkled brilliantly in the night sky. Moody sought solace in their quiet beauty when, in the darkness, he heard a faint melody. It beckoned him closer.

The alluring voice drew Moody to a rocky ledge that overlooked a shallow ravine. He took out his wand and dissipated the mist, exposing a grassy clearing afore the foot of the ledge where he happened upon the source. *Titaiaja*? He stood there, enrapt, even though he didn't understand the words.

The giantess stopped singing to regard the wizard, whom she towered over. "I've disturbed you."

"Nonsense." Moody put his wand away and straightened. "What was that, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I was practicing the benediction for tomorrow's peace accords."

"It's a beautiful song."

"I wasn't singing. That's my speaking voice."

Moody arched an eyebrow. "No offense but I've never heard giant-speak that sounded like that."

"Understandable, considering you've probably never heard *proper* giant-speak in the first place."

He grinned. "Point taken. It's beautiful just the same."

"Thank you." Titaiaja started to blush, so she looked out over the ravine. The tops of the trees jutted out over the thick mist that covered the ground. "Is this what a cloud looks like up close?"

"We call it fog."

"Fog: a strong name." Titaiaja sighed. "Things are so very different here."

"You've never been to England before, I take it?"

"Not exactly," she answered timidly. "My father didn't let me leave the tent the last time. Even now he still thinks I'm a little girl."

Moody couldn't help looking up at her with a lopsided grin, saying, "'Little' is hardly a word I would use to describe you."

"Do you have something against being big?" Titaiaja said, pouting with her hands on her hips.

"On the contrary...." Moody paused when a sudden breeze of cool night wind blew in from the east. Titaiaja hugged her chest with her back to the wind, her silk dinner gown the only protection from the chilly air. Moody summoned a half-dead tree out of the rocky slope. It hovered magically in place and, with a wave of his hand, was reduced to kindling that ignited into a large campfire. "My people have a saying: *The bigger, the better.*"

She knelt next to him to warm herself. "So, what's it like being little, anyway?"

"From my perspective I'm just right, but I take it that you've never met a wizard before either?"

"Only Dumbledore. So much so that, when I was young, I thought all wizards were old."

"A reasonable assumption in Dumbledore's case," Moody said, grinning. "He's certainly been old for all the time I've known him."

"You're funny," Titaiaja giggled. Without thinking she reached for Moody, and he retreated a few paces, taken aback. "Oh, I'm sorry." She withdrew her hand. "My people can convey information through touch. I forgot when they told me that little people are averse to that form of communication."

"We don't mind it so much. It's just that we... 'little people' usually state our intentions first."

"That's odd. How can one know their intentions without first touching?"

"Through social intercourse."

"How clumsy," she said with that same pout. "Doesn't that tend to lead to misunderstandings?"

"Oftentimes, yes."

"In that case, may I touch you in order to suss out my intentions for touching you?"

Moody chuckled. "You may."

Moody flinched at the sensation of her surprisingly soft fingertip against his forehead. In his mind's eye Titaiaja was standing before him, her height now proportional to that of a human female. They merged. Foreign images that felt strangely familiar flooded his psyche. They showcased a life of privilege and study...full of love and compassion...but weighted with obligation.

Moody opened his eyes, and the images were gone. They were now back to their disparate sizes. Titaiaja reclined on her side, propping herself on her arm. He wasn't aware, until now, that eyes could come in silver. Astonished, the only thing he could think to say was, "Hello."

"Hi." She blushed.

"I know you," he whispered, befuddled. "I mean, I feel like I've *always* known you."

"And I you."

"How is that possible?"

"I'm not sure. I've been told that it usually happens when two people are...." She searched inwardly for the correct word. "Compatible."

"You knew that was going to happen?"

"It's not so much a knowledge as an instinct. My people believe it's a skill that we've evolved out of a necessity to choose mates that will bear healthy offspring."

"Offspring immune to the Sickness, you mean?"

"Yes." Titaiaja sat up, hugged her knees to her chest and mused. The tips of her trussed, cerulean hair brushed against her ankles as they swayed in the breeze. "Your world... it's frightening. Does that beverage you drink make it any easier?"

"Not really," Moody replied. Her words prompted him to feel for the outline of the flask hidden under the lining of his jacket. "I'm afraid I have my own 'sickness' to contend with, one that I doubt you'd want any part of."

Grinning, Titaiaja rested her cheek on her knees and said, "We believe that all sentient beings live in an incomplete state; we're all broken. It's only when we come together that one heals the other." Her eyes twinkled.

Moody took off his jacket under the warmth of the fire. He concentrated and conjured a disembodied hand of energy proportional to that of a giant. "May I?"

She smiled in understanding. "You may."

Moody started with her hair, feeling by proxy the locks flowing between his fingers *Like the softest velvet*. She giggled when the tingling energy from his fingertips tickled the skin on her shoulders, gliding over them. *The smoothest silk*. She sighed when his strong arms embraced her and shuddered as his hands followed her curves without restraint... beholden to her giant, tiny waist. She whipped her hair aside, exposing her slender neck an invitation and moaned when the tingles kissed the spot that pulsed rapidly just beneath her skin.

She made no objection to Moody leaving his mark. "Is this how you held her, the one with the purple hair?"

"Aye."

"A foolish woman." Titaiaja found his hand. Their fingers interlaced. The fire welled. "Would you... like to hear the rest of the benediction in my quarters?"

"That's kind of you, but it's late, and I've taken up enough of your time. I should let you get back to your work." Moody begrudgingly released her and promptly left fully aware that he was pushing the fortitude of his character to its limits. He paused and swallowed hard when she called his name.

"Alastor Moody, it's been a pleasure to meet you." The giantess glanced over her shoulder and smiled weakly. "Did I say that right?"

The wizard nodded. "The pleasure and the honor have been mine, Princess Titaiaja."

Moody had a difficult time sorting his feelings as he walked back to his tent. The disturbingly familiar but alien memories swirled in his mind. He looked up; the stars were diffused behind the light given off by the spires. The solace that he sought eluded him once more.

He reached into his vest.

"You shouldn't be wandering about alone, especially at night."

Moody turned with a start, being snapped from his reverie by Shacklebolt's voice with her particular accent. "I'll take that under advisement, sir."

Shacklebolt leaned against the spire planted next to their guest tent. She was still wearing her evening gown with a solid gold necklace that hung prominently around her neck. "You may not be under my direct command, but on this mission, I expect you to act with the dignity accorded to your position."

Moody narrowed his eyes but stood at ease, replying, "If I am to infer that my behavior has been anything but, then by all means, point out the deficits therein so that I may not repeat them, sir."

Shacklebolt approached, standing extremely close. Moody resisted the urge to flinch as her hand explored him. When she found the hardness under his uniform, she reached into his lapel to retrieve the metal hip flask hidden underneath.

"I thought you said I was off-duty," was Moody's response.

She curled her finger, beckoning him to lean closer, and whispered, "An Auror is never off-duty. Not ever... ever... ever." She tried, unsuccessfully, to read his silent expression. "Do you have something to say, Mistah Moody?"

Standing so close to her, Moody finally took notice of the shiny gold necklace around her neck. "You look lovely this evening, sir."

"Thank you." Perceiving his downward gaze, her fingers grazed her neck. "It was a gift from Ozymandias. It would've been impolite to refuse."

"Indeed. I can see how it can make one uncomfortable, accepting such an overture." Moody grinned when Shacklebolt returned his flask.

She averted her eyes, and they separated, appeasing the etiquette of personal space. They were both startled when a siren blared. The camp came alive with activity. Edgar and Dumbledore came out from their tents.

"What's going on?" said Edgar.

"It's an alarm," Shacklebolt replied.

A flare shot into the sky the origin of which was disturbingly familiar.

"Ozymandias," Dumbledore said under his breath. He ran and was soon followed by Moody and Shacklebolt.

Edgar likewise followed in protest. "Let me get this straight: an alarm has been raised, and yet we're going *toward* the screams?"

The wizards arrived on the scene. Ozymandias lay on the ground; a gaping hole was burned into his chest. The women wailed. Ysbaddaden knelt over his father's still form and closed the eyelids with his fingers. Soon after Rogg and Titaiaja appeared, escorted by a security detail. When Titaiaja saw Ozymandias she threw herself on him in grief.

"What happened?" Rogg snapped.

Ysbaddaden rose slowly. "That's what I would like to know." He looked in the direction of the four wizards. "Explain your whereabouts!"

Titaiaja had the presence of mind to regain some semblance of her composure. "Surely, you don't think they had anything to do with this, brother?"

"The evidence speaks for itself!" Ysbaddaden held up a wand, it looked more like a toothpick between his fingers, and he cast it before the humans.

Moody picked up the wand. His eyes widened in recognition of its grainy texture.

Edgar was the first to respond. "I assure you our government did not authorize this attack."

"Listen to them, brother," Titaiaja said. "We've known Dumbledore all of our lives."

"Maybe. But we don't know the rest of them"...Ysbaddaden pointed to Moody..."and especially not that one!"

Titaiaja averted her eyes. "I know him."

Ysbaddaden's head snapped in his sister's direction. He regarded her briefly then slapped her. "Whore!" Ignoring her pleas, he raised his hand to her again, but his arm was stilled. He looked to see a hand of energy clamped mightily against his own...and beyond that to the wizard whom he hated.

Moody stood defiantly before Ysbaddaden. His wand arm shook, and he struggled with his words. "You will keep your hands off of her!"

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Edgar interjected quietly, "but wouldn't this fall under Shacklebolt's definition of 'provocative action'?"

Ysbaddaden snarled. "Worm." He crushed the energy hand in his grasp and sneered when Moody dropped to his knees, clutching his affected wrist.

Some of the giants standing around started to pant. Soon enough they all breathed in unison. Some snarled while others gnashed their teeth. Edgar and Shacklebolt drew their wands.

"Not again," Dumbledore uttered barely audible. He stepped up and commanded, "Put your wands away."

"Is that wise?" Shacklebolt said.

"Wands away, NOW!" When they obeyed, Dumbledore approached the son. "Ysbaddaden, let us help."

"How?"

"If you allow us to examine the body, we might be able to find out who is responsible for this crime."

"Why?"

"In order to bring them to justice..."

"*Wizarding* justice," Rogg interrupted. He clicked to the guards and said, "Kill them..."

"I am Gurg now, Rogg!" The slain king's son beat his chest. "Ysbaddaden is Gurg, NOT Rogg!"

The guards stood down, and Rogg bowed, saying, "Then, by all means, what are your orders,*baby* cousin?"

Titaiaja bravely rose to her feet. "Brother, remember:*peace and reconciliation*." She gently turned her brother's eyes into hers. "It's what Father wanted."

Ysbaddaden blinked, and for a brief moment, his features softened. He gently felt the red area on his sister's cheek that had already started to swell. "I-I struck you?"

Titaiaja smiled to reassure him. "It's all right."

Ysbaddaden kissed her on the cheek and turned to regard the wizards. "Out of respect for my father, the only 'peace' I offer is for you to leave in peace." The glower returned to his eyes. "But there will be NO reconciliation! If the *stick-monkeys* want war, WE WILL GIVE THEM A WAR!"

Roars of bloodlust and vengeance drowned the wails of those that mourned. At the Gurg's command, Rogg, along with two guards, escorted the wizards from the camp. No one spoke until they were beyond the spires.

Ever the optimist Dumbledore made one last entreaty. "Rogg, surely you know that the Sickness is affecting you all like a contagion."

Rogg smiled. "Yes, as I'm sure it was also the Sickness that burned a hole though Ozymandias' chest."

"We've been set up, Rogg," Moody said. "We are not your enemy."

Rogg gave his parting command to the guards. "If they're not gone in *thirty* seconds, kill them." He regarded the humans one last time, snorted and left.

Moody clenched his fist, ignoring the pain in his hand. "Professor, if we're to have any chance of finding out the truth, it is imperative we go back to that crime scene."

Edgar kept one nervous eye on the guards and the other on his pocket watch. "I don't think going back is an option, gents."

When Moody looked to her in appeal, Shacklebolt shook her head. "My orders are to see to it that we return safely."

"With all due respect, sir, that's trollshit!"

"Use your head, Auror," Shacklebolt scolded quietly. "We've been outmaneuvered. Now is not the time for blind heroics."

"I must agree with Auror Shacklebolt," Dumbledore said.

Moody continued in protest. "But he was your friend."

Dumbledore's reddened eyes glared at the young wizard. His voice was on the verge of cracking when he spoke. "A fact of which I am acutely aware, Alastor."

Shacklebolt motioned toward her bracelet.

BAM!

False Flag

Chapter 26 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

False Flag

BAM!

Alastor Moody's natural reaction to the free fall was to scream. He opened his mouth only to be gagged by a rush of air. When the tree branches pelted him, he summoned the Protection Charm on instinct just in time. He bounced off the sloped ground at an odd angle, and his body rolled downhill like an out of control rag doll. Disoriented and winded, he found it impossible to get his bearings. He struggled to apply an appropriate spell, but panic denied him the luxury of reason.

Moody's training took over; he spread out his limbs and the world stopped spinning. He slid on the scouring terrain, rocks grating through his clothes. He dug his nails into the earth, ignoring the pain from the cold dirt that flayed the skin from his hands.

When he finally came to a stop, he opened his eyes to see his feet dangling over a precipice. A mere three fingers were leveraged behind a shard of granite.

A dark figure stood at the ledge. The loose gravel that it kicked over the side served to garner Moody's attention. The green light that primed the tip of the wand in its hand revealed its intentions. Moody's free hand still managed to retain its hold around the wand he had recovered from the crime scene...the wand with the familiar grainy texture. He brought it to bear. *"Expluso!"*

"Avada Kedavra!"

Moody could feel his grip slipping, his precarious position losing the battle for him. The enemy sniggered as his Killing Curse quickly gained ground against the disadvantaged Auror. Moody closed his eyes before the oncoming green glow.

"Stupefy!"

Dumbledore's familiar voice ended the duel; the dark figure slumped to the ground. The gentle, old wizard stepped into view and quickly levitated Moody onto his feet. "Are you all right, Alastor?"

Moody discarded the useless wand. He was still shaken from the ordeal but managed to answer, "Yeah." He looked to his would-be assassin and gasped in recognition. "Auror Murphy?"

"You know him?"

"He's one of the missing Aurors from Wolf squadron." Moody knelt over the semiconscious Auror and slapped him awake. "Murphy, what is the meaning of this?"

Murphy slowly opened his eyes and regarded him weakly. "I never did like you," he said, and he breathed his last.

After Moody's repeated attempts to revive the corpse, Dumbledore put his hand gently on Moody's shoulder. "Suicide pact... it's a special type of wizard's oath. The sanction for failure is death."

"I know. It hardly seems necessary."

Dumbledore nodded weakly. "A disturbing indication of the lengths our malefactors are willing to go."

"This can't be a coincidence coming after Ozymandias' death," Moody thought aloud. "They must've diverted our jump point; we weren't supposed to make it back."

"It's hard to believe that Aurors are capable of these acts. But they do possess the qualifications."

Moody rose and dusted himself off. "I certainly would've fallen prey to his trap if it weren't for you, Professor."

"You're quite welcome, Alastor..." A sudden light-headedness caused Dumbledore to stumble. He held onto the young wizard for support and snorted in odd amusement. "I'm afraid the trap set for *me*, on the other hand, wasn't entirely unsuccessful."

Moody steadied him and helped him back to his feet. He noticed a trickle of blood coming from under Dumbledore's sleeve. "We've got to get you to Mungo's..."

Just then Edgar's voice boomed in the distance. "PROFESSOR... SHACKLEBOLT... MOODY?"

Dumbledore and Moody shared a look of apprehension. "Go to him, Alastor. Quickly!"

"Are you sure?"

"Hurry, before it's too late."

Moody reluctantly left Dumbledore and sped off in the direction of Edgar Bones' voice.

"HELLO?"

The echo was misleading; Moody paused briefly and listened intently in the darkness.

"WHERE IS EVERYBODY?"

For Merlin's sake, Edgar! With renewed bearings Moody ran toward Bones. He clenched his wand between his teeth as he took out his invisibility cloak...it wasn't going to be big enough. *Engorgio!* He leapt over the next hedge and found the outline of Edgar Bones wandering about in the shadows. Before Bones could say anything else, Moody tackled him. *Muffliato!*

The cloak settled over them.

BAM!

BAM!

BAM!

BAM!

BAM!

Even under the cover of the Muffliato Charm, neither Moody nor Bones dared to utter a sound amidst the five dark figures of Wolf Squadron. It was impossible to make out

their faces behind the deadly green glow of their wands. However, Moody recognized each of their voices.

The first voice sounded like Auror Radler. "I could've sworn this is where I spotted that pogue Bones."

"Spread out," the leader, Auror Brignast, commanded. "Standard search pattern."

"We're one man short. This would be easier with Murphy in the mix," Auror Terrence Sweets said.

"He's taking care of Dumbledore and Moody, dear brother," Auror Tabitha Sweets answered, tapping her ear. "Although, he has yet to check in on the ~~slug~~ line."

"I wouldn't worry, girl, you know how Murphy enjoys his work." Auror Whitney's gruff voice was unmistakable. "Besides, Dumbledore is a fossil and Moody is just a piss-artist." The burly Auror set down the cloth sack that he was carrying and undid the clasp. "This is the only one we need to watch out for in my opinion."

Moody resisted the urge to pounce then and there as Whitney uncovered Shacklebolt's barely conscious form, bound and gagged, underneath the cloth. She stirred when Whitney shook her.

"Maestro's Number One, eh?" Radler said, looking on. "Why is she still breathing, then?"

"Because..." Whitney trailed off as his hand slowly ventured higher up Shacklebolt's inner thigh and disappeared under her skirt. He sneered when her back arched. "I plan on taking this witch down a peg or two first."

"Stay on task, Whitney," Brignast said evenly. "We're not taking any chances. I'm giving Murphy five more minutes, and then we'll sanitize the area."

Underneath the cloak, Brignast's last order gave Edgar enough pause to test the protection of Moody's Muffliato Charm. "Why does 'sanitizing' sound like it'll be a bad thing for us?"

Moody cursed, confirming Bones' instincts, and said, "Get your wand at the ready."

"You knocked it out of my hand when you tackled me," Bones replied, rubbing his neck. *Ouch*, by the way."

"Sorry." Moody reached into his sleeve and handed his reserve wand to Bones. "We don't have much time."

Bones took the proffered wand tentatively. "What do you want me to do?"

"If they're following protocol, then they're most likely hocked up on meerkat essence. So, when I throw off the cloak, I need you to conjure your best Lumos Spell. I'll do the rest."

"I don't understand what a flash of light is going to do against five Aurors."

Moody tried not to allow his annoyance to show as he answered, "Meerkat essence is used for night vision, Mr. Bones."

Bones smirked in understanding. "You want me to blind them."

Moody nodded and gripped the edge of the cloak. "Whatever you do, don't stop moving."

Moody threw off the cloak. The flash from Bones' Lumos Maxima Spell bathed the area in blinding light. The Aurors of Wolf Squadron covered their eyes, but to no avail.

"Call me a pogue, will you?"

Moody sprung to his feet and bore down on the nearest wizard. He leapt into the air and landed his fist heavily across Auror Sweets' jaw, knocking him out cold. He proceeded to line up the next three in short order. He pointed his wand at the witch, Tabitha, and struck her in the chest with the Disarming Spell. Unfortunately, the noise gave him away.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Moody nimbly sidestepped the curse, and with a practiced flourish, dispatched Radler with *'Excelsiosemptra'*, catapulting him into the air. Radler's screams became more and more faint as he ascended into the heavens.

Moody, now engaged in mortal combat with Auror Whitney, kept a wary eye out for Bones, who, surprisingly, was holding his own in a duel against Auror Brignast. *How long can he keep that up?* Moody redoubled his focus to the immediate threat. Whitney was strong; the feedback from their clashing spells was making his arm shake. He broke out of the duel a split second before Whitney's Killing Curse punched through. He somersaulted to safety and came about, casting the Disarming Spell.

Whitney laughed heartily as he expertly deflected Moody's counterattack. "It's about time you learned, boy: out in the world, you duel for keeps or die!" He aimed his wand.

Like an unseen phantom Shacklebolt leapt onto Whitney shoulders from behind. Her thighs clamped tightly around his head like a vice. With her arms outstretched she twisted at the waist as far as she could. Then, with a sudden jerk, she twisted in the opposite direction, drawing her arms in and spinning Whitney off of his feet. They hit the ground to the cascading sound of snapping vertebrae with Whitney's face planted into the dirt; his toes pointed skyward.

The corpse's arm twitched. The wand in its hand stabbed into the ground as it cast its master's parting spell...just before his spine was severed. The ground began to crumble outward from the centre. The loose dirt spun faster as the hole expanded. Shacklebolt struggled to kick the heavy corpse that pinned her leg. She managed to free herself just before the sinkhole claimed Whitney's remains. Though dizzy she managed to get to her feet and keep pace ahead of the ever-expanding hole until she stumbled over a rock.

She's not going to make it. Moody took his wand in his teeth and ran to her aid. He dove and grabbed Shacklebolt by the wrist just as the ground beneath gave way.

Her breathing laboured, Shacklebolt regarded the whirlpool of earth far below. Moody's tenuous grip was the only thing that kept her from falling into the abyss. "Not to sound ungrateful, but next time you might want to try the Mobilicorpus Spell."

"Right," Moody grunted through his teeth. He started to pull her up but was reminded of the pain in his shoulder...the stitches had ripped open under Shacklebolt's weight. Lest he lose his grip on Shacklebolt, he tried to ignore the sounds of Edgar Bones fighting for his life. A curse from Brignast's lips made the skin along his spine tingle. *He wouldn't dare!* It was a curse he had read about in training manuals but never thought he would hear in person; it sounded different from the way he imagined reading it.

The air crackled.

"What was that sound?" The recognition in Shacklebolt's widened eyes, and the gasp that escaped her chest told Moody that the question was rhetorical. "Give me your wand..."

"What?"

A rush of billowing air brought with it nigh unbearable heat.

"Your wand, now!"

Weary of thinking, he defied the pain and pulled with all his strength. Shackbolt pushed off and vaulted over his right shoulder. At her height, her lips found his; she took his wand in her teeth and dismounted. The roar of fire drowned Shackbolt's voice. The water that streamed from the wand evaporated instantly.

Moody looked upon the thing and froze in awe by the beast of fire. In semisentience it looked around; having no master, everything it beheld was prey. The heated air that swirled about blew noisily among the trees, lending to the illusion that the beast was capable of human speech.

"I feed..."

Screams from high above marked Auror Radler's descent from the sky. The creature snatched the helpless Auror from the air with its fiery maw. It roared and shat scorched meat. It regarded the two remaining Aurors, this fiendish thing of fire, and moved toward them. Shackbolt screamed against the onslaught, and the wand she held brought forth a glowing whip. It cracked the air and ensnared the creature. The nearby trees ignited in its struggle to free itself. Shackbolt was forced to drop to her knees as she was dragged along.

Moody came to her aid. He held Shackbolt fast, combining his energy with hers, and the whip tripled in girth, easily restraining the creature. However, the monster's continued struggles made it even harder to breathe in the superheated air.

Moody braced Shackbolt's trembling arm. He could scarcely hear his own voice. "For Merlin's sake, let it go!"

"Left unchecked, it'll raze the countryside!" She presented her bracelet. "Take my Portkey... return with the others!"

"We're at a stalemate as it is! If I let go, it'll overtake you!"

"I... can contain it!"

"You're not privy to my wand's strengths and weaknesses!"

"I am giving you... a direct order, Auror!"

"I am refusing that order!"

A strange bird descended upon the wizards. It glowed with feathers like flame. Its distinctive caw pierced the din as it circled overhead. Then, with sudden ferocity, it headed straight for the fire monster and was devoured by it.

The fiend gulped it down hungrily and then stilled. Its core changed from orange to blue then to white. It seemed to writhe in agony as rays of white heat perforated it from within. Eventually, it dissolved into a vortex that sucked the surrounding brush fires into its centre. After a brilliant flash of light, darkness returned to the forest. Echoes of the creature's death throes faded into nothingness.

Moody's eyes hadn't quite adjusted to the darkness, so he remained motionless in the quiet of the aftermath.

"I think you can let me go now."

Moody snorted, realizing that he still held Shackbolt firmly in his arms, yet he hesitated. "Sorry."

"Quite all right." When Moody released her, she pointed his wand at the pit behind them. "Accio wand!" After a few seconds, a wand rose magically from darkness below to its mistress' waiting hand. "They destroyed my wand, but Whitney's will make a fine replacement."

"Indeed," Moody said, proffering his hand.

Shackbolt grinned and handed over the wand that she had borrowed. "Purpleheart, correct? What's the core comprised of?"

"Gryphon's feather."

"An interesting combination."

"Thank you." He sheathed it in his sleeve compartment. "Truth be told, I'm not usually comfortable with strangers handling my wand."

"That sounds boring."

A faint light drew their attention back to the creature's remains. With wands drawn, the two Aurors converged upon the pile of soot that marked the Fiendfyre's demise; something stirred underneath.

"Careful," Shackbolt said. "It could be an Ashwinder."

"My thoughts exactly."

They hopped back with a start when the Patronus of a baby phoenix worked its way out of the dirt and ash. It chirped weakly then hopped off. They followed it until it reached its master who was slumped unconscious against a tree. It pecked a few times at the old wizard's feet and then disappeared.

Shackbolt went immediately to Dumbledore's aid. "See to Bones."

Moody obeyed. He found Bones sheltered behind a waning Protection Charm. He didn't move when Moody shook him, yet he still held firmly onto Moody's Beech wand. "He has a concussion and a nasty burn," Moody reported. "What about Dumbledore?"

"Paralysis from some type of neurotoxin," Shackbolt answered calmly. "He appears stable for now, but he requires medical attention." She took out her bracelet. "I don't like it, but we'll have to risk teleporting back to base camp."

"Then may I humbly suggest that I go first to secure the area this time, sir? I can pull you three from the other side when I deem it safe."

Shackbolt, who was in no condition to protest, nodded and tossed Moody the bracelet.

BAM!

The return trip was abrupt, causing Moody to drop to his knees, but otherwise tolerable. The cool, fresh air invigorated him, and he breathed deeply, but unfortunately, he had no time secure the area. His blurry vision focused on two fast approaching Aurors.

Debating the wisdom of drawing his wand, he was relieved instead to hear the familiar voices of Jeff and Reuben.

"Moody, you made it." Jeff came over and steadied Moody onto his feet. "We feared the worst."

"I told you Moody was too stubborn to buy it," Reuben said, slapping them both on the back.

"Have you two blokes been here all this time? Awaiting my return like a couple of worried old women?"

"Get over yourself, Alastor," Reuben scoffed. "I'm of a mind to collect those ten galleons you owe me before you get yourself killed properly..."

"Eh, now, It was only *eight* galleons, pot-tosser!"

"You'll have to get in line, Rueben," Jeff said, his arms now folded crossly. "Alastor owes me a new bowler to replace the one that he puked all over."

"You ratted me out, Reuben!"

"I didn't say anything, brother; he was bound to figure it out sooner or later, him being a *Tosser Worst Ass* and all..."

"*Auror First Class*," Jeff corrected Reuben behind clenched teeth. "Say it right, or don't say it at all, you dim fuck."

Rueben couldn't help but notice Shackbolt's bracelet that Moody held in his hands. "That's a bold choice, but I don't think that bracelet goes with your cufflinks, Alastor."

Moody's eyes widened. "Shit!" And he tapped the bracelet.

BAM!

Shackbolt appeared followed shortly thereafter by Dumbledore and Bones, who were secured inside containment charms. The three junior Aurors stood at attention when she approached.

"AFC McKinley. Auror Ledley. You are to take the wounded to Hogwarts immediately for medical evaluation," she ordered.

Jeff eyed her warily. "Wouldn't St. Mungo's Hospital be better equipped, sir?"

Shackbolt ignored his concerns, saying, "It is critical that you sequester them into Hogwarts's hospital wing under protective guard. Keep the circle of knowledge small...especially among other Aurors. As far as you two are concerned, the peace delegation is still officially missing."

Jeff and Reuben acknowledged the order and Disapparated, taking Dumbledore and Bones with them.

"Can we trust them?" Shackbolt asked, scanning the area for witnesses.

Moody nodded. "I'd stake my life on it, sir."

"Good... because it *does*." She donned her invisibility cloak.

Without question, Moody likewise cloaked himself and followed her. Because their cloaks were at the same "ethereal frequency", they were the only ones who could see each other as they ventured deeper into the encampment. It felt strange to Moody, having to skulk about among his fellow Aurors, but he understood Shackbolt's precautions.

They sneaked past the guards stationed in front of the command tent. Inside the modest tent was a vast war room. The maestro stood at the far end with his back to them. Seemingly oblivious, his attention was focused on a large tapestry magically suspended with a mural of Britain sewn into the fabric. The overlay showed certain areas highlighted by threads that blinked in unison, marking the locations of known Giant strongholds.

Without taking his eyes off the mural, the maestro acknowledged the intruders' presence. "Report."

Shackbolt was first to throw off her cloak. "The peace mission has failed, Maestro."

"I gathered that." He finally turned to face them with a serious regard. "What happened out there?"

"I'm not sure. It appears as if Gurg Ozymandias was assassinated by an exceptionally powerful wizard."

"I see. Where are Dumbledore and Bones?"

"The jump point was compromised..."

"Impossible! I charmed that Portkey myself!"

Shackbolt raised an eyebrow at the maestro's rebuke, but persisted. "Nevertheless, we found ourselves transported into a trap on our return where Dumbledore and Bones were seriously injured. I have taken the liberty of diverting them to Hogwarts incognito under the assumption that St. Mungo's is not secure."

"What garnered that assessment?"

"On account of Wolf Squadron going rogue, I imagine." The words came out of Moody's mouth before he could think to stop them.

For the first time, the maestro regarded Moody's presence, like one would regard the sudden appearance of an unwelcome housefly. "I find that hard to accept."

"It's the truth." As proof Shackbolt presented Auror Whitney's wand. She glared at Moody, and he wisely withdrew off to the side.

Maestro shook his head. "They must have been Imperiused."

"They were running a false flag operation, the goal of which was to frame Wizarding Britain for the assassination while, at the same time, taking out the peace delegation, making a war between giants and wizards inevitable." Shackbolt paused to give the maestro a chance to ponder the reality of the situation. "Surely, you know that's a task far beyond the faculties of someone compromised by the Imperius Curse."

"Then they very well may have succeeded." The maestro waved his hand and the tapestry began to magically unravel. When the fibers rethreaded, they showcased an overlay of the demilitarized zone just a few miles away. "Our encampments bordering the Northern Forest have been overrun. I expect the Minister, herself, to make a formal declaration of war in the morning. She's already given me orders to implement Operation Green Purge."

Moody once again forgot his place. "I'm not familiar with that operation."

"It's Wizarding Britain's final solution to the Giant problem: extermination," Shackbolt said.

"You can't be serious!" Moody gasped. "That's madness!"

"We may not have a choice. It's us or them." The look that the maestro shot his way made it evident that Moody's continued presence was only barely tolerated.

Shackbolt quickly brought the conversation back to the point. "We may still be able to reason with them."

"I'm listening," the maestro replied, his interest piqued.

"The First Tribe is no myth. If I suss out who's behind this, then that might be enough to reestablish a dialogue."

"That's debatable. In any event, I'm not too keen on you going back into the field so soon, Shacklebolt."

"If we keep up the appearance that Wolf squadron succeeded, then I'll have the advantage. All I'm asking for is twenty-four hours."

The maestro snorted. "You only have twelve, girl. And you're not going it alone." He nodded in Moody's direction. "Use the boy."

"Moody's still too green."

"He's wand fodder."

"He's still in the room," Moody protested under his breath.

"That wasn't a suggestion, Auror Shacklebolt." The finality of the maestro's tone invited no further discussion on the matter.

Shacklebolt averted her eyes. "Of course, Maestro."

"Take my escape Floo." The elder wizard approached and placed his hands on her shoulders with a countenance that was uncharacteristically gentle. "Stay constantly vigilant." He directed them to a door hidden behind the mural. Once they were inside, he locked it behind them.

The lights came on to reveal a small sitting area with a fireplace. A bowl of Floo Powder rested on the mantel. Shacklebolt opened the cupboard on the far corner and sorted through the magical provisions therein.

Moody watched her with some interest before inquiring, "So, what's the plan?"

Shacklebolt handed him an unmarked jar of salve and brought him before the mantel. "I want you go home and get some rest while I call in some markers. I'll contact you when I need you."

She dipped her hand into the powder, but Moody interrupted her. "Am I to understand that you're sending me to my room?"

"You're no good to me knackered. I'll need you fresh later on."

"With all due respect, sir, I feel fine..."

Her glare cut him off. "If you continue with this annoying habit of second-guessing my orders, I'll see to it personally that you walk a beat down Diagon Alley for the remainder of your career. Do I make myself clear, Auror?" Having made her point, she disappeared into the flames.

Moody quietly grabbed a pinch of the silvery powder and cast into the fire.

"Home."

Ten Hours, Thirty Seconds

Chapter 27 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 27

Ten Hours, Thirty Seconds.

Moody bolted out of bed upon hearing a loud rapping on his door. He traversed his small flat in silence; the glowing tip of his wand cast its dull red light along the walls as he stepped lightly on the creaking floorboards. He stood off to the side of the front door, holding his wand at the ready. He waited for another knock before answering, "Who's there?"

"It's me," Shacklebolt said from the other side. Moody cracked the door slightly and peered at her from behind his Shield Charm. "Are you going to let me in?"

Moody lowered his wand. "Of course." He uttered the counterspell to allow her entry.

Shacklebolt ventured inside, keeping her back to him. "Are you in the habit of letting your defenses down without verifying the identity of your guests?"

Moody closed the door and turned on the lights. "Pardon?"

"How do you know that I am the true Queenie Shacklebolt?"

He smiled. "How do you know that I am the true Alastor Moody?" She turned and thunked him on his wounded shoulder, and he winced. "Right."

Shacklebolt regarded the quaint little abode. It was sparsely furnished but arranged efficiently. The art that decorated the walls, along with the various arrangements of plants, lent to the room a particular warmth. "This is your flat? You live here alone?"

"Yes, sir," he replied with a yawn.

"It's... tidy."

"You sound surprised."

She faced him. "I hope you managed to get some rest; it's going to be a long night."

"I was able to get a catnap in," Moody said. He ran his fingers through his mussed hair. "So, what's the plan, sir?"

Shacklebolt stooped to examine the exotic plant by the windowsill and absent-mindedly replied, "When in the field, in order to protect superior officers from being targeted, we all assume the base rank of Auror. Therefore, I would appreciate it if, for tonight, you would call me Queenie."

"Yes, sir—"

"*Queenie.*"

"Right... heaven forbid they should zap the right Auror," he muttered under his breath.

"We should get going, *Alastor*," she said aloofly. "*After* you put some clothes on."

Moody felt a of flush of heat rush through his body. It had completely slipped his mind that he had been wearing nothing but his pants all this time. Portraying an air of nonchalance, he excused himself and retreated to his bedroom.

He turned on the light in the loo and examined his shoulder. Fortunately, the salve Shacklebolt gave him earlier had done a good job of accelerating the healing process. Satisfied, he splashed some cold water on his face and dressed the wound.

He glanced through his wardrobe and grabbed the first hanger off the rack. Shacklebolt's voice sounded muffled from the other side of the wall.

"You should dress Muggle style."

He cursed, replaced the suit and made another selection. After getting dressed, he gathered his field provisions and joined Shacklebolt in the living room. He found her reclined on his divan and engrossed in one his writing journals. Her free hand unconsciously caressed the smooth skin along her leg.

He cleared his throat.

She didn't bother to look up from the page. "Well, Alastor, this certainly explains your reports with all their flowery, unnecessary words."

"It was an adolescent hobby; one that I don't engage in anymore."

"Pity." She turned the page. "So, this 'Druella' is the one that got away, I take it?"

"That's a bit personal, don't you think?" Moody said, standing over her.

Shacklebolt rose and handed over the journal. "Yes... unfortunately, we don't have time for a honeymoon."

Moody snorted. *Honeymoon*? He replaced the notebook in his desk and locked the drawer. "Does this mean I get to learn something personal about you *Queenie*?"

"Absolutely." She smirked. "I'll have you know that I'm rather fond of truffles."

They left his flat. He followed her down the stairs to the exit in silence. It was windy outside; he couldn't even hear her soft footfalls over the breeze that rolled in from the east just over the Thames. They walked up to a lone car that was parked next to a lamppost. Moody stopped in his tracks when the driver's side door magically opened.

Moody walked a full circuit around the strange contraption. "Is this an automobile?"

"Yes." Shacklebolt snapped her fingers, and the passenger's side door opened for him. "Get in."

Moody sat himself inside with care. He shifted uncomfortably in the small confines of the cabin. "I take it there's a reason why we're operating this conveyance rather than teleporting properly?"

"Theoretically, the Ministry has the capability to track us if we were to Apparate. Without knowing who we're up against, this way is safer." Shacklebolt pulled what looked like a belt out of the seat cushions. "Have you ever ridden in one of these?"

"Yes, from my Muggle Studies courses." With piqued interest he watched as Shacklebolt tapped the steering column with her wand, and the car came to life. She grabbed the metal stick embedded in the dashboard. "As I recall, you have to depress the clutch first."

"This car can change gears automatically," she replied.

"Ah, how clever."

Shacklebolt pushed the pedal and yelped when the car unexpectedly lurched backwards. The edge of the bumper scraped the base of the lamppost. It echoed loudly in the late night hour. She straightened and regained her composure, muttering under her breath, "That's right: 'R' must mean 'reverse'."

"I thought you said this was an automatic," he said, trying in vain to hide his amusement. "Are you sure that this thing is safe?"

Shacklebolt appeared not to notice. "It got *me* here in one piece, didn't it?" After shifting into the appropriate gear, the car lurched forward, and she revved the engine.

"Do I want to know how you came by this vehicle?"

"It's probably best if you dont."

Nine Hours, Thirty Seconds

Chapter 28 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Nine Hours, Thirty Seconds

The thick wooden door opened to allow the Aurors' entrance. Moody followed Shackbolt inside and immediately thought he had stepped into another one of Ozymandias' time warps. The small shop was lined from floor to ceiling with artifacts most of which seemed like they came from the turn of the last century. A small circular table, covered with a velvet tablecloth, was situated prominently in the center of the room. The crystal ball atop the table glistened from the light given off by the scented candles that hung on the walls. An aged tapestry hung behind the display, covering a small door.

Moody felt something tugging on his trousers, and he looked down to regard a little girl who looked up at him through the thick lenses of her eyeglasses. "Well, hello, there." He knelt to one knee and let her take his hand. "What are you doing up at this hour, little one?"

The little girl adjusted her glasses and opened his palm. She peered at it for several seconds, tracing the creases in his skin with her tiny finger. "Your Fate Line... It's broken... and crossed."

Moody smiled. "What does that mean?"

She looked Moody in the eye and readjusted her glasses. "Trouble."

When the door at the back of the room opened, the little girl scurried away to hide behind the paisley sofa. An old witch, wearing tattered, gaudy robes, entered the room. She approached, her back hunched, walking with small calculated steps. She seemed to ignore Moody as she eyed Shackbolt intently. Shackbolt returned the old witch's glare with a raised eyebrow. After a silent exchange, the witch beckoned the two Aurors over to the back door behind the curtain.

They were led into a modest kitchen with a square rickety table that was worn and scuffed with age...much like its owner.

The old woman closed the door and joined them. "Hello, Queenie, it's been a while."

"Cassandra," Shackbolt greeted her. "I take it that my arrival was not unexpected."

"You're always welcome...when you're not trying to bust me, that is." Her eyes finally lingered in Moody's direction. "Who's the eye candy?"

Moody straightened. "The eye candy's name is Alastor Moody."

She put her crooked finger to his lips. "Shhh... Don't ruin the illusion by talking, dearie."

"He's helping me, Cassie," Shackbolt said impatiently.

"Helping you do what?" The old witch sneered at Shackbolt's continued silence. "I sense your desperation, Queenie. You were right to come to me first." Her head snapped in Moody's direction when the young Auror snorted loudly. "I take it that you are not a believer, Eye Candy?"

"Let's just say that the Ministry's policy denying the legitimacy of Divination is one of the few that I concur with wholeheartedly, Madam Trelawney."

A gummy smile slowly appeared on her ancient face. "I can see why you like him, Queenie." Her hands casually explored Moody's chest and arms, gauging the musculature underneath his clothing. "He's a bit chatty but very nice, indeed." Her gaze moved downward toward Moody's waistline. "A strapping young lad who has more than enough girth for a gal to bear down on..."

"Cassie." Shackbolt shot her a warning glare.

Cassandra pouted. "Bah! The boy can take it." Moody flinched when she pinched his bum.

"Spare us the theatrics, please," Shackbolt said.

"Fine, have a seat, then." They all sat at the table in the middle of the kitchen. Cassandra took Queenie's hand. She reached for Moody, but he hesitated. "Come now, I don't bite...seeing as how all my teeth are gone." She leered and held the young wizard's cautiously proffered hand.

They sat in stillness. Cassandra concentrated with her eyes closed; her breathing was slow and loud. She yelped, and her grip on the young Aurors tightened while she spoke in an alien voice:

The Cyclops is bested...the potion he drunk

Evil subdues him; he rots in a trunk.

E'er the pendulum swings...from the light to the dark

Evil seeks the weak; it leaves its mark.

The room was quiet again. Exhausted, Cassandra released them and massaged her temples.

"Is that it?" Moody said. "All these theatrics for a nursery rhyme?"

"What did you expect?" Cassandra got up and went to the cupboard by the stove. "It's not my fault if you don't *follow up on your leads*, Auror."

Moody threw his hands up. "Unbelievable... literally."

Cassandra ignored him. She reached into her pantry and retrieved a small metal container. When she opened the lid to look inside, she cursed. "Sybill! Get in here!"

After a few seconds of quiet, the kitchen door opened slowly. The little girl who had read Moody's palm peeked inside. "Yes, Gran-gran?"

"Have you been into my tea leaves again, child?"

"Yes, Gran-gran."

Cassandra placed her hands on her hips and sighed heavily. "Well, bring it out, then; let's have a look."

Sybill obeyed and shuffled inside, carrying a large bowl of tea. She handed it over to Cassandra, who proceeded to pour its liquid contents into a large pot on the stovetop. "No point in wasting perfectly good tea." The old witch then returned the bowl which was empty, save for the tea leaves that remained stuck to its insides.

Young Sybill eyed the tea leaves in wonder. "Look, Gran-gran, the leaves say it's going to rain blood tomorrow."

Cassandra put on her glasses and knelt beside Sybill to examine the wilted tea leaves. "That they do. Very good, child. Now, off to bed with you before I tell your mum that you've been staying up late again." She kissed the little girl on the forehead and smiled as she watched her trot off. With a groan, she rose to her feet and rinsed the bowl

off in the sink. "Poor girl. I don't have the heart to tell her that she doesn't have the Sight...though she's probably better off without it."

Shacklebolt waited until she was sure they were alone before continuing, "What do the visions mean, Cassie?"

"Don't look at me. I'm just the messenger." Using a large ladle, she scooped the tea from the heated pot into three small cups. "I don't make the rules; it's up to you to make your own future, girl."

"Why am I not surprised?" Moody said. "Can you tell us anything of substance?"

She placed a cup of tea in front of Moody and replied, "Only that sometimes it takes losing an eye to see things more clearly."

Moody regarded the tea in the cup and then looked to Cassandra. "That's exactly the sort of doublespeak nonsense I'm talking about!"

"Alastor, please."

"No, he's right, Queenie. I'm just a bitter old woman." Cassandra placed a second teacup in front of Shacklebolt and seated herself at the front of the table. "I used to be quite the looker once: *all* of the gents wanted a whiff of me." She took a sip of her tea and started to cough. "Unfortunately, the gift of Second Sight can be off-putting to say the least." After another coughing fit, she hacked and spat into her cup. "Can you imagine what it's like, random images of complete strangers forced into your head?"

Moody averted his eyes. Recalling his experience with Titaiaja, he could certainly relate to the sensation. "My apologies, madam."

Cassandra smiled at him and took a deck of odd-looking playing cards out of her pocket. She started to shuffle them, but noticed that Moody had not touched his drink. "Is there something wrong with your tea, Eye Candy?"

"You put milk in this tea. I'm lactose intolerant."

"Are you, now?" She gave him a wicked grin. "I guess I should've foreseen that."

"Well, if this fortune telling gig doesn't work out, you could try your hand at interior decorating."

Cassandra laughed, and she laid out the first card from the deck...a picture of two lovers embracing. "Careful, Eye Candy, any more of that sweet talk, and you just might get lucky with this dry, old bird... who's a little less dry at the moment."

Moody snorted. "Is that what your cards tell you?"

"Heck if I know. Cartomancy... crystal balls... tea leaves... It's all rubbish, but it's good for business."

"Thank you, Cassie. We won't keep you any longer." Shacklebolt rose from her seat.

Moody followed her out and gave the elder witch a parting nod. "It's been...*interesting*, Madam Trelawney."

Cassandra held the next card in the deck over her right eye, and she squinted at the young wizard with her left eye. "See you around, Eye Candy."

The two Aurors saw themselves out. It was a quiet walk back to the car and quieter still as they sat themselves inside the vehicle.

Shacklebolt waved her wand, and the engine started. "You disapprove of my bringing us here?"

Moody cleared his throat and kept his eyes forward. "I would never presume. I just find it odd."

"Surely, you've been in the field long enough to know that sometimes conventional methods don't always apply."

"There's unconventional; then there's *fringe*."

She grinned. "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Alastor, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Moody snorted in recognition of Shacklebolt's *Hamlet* reference. "Where to next?"

"Someplace more... *conventional*." She put the car in gear and they drove off.

Eight Hours, Thirty Seconds

Chapter 29 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 29

Eight Hours, Thirty Seconds

The halls of St Mungo's were dark and desolate at this hour. Moody opened the stainless steel door for Shacklebolt and followed her inside. It was cold. A bank of rectangular lockers, three rows high, lined the wall leading to the main examination area. Three oblong metal tables were placed in the center of the room. A white sheet, draped over each table, served to cover its gruesome contents.

"You're late."

The two Aurors looked about in search of the source of the quiet, somber voice. A small elfish creature came out from behind one of the tables. He wore a white robe covered by a blue plastic apron and matching gloves. He approached, half-absorbed with writing on the clipboard he was carrying.

"Forgive us, *Healer* Bunbley," Shackbolt said. "But you know us humans."

Bunbley grunted and looked up from his clipboard to regard Moody. "What's *she* doing here? You know I don't like too many humans crowding me."

"Come now, Bunbley." Moody said. "You're surrounded by humans on a daily basis."

"*Dead* humans... the best kind, in my opinion."

Shackbolt knelt in front of the small creature and shook his hand. "You don't really feel that way about *me*, do you, Bunnie?"

"Well, you're different, Queenie," Bunbley replied, kissing her hand. "Now, what's this to-do about a mystery you had for me?"

She handed the elf her bracelet. "It appears as if this Portkey has been compromised."

Bunbley took the bracelet and examined it briefly. "Using secured jump points?"

"Naturally."

"Then it shouldn't be possible, but I'll look into it just the same."

"Thank you." Shackbolt rose to her feet and stood next to Moody as Bunbley resumed his examination of the subjects under the sheets.

"As you requested, Queenie, we popped back to the crime scene and scoured the area for every magical artifact we could find. There wasn't much left after the Fiendfyre, I'm afraid, but I can see why you wanted to keep this under wraps: Aurors turning up dead can't be good for the Ministry's propaganda machine."

"As always, your discretion is appreciated, Healer," Shackbolt said.

"Let's get started, then." Bunbley uncovered the first sheet without ceremony. "Auror Murphy of Wolf Squadron. Cause of death: magical cessation of life functions consistent with defaulting on an Unbreakable Vow."

Moody regarded the dead Auror. "The last thing he said to me was that he never liked me."

"Something we obviously had in common." Bunbley removed the second sheet. "Auror Whitney of Wolf Squadron. Cause of death: destruction of the Reticular Activating System brought about by aggressive spinal trauma at C2."

"For Merlin's sake," Moody said under his breath. "Can't you just say he got his bloody neck snapped? Save a tree, will you?"

"I'll try to use smaller words, junior," Bunbley replied. He threw off the final sheet, uncovering what looked like a large lump of coal. "This body was burned beyond recognition, but going by the wand we were able to scrape from the remains, we were able to confirm the decedent as Auror Radler of Wolf Squadron."

Moody's brow furrowed. "Are these all the bodies that were recovered?"

"Yes. Nothing of any import was left behind."

"Aurors Brignast and Terrence and Tabitha Sweets are missing?" Shackbolt said, finishing Moody's thought.

"Nobody popped in before my team, and I found no evidence of natural predation. So, if they're not on my table, then your Aurors are probably still alive somewhere." Bunbley looked up from his clipboard to regard the worried expression shared between the two Aurors. "That's a good thing, right?"

Shackbolt smiled weakly. "Of course it is. Please continue."

Bunbley led them to the counter along the adjacent wall atop of which were various tagged exhibits. "As I said, we also recovered a number of magical items at the scene." He picked up the first exhibit. "Here we have one redwood wand. The inferior craftsmanship leads me to believe that it is of the black market variety."

Moody nodded in agreement when he recognized the grainy textured wand. "This is the wand that was allegedly used to kill Ozymandias. It is virtually identical to the wands Ledley and I recovered from the Fletcher sting. The bloody thing almost got me killed in a duel."

Bunbley guffawed obnoxiously. "What were you thinking, duelling with a black market wand?"

"I didn't have much of a choice at the time," Moody replied. "Did you do a backtrace on the spells cast by this wand?"

Bunbley rolled his eyes. "A backtrace, eh? I wish I'd thought of that...." He sneered and replaced the wand. "Of course not, you silly boy."

"Why not?"

"Seeing as how that this specimen is not wandlore grade, a *Priori Incantatem* would be unrevealing, Alastor," Shackbolt answered.

Moody averted his eyes. "Right."

Bunbley picked out the next exhibit on the countertop. "We also found this walnut wand. We haven't been able to trace it."

"It's Edgar Bones' wand," Moody said.

"Edgar Bones the Alderman? What was he doing on the scene?"

"That's another detail that requires your discretion, Healer Bunbley," Shackbolt said. "Please continue."

"The next series of items was taken from purses found on two of the bodies. There are samples of over two hundred species of magical flora." He handed Shackbolt a manifest.

"Aurors collecting samples?" She said while mulling over the list. "For what purpose?"

"If I were to guess, I would say they were conducting some sort of botanical survey."

Moody peeked at the list from over Shackbolt's shoulder. "Is there any value to these items?"

Bunbley shrugged. "Maybe to a herbologist."

"Say, Bunbley, can I borrow this manifest of yours?" Moody said.

"Of course not, silly boy, it's evidence!"

"May I borrow it?" Queenie asked.

Bunbley grinned. "Sure."

She handed the notebook to Moody, ignoring his exasperated expression. "Thanks, Bunnie, I owe you one."

"You owe me thirty-seven. But I'm not counting, love."

The Aurors left the morgue and exited the hospital via the back entrance so as not to risk being seen. They walked in silence back to the car. Their visit with the Magical Medical Examiner had raised more questions than it had answered.

"*Bunnie*," Moody thought aloud. "That certainly explains how you get such a fast turnaround on your forensics."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean, Alastor."

"Why did you address Bunbley as a Healer?"

"Because he acquired his certification through the Ministry, graduating at the top of his class, and he did his residency at St Mungos."

"What's he doing in the basement performing autopsies on cadavers, then?"

"I imagine that is the only job someone like him can get within the Ministry that makes use of his skills."

"It makes sense, I suppose: a corpse can't exactly lodge a complaint against a house-elf, emancipated or not."

"He's not a house-elf. He's a forest-elf."

Moody snorted. "I didn't know there was a difference."

"What matters is *he* thinks there is, and I acknowledge that. You would probably find him more amenable if you did the same."

"I'll keep that in mind, sir"...he clenched his jaw at Shacklebolt's reprimanding glare in forgetting to address her informally..."er, Queenie."

"Having three rogue Aurors at large complicates things."

"True, but you don't exactly sound surprised."

"You perceive correctly, Alastor. Wolf squadron was one of our best field teams; each member was a fierce combatant in his own right."

Moody was not impressed. "We took them out easily enough."

"*We* were lucky."

"I thought the maestro said there's no such thing as luck..."

"We were lucky." She waved her wand, and the car doors opened. "So, what are your thoughts so far?"

"Pardon?"

"What are your thoughts on the case?" When they got in, she closed the doors. "You'd remember that we're working on a case?"

"Yes, Queenie, I just didn't think you'd be interested in my opinion."

"That's a silly thing to say, Alastor. We are partners, after all."

Moody fidgeted uncomfortably. "Well, something Bunbley...er, Healer Bunbley...said about the samples he recovered that reminds me of something Dumbledore mentioned about the forests of the northern country: he said they were a 'treasure trove for any herbologist'."

Shacklebolt pursed her lips. "Unfortunately, it would be impractical to add every known herbologist and academic to our suspect list."

"Still, it may prove helpful to consult with one."

"Where are we going to find a herbologist whom we can trust at this hour?"

"I have an idea." He smiled. "Can I drive?"

"No."

Six Hours, Thirty Seconds

Chapter 30 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

It was forebodingly quiet. The soft sounds of footfalls were the only evidence of life in the narrow, dark entryway closed off from the world. Moody and Shacklebolt approached the unmanned desk atop of which sat a small bell, which stood out prominently on the otherwise bare desktop. Moody rang the bell, and after a few seconds, a house-elf Apparated.

The small grey-skinned creature regarded the Aurors briefly. "Two shekels." Moody threw the money on the table, and the elf collected the coins. "Welcome to *The Glass Slipper*." The elf snapped his fingers, and the wall behind him disappeared. The two humans stepped inside the crowded nightclub. Deafening music and bright flashing lights assaulted their senses.

"It's loud," Shacklebolt said.

"What did you say?"

"I said, I'm already *not* liking this plan of yours, Alastor."

"Have a little faith, sir," Moody replied. "By all accounts, we're just a couple of patrons."

"Do you come here often?"

Moody smirked. "Now, that's not very original, is it?" He perceived Shacklebolt's annoyance telegraphed through her silence. "Let's just say it's a place I happen to pass on my way to volunteering at the local animal shelter."

"How noble of you, Alastor."

He shrugged, ignoring her sarcasm. "It's a layer."

They ventured deeper into the crowd and were surprised when a rather boisterous woman, wearing a feathered boa, grabbed Moody brusquely by the arm. "Alastor! Where have you been? I haven't seen you in a dog's age!"

"Good evening, citizen"...Moody shrunk under Shacklebolt's sideways glance..."whom I have never met before tonight."

The feathered woman coaxed Moody along. "Do you want your usual table by the cages, dearie?"

Shacklebolt took Moody by the other arm and jerked him free. "I suggest you get your own date, miss. This one has work to do."

The lady turned her attention toward Shacklebolt. She whipped her boa back over her shoulder, inadvertently hitting Moody in the face. "You must be the new girl?"

Shacklebolt returned the lady's glower. "And what if I was?"

"I wouldn't let Paul catch you wearing that dreadful outfit if I were you."

Moody thought it prudent to interrupt before things came to a head. "Thank you, madam, but we're just here for the ambiance. We'll manage fine on our own."

"Suit yourself, Allie." Her hand graced Moody's cheek. "You know where to find me, yeah?" She left, but not before giving Shacklebolt a parting once-over. With a flourish, she turned to leave; her boa whipped behind her.

Moody spat out a feather. "Poor girl. She obviously has me confused for some other Alastor."

"How many 'Alastors' can a person know, I wonder?"

"Now that you mention it, Queenie, there is an Alastor who works on the ninth floor back at the Ministry. I can't tell you how many times our post has gotten crossed."

"Ah, you must mean Alastor *Gumboil*."

"That's him."

"Then I can see how the mistake could've been made, given that he is a whole foot shorter than you and talks with a lisp..."

"Does he, now? I've never noticed."

Shacklebolt had grown bored with Moody's continued pretence. "This herbologist of yours frequents this establishment, I take it?"

"Yes, but not as a patron." Moody craned his neck over the crowd, scanning the room. "And she's not in her cage which means she's working the VIP section in the back."

"VIP section?"

"It's... where customers pay a premium for 'premium' services."

Shacklebolt scoffed when Moody directed her toward the beaded veil prominently displayed to the right of the stage that marked the entrance to the VIP section. It was guarded by two fierce-looking wizards who kept a tight watch on entering patrons. "Am I to understand that our contact is a prostitute?"

"I wouldn't call her that," Moody said, rubbing his cheek thoughtfully. "*Performer* is more accurate. You should see the work that she puts into her act."

"And you gleaned all of this information from a simple walk-by on your way to the animal shelter?"

"I may have popped my head in on rare occasion." Moody smiled weakly.

She rolled her eyes in response. "This is a waste of time that we don't have. We should go."

"With all due respect, sir, surely you have been in the field long enough to know that conventional methods don't always apply."

Shacklebolt raised an eyebrow at Moody's persistence in using her own words against her. "All right, Alastor, but I hope your asset produces."

"All we have to do is sneak past the curtain to find out," Moody replied. "They employ off duty Hit Wizards; I recommend we use stealth."

"I agree." Shacklebolt removed her headdress. Her braided hair magically unravelled. "What are we up against?"

"The entire building is laced with Anti-Confundus Charms; however, I think if we tune our cloaks appropriately, we can defeat their countermeasures."

Shacklebolt shook her head. "We should go for a simpler solution."

He failed to respond upon regarding Shacklebolt, who began to caress herself surreptitiously in the anonymity of the crowd. As she uttered the incantation, her clothes Transfigured right before his eyes. The hemline of her dress rose past her upper thigh. The sleeves rolled up her arms and disappeared altogether, exposing her

shoulders. At the spell's end, she smoothed the fabric along her body, which had become a two-piece leopard print mini joined by a sheer black mesh that covered her midriff.

"Invisibility is an attitude." Shacklebolt smiled under Moody's silent gaze. "Well, how do I look?"

"Amazing..."

She cupped her ear. "What was that? I couldn't hear."

"Er...I said... I don't understand how this is going to get us in?"

She placed a hand on her hip and started to twirl her newly unfettered locks with her finger. "Start by asking me to dance." She bit her lip.

"Would you like to dance?" Moody enunciated clearly over the din.

"I thought you'd never ask." She took his hand and led him to the edge of the dance floor where she started to move with the music. He perceived her strategy and started to sway along with her, though at a respectful distance. She stopped, her hands on her hips. "What do you think you're doing, Alastor?"

"Er... you asked me to ask you to dance, didn't you, sir?"

"Not like you would with your mum at the Yule ball; if I don't believe you, their security won't either." She pushed him away. "And stop calling me *sir*!"

Shacklebolt left him and meandered deeper into the crowd...fishing. Her nails gently raked along the backs of two blokes on either side of her. A look over her shoulder was enough to steal them from their dance partners. She led them to the centre of the floor, one at her back and one at her front, the three of them fused together and moving as one to the music's primal beat.

Moody's jaw clenched. The way those two pairs of hands explored her made his blood boil...or maybe it was the way Shacklebolt egged them on. Her eyes seemed to tease him. He plowed his way through the dance floor, grabbed the blokes by the scruff of their collars and pulled them off of her. This act did not gain their favor, as one would expect, and they engaged the Auror, reaching into their pockets. Moody already had the hilt of his wand at the edge of his sleeve.

There was sparkle of light. The two men stopped their advance upon Moody and sauntered off, content to dance with each other instead. Shacklebolt concealed her wand before anyone took notice. Moody approached her, amused by the arrogance behind her mischievous smile.

She turned her back to him and continued to dance on her own.

He came upon her from behind and brushed her hair aside to expose the nape of her delicate neck. His fingers graced her shoulders and continued down to her arms. He leaned in and touched the curve of her neck with his lips.

She reached behind his head and pulled him closer. "Can you make me believe?"

His hands cradled her gyrating midriff, and he pressed against her tightly. Her shoulders moved loosely about and worked her body against his at every angle. Where she moved, he was obliged to follow. His hands dared to drift around her hips to indulge themselves in palmfuls of her round, supple flesh. *Who is she dancing for?*

They put on their private show up until the song's final riff, ending with an embrace. The couple stilled at the song's end, staring into each other's eyes.

Shacklebolt levitated off her tiptoes to a comfortable height. Their lips were so close they could feel each other's heat. "Yes..." She coaxed herself from Moody's arms and led him from the dance floor and past the guards.

They were believed.

The music was dulled behind the veil. Shacklebolt released Moody's arm, and the Aurors proceeded deeper into the maze of rooms...each one being sectioned off by its own privacy curtain.

Shacklebolt deigned to peek inside one of the rooms. She grimaced and closed the curtain. "Which one is it?"

Moody's lip curled. "I'm not sure."

"What do you mean you're not sure?"

"Believe it or not, I've never been back here."

"I believe you, Alastor, but we can't wander about all night." She straightened and folded her arms, employing a rather stern look.

Shacklebolt's sudden change in demeanour made Moody nervous, but he persisted. "We won't have to; her act is very unique." He took out his wand slyly and cast the spell, "*Arboris Revelio*." His wand led them to a remote room in the northwest corner. Moody sniffed the air and detected the scent of honeysuckle. "This is it."

The smell of honeysuckle was overpowering as they stepped inside. An older wizard sat just in front of a small stage; his attention remained focused on the entertainment, Pomona Sprout, who strutted around a large squash, wearing only a pair of emerald-green stilettos. Two vines followed her about, their large leaves served to conceal her woman parts. She kissed one of the tendrils, and it shot vertically erect into the ceiling. She grasped it firmly; her legs did the splits as she lowered herself over the gourd. The vine pulsed under her weight as she slid lower and lower...until the squash was gone. The old wizard rose from his chair, and he cheered, throwing his money on the small stage. Pomona finally took notice of the new entrants, yet she continued on with her seductive dance, her belly distended.

Moody approached the stage, although Pomona continued to ignore his presence. "I didn't realize that butternut squash was in season, Holly." He was careful to refer to Pomona by her stage name.

"I grow them myself." Using the vines for support, Pomona folded herself in half and eyed Moody from betwixt her legs. "Now, get out of here! Can't you see I'm with a client?"

"Sorry, Holly, but I require your expertise; it's a matter of life and death."

"Something's always a matter of 'life and death' with you. You'll have to wait until the end of my shift."

"DOWN IN FRONT, YA YOUNG PUNK!"

Moody obligingly stepped aside but still engaged Pomona. "It can't wait, love. I'm afraid I'm going to have to call in some markers."

She laughed as the vines swung her upside down. "What markers? There are no markers between us, you git!"

"No? What about my continued silence to Edgar Bones in regards to your...*vocation*, 'Cousin'?"

Pomona stared at Moody blankly. "I really do hate you."

Moody grinned. "I know."

The vines lowered Pomona at her command. "Come on, then."

However, her client was not happy. "Where are you going, Holly?"

"I'll be back in a blink, love," Pomona assured him while she collected the money on the stage.

"For how long?"

"Patience, Elphias." Pomona squatted over the old wizard. She bore down, and the squash fell into his lap. "If you're a good boy, mummy will make you very happy when she gets back."

"I-I can be a good boy, mummy."

Satisfied, Pomona led the two Aurors through the door situated behind the small stage. Once inside, she summoned a robe and promptly dressed herself. She paid the Aurors no mind as she kicked off her heels and sat at her vanity. She turned on the light and started to preen her flyaway hair. "Spit it out, then. I don't have all night."

Moody looked to Shackbolt, who nodded in return. He handed Bunbley's manifest to Pomona. "What do you make of the items on this list?"

Pomona mulled over the list briefly and snorted. "Are you doing a survey, Alastor?"

"What if I was?"

"Then you should fire your contractor. Bloody amateurs... the items aren't even categorized correctly." She returned the manifest. "You know, I could do it for you properly...for a fee, of course."

"Hold on to that thought, love," Moody replied. "Would you say that the preponderance of these samples have any value?"

"That all depends. Where are the goods processed? Is there a distribution strategy? Do you have any buyers lined up? Have you taken the cost of licensing into account?"

"I have no idea." He shrugged. "Let's just keep it simple and assume everything will be run out of Wizarding Britain."

"Good luck there. The Herbology market is a tough nut to crack. On top of that, the tariffs would eat up any profits made from importing these specimens."

"But I just told you we would grow them domestically. Why would I import them?"

Pomona laughed. "You're serious?"

"Well, it's all theoretical, right?"

"Damn right it's 'theoretical': every single item on your list has been extinct in Wizarding Britain for at least a century."

Moody blinked. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," Pomona spat. "Most of the sustaining farmland in Wizarding Britain...the natural magic in the earth...has been plundered and defiled for generations. As a result, we must import a great deal of our goods."

"How could we let something like that happen, I wonder?"

For the first time, Shackbolt deigned to speak. "Humans and nature have always been at odds."

"She's right," Pomona said. "Nature will always take the piss so long as people remain in the equation."

No people. Moody snorted in realization. "For the sake of argument, Pomona, what if these flora were found to be growing native?"

She shrugged. "It would be huge. Wizarding Britain would be virtually self-sufficient."

Moody shared a knowing look with Shackbolt and continued, "You're talking about a fundamental shift in the economy, then?"

"Of course. A lot of money could be made." Pomona smiled in reverie as she put the finishing touches on her makeup. "If I could get in on the ground floor of something like that, I certainly wouldn't have to bother with getting up early for my interview with Dumbledore in the morning..."

Shackbolt looked back in Pomona's direction. "Dumbledore of Hogwarts?"

"The same." Pomona sniffed haughtily. "He wants to hire me for a teaching position."

"You're going to be teaching?" Shackbolt said, warily. "Children?"

"You got a problem with that, dearie?"

"I might..."

Moody wisely interrupted, putting himself between these women of incompatible temperaments. "What was that bit about acknowledging others, Queenie?" He was relieved when Queenie acquiesced.

That didn't stop Pomona from getting her last word in, however. "I'll have you know that some of us didn't have the good fortune of being born into a wealthy family, but that doesn't make me any less of a lady..."

Suddenly, there was loud rapping at the door. The voice on the other side sounded agitated. "Holly! Why do I have a paying customer sitting out here sniffing your squash!"

"Two seconds, Paul!" Pomona yelled back. She threw her hairbrush at the door, and the rapping stopped. "... Fookin' arsehole."

"We don't want to get you into trouble," Moody said, satisfied that he gotten all the information that he needed anyway. "We should be off."

"It's probably for the best." Pomona rose from her seat and regained her composure. "Sorry I couldn't be of more help."

"On the contrary, you've been extremely helpful, love."

Before he could leave, Pomona took Moody by the hand. "Listen, Alastor, you're not going to say anything to Eddie about my... profession and all, are you?"

"My lips are sealed, *Cousin*." He smiled and kissed her forehead.

The pounding on the door resumed. "HOLLY!" At the end of his patience, Paul let himself in. His face turned pink when he saw her hugging Moody. "You'd better not be turning tricks on my time!"

"Nothing of the sort, I assure you, Paul," Moody replied. "Holly here is my... cousin. I was just relaying news from back home."

He narrowed his eyes at Moody then turned his attention toward Shackbolt, who had been standing quietly in the corner. "You're not one of my girls."

Shackbolt returned Paul's glare. "You are correct."

"Get out, the both of ya." He pointed to Pomona. "And *you*, get back out there and shake your tits!"

Pomona stormed out, cursing under her breath. "For Merlin's sake, you'd think a girl could have a minute to pee and soak her corns!"

Moody and Shackbolt were escorted out of the building. The walk back to the car was unremarkable as they pondered on the direction that the mystery was taking them.

When he noticed Shackbolt shuddering in the chill of the night, he took off his travelling cloak and draped it around her.

She straightened. "It's not necessary..."

"Take it." He persisted. "It's cold out."

"Thank you."

They walked a few more paces. Events of the case were not the only thing weighing on Moody's mind. "About what happened back there... if I was in any way untoward in my actions..."

"Don't do that."

"Sorry?"

"That annoying English predilection for apologizing when you have nothing to apologize for."

"Sorr...er...right." He put his hands in his pockets to keep them from fidgeting. "I just can't help but feel that you're angry with me."

She sighed. "It's just been a long night, Alastor."

"Pomona is not really my cousin, in case you were wondering."

Shackbolt ignored the comment. It did, however, seem to encourage sharing her thoughts on the mission. "Your... performer friend was quite helpful, well worth the 'effort' it took to get the information."

Effort. Moody snorted at the word.

"In the absence of human interaction, the ecosystem up north has somehow healed itself over the centuries; it would certainly make for very lucrative real estate if the Ministry were to annex it."

"Were it not for those pesky, territorial giants, that is."

Shackbolt nodded quietly. "Their removal is a compelling motive. However, there are still quite a few missing pieces to gather."

"Which invites the question, where do we find the next missing piece?"

"It's your lead, Alastor. You tell me."

Moody pursed his lips in thought. "I suppose we should turn our attention toward the murder weapon?"

"I would agree." She smiled reassuringly.

"In that case, Queenie, we'll have to spring Fletcher out of lockup."

"Who's Fletcher?"

"He's your generic, everyday scumbag who fancies himself a businessman. The wand used to kill Ozymandias looks suspiciously like one of his black market wands."

"I see. I have a friend in the clerk's office who can push the paperwork under the table." They arrived at the car. She stopped when Moody opened the door for her. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Pardon?"

"Is there any particular reason why you're holding the door for me now?"

"It's what a gentleman usually does for a lady, is it not?"

"I'm capable of opening my own door, thank you." She took off his cloak and handed it back.

"Fine, then."

Shackbolt flinched when Moody slammed the door, and he paid her no further mind as they entered the car on their respective sides.

Four Hours, Thirty Seconds

Chapter 31

Four Hours, Thirty Seconds

Big Ben tolled in the distance. Fletcher took out his solid gold pocket watch and adjusted the time. He put it back in his pocket and grinned, relieved to be finally free from the hospitality of the M.L.E's detention facilities. He stepped out onto the pavement and reached for his cigarettes. He started to light one, in anticipation of that first smooth drag, when he perceived that he was not the only denizen on the otherwise desolate street corner. A vision of a woman leaned against the street lamp, wearing her leopard print mini like it was a second skin.

The thin bow-legged wizard approached her with pride in his fine linen robes despite the fact that they were wrinkled from being slept in. "Wha's a right bit o' totty like you doing all alone on this dreadful street at this dreadful hour?"

She accepted when Fletcher offered her a smoke. "Waitin' for someone like you, papa."

He lit the fag for her. "You're not from around 'ere are you?"

"I jus' got off the boat, mistah, what's it to ya?"

"A girl like you needs representation." He walked a circuit around her fine ebony body.

"And what if I like bein' free?"

"Then you're taking a risk; you never know what skulduggery you're bound to run into out 'ere."

"Nu-uh." She removed Fletcher's hand from her bum. "I'm na that kind of 'free', mistah."

He merely smirked. "What's your fee?"

She took a long sultry drag and blew it in his face. "Three...for thirty minutes you won' soon be forgetin'."

"You could be making twice that under my... protection. Not to mention work with a roof over yer 'ead."

"What does a girl have ta do ta come by such protectin'?"

"An interview would be in order." He sneered at her raised eyebrow. "Think of it as an investment."

With that she led Fletcher to a small car that was in pristine condition, save for a large scratch on one of its sides.

Fletcher regarded the vehicle with amusement. "I see you got a nice and convenient mobile base of operations 'ere, but we'll 'ave to get you set up with your own place just the same." She opened the door for him, and he got into the back seat but frowned, however, when she entered in the front. "What are you doing all the way over there, girl?"

Shacklebolt dropped the act. "Scum like you make me sick, taking advantage of people down on their luck..."

"Didn't you 'ave an accent a second ago..."

"Especially when we both know the going rate is ten!"

"Shakin' me down, eh?" Fletcher said with a knowing wink. "I'm willing to negotiate, dearie."

Just then Moody dispelled the Confundus Charm to reveal himself in the seat next to Shacklebolt. "Really, Fletcher, not five minutes out of lockup, and here you are soliciting an officer of the Ministry."

"Moody!" Fletcher tried to get out but found the doors were now magically bound, secured by Shacklebolt's Imprisonment Jinx. "Don't you 'ave anything better to do 'n bust my bollocks? This is entrapment, you know!"

"We're not here to bust you, Fletcher," Moody replied. "Who do you think arranged for your release?"

"You did? Why?"

"You know how lazy us wand-bobbys are, Fletcher; we thought it better to bring you out to us."

"I'm not sure I like sound of this," Fletcher said warily. "What do you want?"

"The only thing you have of worth: information."

"What's in it for me?"

Shacklebolt pointed her wand at Fletcher. "How about *I* not turn you into a rat?"

Fletcher was not intimidated. "That'll do for starters, but if you're making me out to be your snitch on the street, then I demand some bloody compensation. After all, I got kids to feed."

Shacklebolt narrowed her eyes but lowered her wand. "I suppose it wouldn't be enough that you would be helping us for the common good?"

"Show me your tits, and I'll think about it." He laughed.

"I think I *will* turn him into a rat."

"Patience, sir." Moody cast the Muffliato Spell to afford him and his partner some privacy. "Fletcher and I have this dynamic where we insult each other, he lies to me, I torture him, and somewhere between that parlay we arrive at some flavour of the truth." He paused when Shacklebolt retrieved a small black container from the car's glove box. "Is that what I think it is?"

She nodded. "No offence, but we're going to have to fast track this." She tossed the box into the seat next to Fletcher.

"Eh, now, what is this?" He gasped when the box opened. "No...."

The Boggart was free. It swirled about briefly as a black mist before taking on mass. Fletcher's face turned pale as his worst fear was realized.

The Boggart spake. "Mummy was right! I've done everything for you: cook, clean, bear your demon-spawn, and I've gotten nothing in return!"

Moody snorted. "Fletcher, you mean all that nonsense about you having kids is the truth?"

Fletcher retreated, trying in vain to open the door. "Yeah, it's true! Call it off!"

"Business first." Moody presented the black market wand. "What can you tell me about this wand?"

"It's one of mine, blast it!" Fletcher shielded his face as the Boggart started hitting him with its purse. "It's from my redwood line, in fact; I ran a special on those!"

"LIMP-DICKED BASTARD!"

Moody waved his wand, and the Boggart stilled. "I'm going to need a manifest of your clientèle."

"You're dreaming." Fletcher struggled to regain his composure. "I market my wands as untraceable."

Moody sighed and released the Boggart.

"Mundungus isn't even yours, husband!"

"You filthy whore!" Fletcher shrieked. "I knew there was no way that little runt could come from my loins!"

"What can I say? I needed a man...*areal* man...like your brother!"

Moody halted the Boggart again. "Sheesh, Fletcher, is this what you go home to every night?"

Fletcher had become visibly shaken. "I'm telling you, Moody, most of my customers are middlemen...they buy in bulk! There's no way I can account for every wand!"

"You said 'most'," Shacklebolt commented. "We're not interested in the buyer who wants one hundred wands, just the buyer who wants one."

"No, I have an obligation to my customers!" Fletcher's face had gone from pink to red. "I don't care what you do to me!"

Shacklebolt waved her wand toward the Boggart. "Well, I guess we'll leave you two lovebirds in peace, then."

The Boggart resumed its torment by taking a different tack. "Come, me husband, make love to me; give us another child..." It pinned Fletcher down and started to unbutton his trousers.

"You can't do this, I have rights!" Fletcher pleaded, struggling against the Boggart's superior strength. "C'mon, Moody, tit for tat, eh? After all, I gave you the tip on those kidnappings."

Moody shook his head. "Not good enough."

"I gave you Stoker, too, didn't I? The bloke that sold me the proper wands!"

This gave Moody pause as he reflected on the name. "Stoker..."

"What is it?" Shacklebolt questioned.

"A lead I didn't 'follow up on'," he replied, pondering upon the comment made to him earlier by Madam Trelawney. "Fletcher, did Stoker happen to buy one of your crap wands?"

"As a matter of fact, he did; he said he needed one for a big job," Fletcher said desperately. "Could'a been that very one you showed me, now that I think of it!"

Her interest piqued, Shacklebolt recast the Silencing Spell. "Am I to understand that this Stoker person is somehow involved in the kidnappings to which Auror Murphy from Wolf Squadron was assigned?"

Moody nodded. "Yeah, and from what I heard, Murphy was very cross when he found out that Reuben and I rescued the Weasley brothers.... This can't be a coincidence."

"I agree," Shacklebolt said. She waved her wand to stay the Boggart once more. "Fletcher, where can we find Stoker?"

"Oh, we're back to the niceties, eh, now that I 'ave something you want? Well, what about *my* wants?"

"What *do* you want?"

"I still wouldn't mind seeing what's under your top, love." Fletcher sneered without shame. "Just a quick peek to get the image of wifey's saggy milk bags outta me 'ead."

Shacklebolt's response was detached. "I feel so sorry for your wife."

"I'm willing to bet they look like the tops of little chocolate cupcakes, yeah?"

"Maybe you should direct all of that affection to someone more deserving." She allowed the Boggart to continue and exited the car.

The Boggart assailed Fletcher with renewed aggression. It hiked up its dress and straddled him. "Don't deprive me, husband."

Fletcher had had enough. "When Stoker wants to lay low, he hangs out at his Muggle girlfriend's flat on the corner of Linden and Purves, just a stone's throw from the Kensal Rise railway station!"

"You know how needy I get when I'm on the blob...."

"THAT'S ALL I KNOW! I SWEAR! FOR MERLIN'S SAKE!"

Sniggering, Moody aimed his wand. "*Riddikulus!*" And the Boggart turned into a puppy. When Shacklebolt opened the door from the outside, Fletcher bolted and ran down the street, screaming. Moody stepped out of the car and regarded Queenie, who was looking quite pleased with herself. "You're terrible, you know that?"

Embarrassed, she laughed...that bubbly, endearing laughter of hers...and averted her eyes. Still holding the cigarette between her fingers, she put it to her lips and inhaled.

"That's not a vice I thought you would indulge in, Queenie."

She expelled the smoke from her lungs. "It's been years since I last smoked, not since I had...", she trailed off and stamped out the cigarette when she noticed her reflection in the glass. "Shit! Why didn't you tell me I'm still dressed like a bloody prostitute?"

"Probably because I wasn't the least bit offended by it."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Turn around, please."

Moody obeyed. He could hear the sounds of her clothes re-transfiguring. "Were you speaking in your native accent earlier?"

"Why?"

"No reason." He shrugged. "I liked it."

"Thank you... You can turn around now."

He joined Shacklebolt by the side of the car. Her clothing was back to normal, but her hair remained undone, formed around her shoulders in tight little curls.

"I'm going to need a bath and a change of skin when this is all over." She hugged her chest tighter and shuddered.

"Being eye-humped by a hundred-year-old biddy is no walk in the park either," Moody scolded. "And on top of that, being ordered to grind up against my superior officer... I'm inclined to lodge a formal complaint."

Shacklebolt snorted. "I'm afraid it's an occupational hazard for people in our line of work. Why do you think the Ministry made you sign all those waivers before you joined up?"

"C'mon, Queenie, you don't really expect someone to sit down and read all three hundred pages of that legalese nonsense, do you?"

"That's why they give you a week to turn it in, Alastor."

Big Ben's quarter bells tolled, reminding the Aurors that time remained an enemy. Moody retired to the vehicle's passenger side; it wasn't until he opened his door that a shrill cough from Shacklebolt garnered his attention.

Moody regarded her folded arms and the way she tapped her foot impatiently, yet a sly smirk betrayed her. He came about and opened the door for her, and she sat herself aloofly, ignoring the lopsided grin on his face. "Seriously, I didn't have to sign those waivers right then on the spot?"

"Get in already," Shacklebolt said, with a serene expression. She waited until he was inside and buckled up before starting the car.

"Er...is that thing house trained, sir?"

Two Hours, Thirty Seconds

Chapter 32 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 32

Two Hours, Thirty Seconds.

The door to the modest flat flew open. The Patronus of a hyena crossed the entrance. She sniffed the air and started to explore the quiet room; her aura illumined the darkness. A voice made her ear twitch.

"If thermodynamic work is to be done at a finite rate, free energy must be expended."

She ventured deeper into the flat until she came upon the source: two humans—one male, one female— seated at a small kitchen table. The female was dead.

The male spoke again. "The entropy of the universe tends to a maximum."

The Patronus hopped onto the table and sniffed the male human thoroughly. Satisfied, she summoned her mistress with a 'yip'.

BAM!

Shacklebolt and Moody Apparated back to back, and the glowing tips of their wands panned about. When the area was deemed secure, they regarded the couple seated at the table, whose gazes remained fixated upon a gem mounted on a rather large ring—a ring too large to be worn by any human.

With empty eyes the male looked up from the jewel's dull glow. "The phenomena of Apparition in species *Homo Sapiens Magi* is achieved by 'Quantum Tunnelling', whereby, within a theoretical probability, a particle may bypass a barrier without travelling through it."

Moody waved his hand in front of the man's face. "Stoker, are you in there?"

He garnered no reaction as Stoker continued to mumble. "A grand unified field theory – incorporating the harmonization between quanta, electro-magnetic force, strong and weak nuclear forces – can be encompassed by the concept of Superunification, which states—"

"He's speaking gibberish," Moody said.

"This is his girlfriend, I presume." Shacklebolt put two fingers against the corpse's wrist; there was no pulse. She moved to examine the glowing artefact on the table. "That's Ozymandias' ring!"

"Careful, Queenie." Moody extended his arm, blocking her. "This is probably what put Stoker and his woman in such a state."

"Why do you assume that?"

"Back at the giant's camp, Gurg Ozymandias used this ring to transmit information directly into my brain," Moody answered. "These giants clearly possess knowledge that we lack; I'm rather surprised no one noticed that the ring was missing from the body."

"I imagine it was easy to miss given the distraction that his chest was exploded from within." She stepped carefully around the table. "Let's do this one by the book."

It took Moody several minutes to preserve and protect the crime scene. He proceeded to lay down a complicated series of spells and incantations while Shackbolt fumbled through the occupants' belongings. When Moody was finished, as per procedure, he put the tip of his wand to his temple whereupon he drew out the shiny silvery strand of his recollection into a small vial. He pocketed the vial and joined Shackbolt, who was standing at the counter going through the mail. "Any first impressions, sir?"

"At face value it appears that Wolf Squadron must have been working in concert with Stoker. Stoker was a known heavy, so his job must have been to kill Ozymandias and then plant one of Fletcher's untraceable wands in order to implicate Wizardkind."

Nodding, Moody added, "But he sees the ring and gets greedy, and being unaware of the ring's power, he does himself in and ends up a vegetable."

"Misadventure: neat and tidy." Shackbolt resumed sorting the many envelopes with keen interest.

Moody picked over some of the discarded pieces. "Is this all Stoker's post?"

"No, his girlfriend's." She handed one of the open letters to Moody. "They're dividend warrants from the Ministry of Magic's finance division. I'm willing to bet that this is the payoff they've been working towards."

"Why are they made out to her, I wonder? Why wouldn't Stoker cash in on this directly?"

"Stoker has a criminal record. He's obviously using his girlfriend to funnel his ill-gotten gains."

Moody pursed his lips as he read the document. "These checks are drawn on the *Rottfang Land Trust*."

"It's interesting, isn't it?" Shackbolt added. "Especially when you consider that our malefactors' primary motive seems to involve the acquisition of land."

"But, Queenie, these amounts are but a pittance... hardly worth all this trouble we've seen going in."

"They are indeed a pittance until the land to which they are attributed were to suddenly become valuable, that is."

Moody snorted in understanding. "And a land trust is good way to hide one's ownership in the land itself. It fits, but one thing still bothers me."

"We have motive, means and opportunity, as well as Ozymandias' ring, linking Stoker to the scene of the crime. What else do you need, Alastor?"

"It's just that my gut tells me everything in Stoker's M.O. points to him being a hustler, not an assassin with the stones to take out a powerful giant like Ozymandias."

She shrugged. "I said it was neat and tidy, not perfect. It's obvious that someone with means orchestrated all of this."

"Well, isn't our mandate to strive for the whole truth?"

"It is, usually," Shackbolt replied. "But we have less than two hours to stop a war."

"It's almost morning; let me talk to Bones," Moody persisted. "He might have some insight into this. After all, a land trust is bound to leave a paper trail."

She regarded him. "All right, Alastor. I'll wait here for forensics while you see what you can glean from Bones. Wait for me at Hogwarts."

Moody returned her guarded look with a grin. "You're finally going to let me drive, then?"

"There's a broom in the boot. Take it."

"A broom can also be tracked."

"Like you said, it's almost morning; it doesn't matter anymore." With that Shackbolt set her Patronus off in the direction of St Mungo's. "Alastor," she called out to her partner as he turned to leave, "be careful just the same."

One Hour, Thirty Seconds

Chapter 33 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 33

One Hour, Thirty Seconds.

Moody raced through the atrium of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. By the time he negotiated the grand staircase to the third floor, he was winded. He pushed through the fatigue and kept his legs pumping all the way to the hospital wing. He opened the door to the waiting room, panting as he looked at Reuben and Jeff, who were standing guard outside the patient ward. He stopped when he noticed Minerva McGonagall fast asleep on one of the benches and paused to regard her gentle form; she hardly looked comfortable huddled atop the stiff wooden bench. He knelt beside her, righted her neck and draped his jacket around her. She awoke with a start.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

She sat up straight and spoke through the tiredness in her voice. "I was just resting my eyes."

"What are you doing here at this time of night, Miss McGonagall?"

"I would ask the same thing of you, Mr Moody."

"I'm on official Ministry business."

"It's about Dumbledore, isn't it?" McGonagall's eyes widened. "Is he... dead?"

"I'm sure he's fine; you mustn't worry."

"Don't patronize me," she snapped, her lip trembling. "I saw those two... Aurors carry him inside the hospital wing, but they won't let anyone in to see him."

"Really, you should go back to bed, Miss McGonagall."

"I'll do no such thing!"

"Suit yourself, then; I'll be off."

She grabbed Moody's arm as he rose. "Can't you get me in to see him? I might be able to help."

"Sorry. I really can't."

"Please... I have to know he's all right."

He looked into McGonagall's pleading eyes and sighed. *Fuck!* "Come on, then."

Moody was surprised when she clung to his arm, presumably out of her fear that he might change his mind. As he escorted her, he regarded her hand and made special notice that her wedding band was no longer present. *Good girl.* He grinned when McGonagall caught him staring. "How's your shoulder?"

"It's fine."

At the ward's entrance, the Aurors standing guard allowed them to go inside, though they continued to give McGonagall a most severe once-over. She tightened her grip on Moody's arm as they passed. Moody smiled to himself as he remembered watching Jeff and Reuben practice those same menacing leers in the mirror for hours in their dorm during their academy days.

Once inside, McGonagall released Moody's arm. She gasped when she saw Dumbledore incapacitated, being attended to by Madam Pomfrey. Her brisk footfalls clacked loudly in the deathly quiet ward.

Pomfrey greeted McGonagall warmly, but didn't have the same regard for Moody, who was not far behind. "You? What is the meaning of all this secrecy? Your lot has put Professor Dumbledore's life in danger by not sending him to a proper hospital!"

"That's why it's called 'secrecy', Madam Pomfrey," Moody replied, unperturbed.

"Never mind him, Poppy," McGonagall interjected. "How's Dumbledore?"

"The worst of it is over," Pomfrey told her reassuringly. "You just missed Healer Potter. He got a drip of serum going."

"Thank Merlin!" McGonagall said in relief. "What was the prognosis?"

"Australian sea snake venom," Pomfrey answered. "Quite deadly to wizards, as conventional treatments are useless."

"Will he live?"

"It depends if the anti-venom can do its work before the poison can affect his heart."

"How were you able to stabilize him?"

"I didn't." Pomfrey smiled and reached into her pocket. "I found these clenched in his hand."

"Alihotsy leaves?" McGonagall said excitedly upon examination. "The man is brilliant!"

"Alihotsy?" Moody questioned. "That causes hysteria, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Pomfrey replied aloofly. "By increasing acetylcholine levels in the brain, which, as it happens, could serve to offset the receptors in the snake venom."

Moody shrugged in response. "If you say so."

McGonagall embraced Pomfrey. "However did he get his hands on Alihotsy, I wonder?"

Moody smiled inwardly again. *A treasure trove for any herbologist, indeed, Professor.* He continued to regard his long time mentor. "He saved my life. I should be lying cold on the bottom of a cliff."

"He saved all of us, mate," said the familiar voice of Edgar Bones. He drew aside the privacy curtain from around the hospital bed next to Dumbledore's, cradling his bandaged forearm.

"Edward!" Moody greeted. "Welcome back to the land of the conscious."

"Who could sleep with all this prattling going on?" They shook hands. "Madam Pomfrey here has cleared me for release, but your two Auror friends out there tell me I can't leave yet."

"It's necessary for your safety, I'm afraid." Moody reached into his crowded sleeve compartment. "I have something of yours."

"Cheers, mate," Edgar said, retaining custody of the proffered wand. "So, things have really gone pear-shaped, I take it?"

"I need to ask you some questions, if you don't mind." Moody took on a serious air as he withdrew with Edgar to a remote corner of the room out of the women's earshot. "What can you tell me about the Rotfang Land Trust?"

"Rotfang...." Edgar rubbed his chin. "If I recall correctly, it's an umbrella fund. Its investments are tied into a little bit of everything: Education, Ministry retirement, the Dentist's guild.... Does this have anything to do with last night's events?"

"It appears so."

"Edgar!" McGonagall's footfalls clacked loudly against the marble floor as she approached. "I demand to know what happened last night.... Don't look at him; I'm asking you!"

Edgar shifted his weight uncomfortably. "Well, Minerva, we had a meeting with these giants..."

"Yes, the First Tribe." McGonagall hurried him along. "Albus told me all about it before he left. Did they do this?"

Moody intervened, much to Edgar's relief. "No, but someone killed their Gurg and made it look like the Ministry is responsible."

"Oh, my," she gasped as she fully comprehended the direness of the situation. "Merlin! How long do we have?"

Moody curled his lip, but saw no point in tiptoeing around the issue. "Less than an hour."

The door opened. Everyone's attention was drawn to Shackbolt as she entered the ward.

"That was fast, sir," Moody said in greeting.

Shackbolt paused to regard the civilians in the room. "I left Healer Bunbley at the scene." She then approached Moody and presented her bracelet. "He brought back the results from his back trace of my Portkey: it turns out it wasn't compromised as we thought. In fact, it wasn't responsible for teleporting us into Wolf Squadron's trap at all."

"How did Bunbley come to that conclusion?" Moody queried.

"He found traces of residual energy from a Redirectional Jinx; *that* was our means of conveyance to the secondary site."

"You're telling me that four very capable wizards walked into a Redirectional Jinx unawares?" Moody said, nonplussed. "Chances are one of us would have felt something was awry in the *thirty seconds* it takes to engage one."

"Are you sure about that?" Shackbolt said. "Dumbledore was grieved, you and I were arguing and Bones was scared shitless..."

"I was *not* scared 'shitless'."

"But Queenie, you engaged the Portkey yourself, didn't you?"

"Now that I think about it, Alastor, I don't remember actually *touching* it."

"But I just don't understand," Moody persisted. "Redirectional Jinxes by their very nature are location-dependent: they have to be laid out beforehand. There's no way Wolf Squadron could have known when and where we would be... led there...."

Shackbolt confirmed Moody's revelation with a knowing look. "Precisely."

"We have another murder to stop."

Just then Reuben and Jeff burst into the room. The manner in their stride made it apparent that something was wrong.

Jeff formally addressed Shackbolt. "Excuse me, sir; you might want to plug into the slug-line."

"What's today's colour?" Shackbolt said in acknowledgement.

"Red."

Shackbolt retrieved the magic slug from her provisions. She grazed it lightly with the tip of her wand, and it changed from green to bright red. "I hate these things." She inserted it into her ear.

"What's going on?" Edgar said.

Moody had likewise *slugged in* and was listening intently, pausing only long enough to answer, "All available wands have been called to the demilitarized zones."

"We're too late, then?"

"I'm not ready to give up yet," Shackbolt said. She rallied the three Aurors together, saying, "You three head off the maestro on the battlefield...stall him."

Moody eyed her warily. "And what are *you* going to do, sir?"

"I'm going to take Stoker, along with all the physical evidence we've gathered, and make an emergency appeal to the Minister, herself."

"With all due respect, sir, she won't listen to you."

"She will listen to *me*." Dumbledore's assertive voice caused everyone to regard him with a start, in spite of his infirm condition.

Madam Pomfrey, however, was not impressed. "You are in no condition to walk, Professor! I must insist that you stay in that bed!"

"I agree, my dear." With a masterful flourish of his wand, Dumbledore's bed transfigured into a sturdy wheel chair. He waved his hand, and the chair locomoted at his will. When he passed by Moody and Edgar, he raised a finger and the chair stopped. "Slothbrain pollen... really evened you two troublemakers out, didn't it?" He pointed forward and the chair obeyed, leaving the young wizards speechless. McGonagall and Pomfrey accompanied the elder wizard as he left. "Shall we press on, Auror Shackbolt?"

"I'm right behind you, Professor," Shackbolt replied. She addressed her subordinates one last time. "Aurors, I don't need to impress upon you that this is the real thing, do I?"

"No, sir," Moody said. "However, you do realize that we don't exactly have the maestro's ear?"

"Your best is all I ask, Auror Moody." She reached into her provisions once again and took out Ozymandias' ring. "Take this. It might give you some leverage." She then dismissed Reuben and Jeff with, "I will speak with Auror Moody alone now."

Edgar took Shackbolt's request as an imperative that applied to him as well, yet he couldn't resist asking of Moody, "You don't think Dumbledore heard us that day in his office, do you, about the detention?"

Moody shrugged, at a loss. "How could he have?"

With nothing more to be said, Reuben, Jeff and Edgar left the ward. It remained quiet after the doors closed behind them.

Although she was pressed for time, Shackbolt paced about patiently to collect her thoughts. She turned to face Moody, folded her arms and stood as tall as she could. "Those two prats I pulled from the dance floor... you were very quick to tear them off of me, weren't you? Why was that?"

Moody did not answer right away, being caught off guard by the question. "It's... what is expected of a gentleman..."

"And your refusal to let me handle the Fiendfyre by myself?" she scolded. "And back in the forest...where you leapt after me, like an unthinking scab, when a simple Levitation Spell would have sufficed... I suppose that was also you being a *gentleman*?"

"Naturally."

They regarded each other.

Shacklebolt again broke the silence between them, but this time with a gentler tone. "Bravery is an Auror's greatest asset, but a gentleman's gallantry will get you killed."

He stayed at attention but bowed his head. "I understand, sir."

"Do you, Alastor?" She approached and placed her hand gently on his chest and whispered, "Today, I just want you to be an *Auror*. Will you do that... for me?"

Her touch brought to mind how fast his heart had been beating. Without the distracting bright lights and smoke from the dance floor, he had an unfettered view into those darkest of brown eyes, baring her intensity, her sex, her compassion and something else he had never before noticed: a sadness. "I will, Queenie."

She withdrew her hand. The morning sun started to seep into the room, and the two Aurors left, in defiance of whatever the day might bring them.

The Last Nephilim

Chapter 34 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 34

The Last Nephilim

Moody, Jeff and Reuben flew in the direction of the ominous clouds forming in the sky. They approached the demilitarized zone, plowing against the wind; the chill bit into their warm flesh. Four objects decloaked, and they found themselves surrounded by a team of mounted Aurors...the Medusa Squadron. The Medusas corralled the trio and forced them to set down on the east end of the front line. Once on the ground, they dismounted amidst several teams of Aurors. The primary officer on the scene, Auror First Class Simmons, stepped out from the thick fog; he didn't look happy.

"Why did you compromise our position?" Simmons said, glaring at the three of them. "You are not assigned to this area."

Moody stood out from the group and faced the elder officer. "I must speak to the maestro immediately."

"He's leading the charge on the western front"...Simmons blocked his path as Moody tried to pass him..."but, you're not going anywhere near there, Moody."

It was then that Jeff spoke up. "We have vital intelligence, Simmons."

Simmons eyed Jeff in return. "Then you should relay it through the chain of command, McKinley."

"With all due respect, sir, we don't have time for this to trickle down third hand." Moody brushed passed him.

"Stupefy!"

Moody dropped to his knees as Simmons' curse clipped him in the arm. "I don't care if the Minister herself sent you here, Moody. If you give away our position one more time, I'll have you shot." He ordered the Medusa squadron to confiscate their wands.

Moody fought against the haze and rose to his feet. "Command doesn't have all the facts; you must forestall the order to attack."

Simmons snorted. "Under whose authority? Yours?"

Moody's jaw clenched in his struggle to keep his tone respectful. "Believe me when I tell you that these are not ordinary giants, sir."

"That's precisely why this hill is our primary point of attack. Their leadership is concentrated at the summit; if we cut off the head of the snake, the remaining tribes will be easy pickings."

"If?" Moody pointed out. *"If you go at them straight ahead like this, they'll cut you down!"*

"Listen to him, Simmons," Jeff pleaded.

"Don't bother, brothers," Reuben said under his breath. "Tosser's already made up his mind."

"Enough!" Simmons was at the end of his patience. Nevertheless, he turned to the Medusa Squadron leader and said, "Go apprise the maestro of these claims."

The squadron leader flew off. Simmons' reprimand of the junior Aurors was interrupted when a monstrous growl echoed unseen behind the mist and trees. Everyone fell silent and looked toward the top of the hill.

Simmons went into action to rally the troops. "Aurors on the line! Wands high!"

Two rows of Aurors spanned the breadth of the open clearing, their wands held at the ready, primed with lights of every conceivable hue unique to each owner.

"Steady, Aurors."

The grunts got louder. Shapeless forms disturbed the fog. The ground shook of angry footfalls stamping in unison.

"Steady...."

One by one, they broke through the mist: fifty brutish giants, wearing loincloths of animal hide and brandishing primitive clubs and spears. They descended down the embankment toward the humans to the shouts of battle cries in strange giant-speak.

Simmons' order to fire was drowned by the terrible din. Deadly magic erupted from every wand and lit the field with a kaleidoscope of colours. The preponderance of curses descended upon the giants...an unyielding onslaught...and nothing living could withstand it.

The Aurors cheered.

Simmons smiled in satisfaction. "See there, Moody; they went down easily enough."

Moody kept his gaze fixed on the carnage of the aftermath. "I don't understand. Those domesticated brutes were servants, not soldiers."

"Unless someone wants us to *think* they're soldiers," Reuben said.

Simmons' attitude remained incredulous. "Tactics from giants? Nonsense."

"That's what we've been trying to tell you, sir," Moody reiterated. "You're not dealing with ordinary giants."

Simmons remained silent as he twirled his wand between his nervous fingers. Eventually he decided to err on the side of caution and addressed the front line once more, saying, "Shore up the flanks!"

The order came too late.

They attacked from the rear. Their armour shone brilliantly in the morning sun: a phalanx of titans twenty feet high, swinging their swords and reaping flesh as chaff in the field.

Moody grimaced in reaction to the bloodcurdling screams of those slain Aurors. He looked to Simmons, who, to his credit, did not falter.

Simmons pressed the tip of his wand to his throat so all could hear. "Everyone form up and return fire!"

"In that case, Simmons," Reuben calmly interjected. "If it's not too much trouble, might we have our wands back?"

Needing all the help he could get, Simmons begrudgingly acquiesced, and Moody, Jeff and Reuben added their magic to the cannon fodder. Every available Auror released a volley of curses into the First Tribesmen, but their magic merely bounced off that invincible armour.

The Sons of God laid into the humans, unrelenting, in a one-sided melee of magic versus metal.

Simmons ordered his forces to retreat to a position higher up the embankment. They needed air support. "Brooms, engage!"

Three broom squadrons decloaked and descended from the sky. They were fast and deadly, a force to be reckoned with...until they were met with something faster and deadlier than themselves. The thunder boomed, and bolts of lightning seared the sky, unleashing their fury on the lead broom squadron....

A crimson rain sprinkled across the battlefield.

The two remaining broom squadrons broke off and retreated to a safe distance, helpless to offer aid. The lightning redirected its assault to the Aurors left on the ground, pinched off between magic-proof steel and divine wrath.

The grisly display caused memories to rush to the forefront of Moody's consciousness. Once again, shared mental images from his bond with Titaiaja brought to the fore a glimpse of an ancient device capable of wielding unlimited power...one of the many ways the First Tribe assured compliance from their lesser subjects. He saw a control panel with a button marked in a dead language, but somehow he was able to understand the writing. *Manual Override*.

Simmons' voice brought Moody back into the moment. "All units fall back; we'll make our stand at the tertiary position!"

Belay that order!

Moody never thought he would be so glad to hear the maestro's voice booming over the slug line. Their leader was here, and they now had a fighting chance.

The maestro revealed himself by coming out from under his invisibility cloak. He cast it aside, holding onto a large sack...its contents unknowable. He commanded, and everyone listened.

All Aurors hold this line and treat the ground with the Engorgement Charm on my mark!

The phalanx of giants trudged ever closer. At their leader's command, the Aurors imbued the surrounding earth with magic. Mushrooms, the size of boulders, magically sprang from their hiding places amidst the giants, planted unseen by a crafty old wizard. The fungal ordnance twitched and exploded. An avalanche of armour tumbled down the mountainside.

The phalanx was routed, but it was a temporary reprieve as the lightning continued to tear into the Aurors indiscriminately. To make matters worse, another legion of armour-clad giants marched from the east.

The maestro stared blankly into the earth. He chanted and waved his wand. Within seconds, a pillar rose from deep within the ground to many meters into the air; filaments fanned out from all angles. When the lightning struck the tip of the pillar, the deadly energy was dissipated.

From a safe distance, the maestro gathered together the remaining Aurors. He walked among them, his brethren in battle, with a calm authority that gave them all a new resolve. "The soil in this area appears to be unusually fertile; it has high concentrations of iron and other trace metals. I want everyone to form a perimeter around this *lightning conductor* to buy us time. With their lightning shield in play, we have no air support. I need wands on the eastern ridge to take it out before the giants can regroup."

Four Aurors immediately stepped forward. Their leader spoke. "The Vandal Squadron lends you her wand-strength, Maestro!"

In acknowledgement, the maestro placed his hand upon the shoulder of the Vandal Squadron leader. "I will guide you via the slug line. Good luck."

BAM!

At the maestro's instruction, Vandal Squadron Apparated at the base of the eastern ridge fifty yards out. They were immediately struck down by lightning, being denied even the luxury of death throes.

"Bloody hell!" Reuben shrieked. "What happened?"

The maestro regarded the fallen Aurors, then lowered his eyes. "Apparently their shield is capable of targeting magical phenomena."

"That must be why they kept pushing us up the embankment," Moody said. "To get us within range."

The maestro nodded in agreement. "I'll have to go in alone...with no magic."

It was then that Simmons stepped forward to say, "I must protest, Maestro!"

"One person, with a smaller magical footprint, will have a better chance of punching through," the maestro replied flatly. "Nobody else dies today if I can help it."

The maestro's countenance invited no debate on the matter. This, however, did not stop Moody from replying, "Maestro, I know how to deactivate their lightning shield."

The elder wizard narrowed his eyes at Moody. "How can you possibly know that, boy?"

"I can't explain, but I swear to Merlin I can do it!" Moody persisted.

"You're going to leg it all the way to that ridge with those giants out there?" Simmons said.

"That is precisely the reason why we will depend on you to lay down exemplary suppression fire, AFC Simmons." With that, the maestro left, taking Moody along by his shoulder. As they approached the threshold of the lightning conductor's protection, he sheathed his wand and addressed Moody one last time. "If one of us falls, the other must push on. Do you understand?"

Moody nodded, and both wizards were off.

The first ten yards were unnervingly quiet. The duo trudged up the embankment under a protective blanket of various anti-projectile charms. Moody could hear his heart beating between each laboured breath.

At twenty yards out, a flash of light narrowly missed them.

"We're too close together. Separate!"

Moody obeyed. Thirty yards out, the lightning strikes became more frequent, but they were erratic, as if probing blind. It was working.

At forty yards out, they were no longer under the protection of the suppression fire.

"Incoming!"

A volley of spears impaled the earth around them. The giants had regrouped, led by one in particular whose armour was made of gold with two horns that protruded laterally from his helmet. A royal dragon guarded this *Golden One* who commanded the spear-throwers.

Ysbaddaden! Moody relied on speed to stay ahead of the second volley but noticed that the maestro had fallen behind; fatigue was taking its toll. He paused to regard the old wizard, who had stopped to catch his breath. The maestro looked to him, smiled and broke away toward the giants.

The maestro's gambit to draw the giants' fire paid off...Moody now had a clear line to the ridge. The last thing Moody wanted to do was abandon the maestro, but he remembered his promise to Shackbolt: to be an Auror.

The maestro advanced upon Ysbaddaden with his wand drawn. The dragon charged in defence of his master with smoke brewing through his nostrils. Bearing down on the human, it spat a stream of orange flame. The maestro unclipped his duelling cloak and covered himself before the flames could engulf him. Then he was gone.

BAM!

The maestro Apparated underneath the dragon as it inhaled. The heavens opened up, and lightning shot down from the sky, igniting the beast.

Moody managed to climb onto the ridge before the ensuing explosion. After the ringing in his ears subsided, he took notice of the machine that commanded the lightning. It was wickedly advanced, but old. The odd contraption clicked and sputtered noisily as it struggled to acquire its next target that stood so close to it. Moody thought it odd that the machine was left unguarded. As he approached, however, he saw a giant slumped next to the device. The armour that the giant wore was stained red from the neck down. Moody sensed a presence behind him and turned with a start to face the tallest giant yet, brandishing a dripping sword.

The giant regarded the young wizard briefly while he flicked the excess blood off his sword as one would brush lint off of a sleeve. Satisfied, he sheathed his weapon and removed his helmet. It was Rogg. "Alastor Moody? Bloody, jolly good to see you again!"

Moody stayed loose as the giant strode past him to the control panel. Rogg seemed indifferent to the human's presence. "Surprised to see me, are you, Rogg?"

"Yes, to be quite frank. Whatever are you doing here on this soon to be historic day?"

"I was going to turn off your lightning shield, actually."

"My word, that would be quite unfortunate for my side. Your air superiority would, no doubt, turn the tide of battle."

"And eliminate Ysbaddaden in the process...your last obstacle to the throne." Moody smirked when Rogg eyed him suspiciously. "Isn't that why *you're* here, Rogg?"

Rogg smiled. "The Stick Monkey trying to use his little monkey brain, is he?" He pushed the button that deactivated the lightning shield. "There. You can tell your people you've succeeded in disabling our defences."

"First, tell me how you killed Ozymandias."

Rogg chuckled with his usual mirth. "Believe it or not, it was indeed *awizard* who held that privilege."

"A wizard that *you*, no doubt, led into the camp past the security," Moody said. "Was that the deal: land in exchange for a kingdom?"

Rogg nodded approvingly. "Not bad, human, but still no more impressive, to me, than an ape using a stick to fish maggots out of a dunghill."

"They are your people!"

"They are devolved savages, unworthy of natural selection!"

"They're not the savages, as far as I'm concerned."

"Why do you care, Alastor Moody? You certainly have no love for us."

"I guess I just don't like seeing arseholes win, Rogg."

"Too bad there's not much you can do about it, little Stick Monkey."

"I beg to differ." Moody tossed aside his jacket; he needed to be as free as possible. Ozymandias' ring was revealed, donned as an armlet around his bicep.

"The ring...." Rogg scowled uncharacteristically upon seeing rainbow jewel. "Give it to me, little Stick Monkey, before you hurt yourself."

By this time, Moody had strategically meandered toward the slain guard, keeping the corpse positioned between him and Rogg. He drew his wand and teased, "Why don't you come and get it, chuckles?"

Rogg put on his helmet, then pulled his short sword slowly from its sheath. The polished metal glimmered. "You would dare to challenge a being of genetic perfection..."

"Who talks too much!"

The giant advanced with speed that belied his massive size.

Moody's best hexes were but charred strands of flax against Rogg's armour. He summoned the slain guard's broadsword and levitated it between him and his enemy. When Rogg parried the blade aside, Moody allowed the sword to spin, and he thrust the handle into the giant's faceplate; Rogg stumbled backwards. Moody capitalized on the advantage by flipping his sword handle-over-blade to impale Rogg's stomach, but the giant blocked. The wizard kept the pressure on as he gained ground, flipping his sword blade-over-handle to cleave Rogg's helmet.

Rogg reversed his grip on his short sword, deflecting the strike. He snatched Moody's enchanted broadsword and leapt with it, bearing down on the small human.

Moody lost his balance when he somersaulted out of harm's way; his heart raced at the sight of the ground taking the sword meant for him to its very hilt.

Rogg spun on his knees and brought his short sword about.

Moody leapt to clear the blade as it passed under him, eyeing his reflection in the polished surface. He twisted in midair to land on his back, and he pointed his wand between Rogg's feet, invoking a magical pillar of earth from the ground that rose to strike the giant square on the chin. He used the distraction to whip out his invisibility cloak. Rogg threw his short sword just as Moody disappeared underneath the folds.

It was quiet.

Rogg stood motionless, scanning the area for the slightest sign of movement: he was denied...this wizard was well trained in stealth. He retrieved his weapon that was impaled into an adjacent tree. A piece of Moody's cloak was left wedged at the sword's point. "You disappoint me, Stick Monkey. I expected more from the mighty giant killer." He swung his sword blindly about. Hitting nothing, he listened. "Where is your acerbic wit now?"

Moody didn't dare breathe as he stood directly in front of Rogg, invisibility his only protection. He very carefully positioned his wand around his vocal chords and invoked, *Ventriloquus*. "You never did tell us your real name, Rogg?"

Rogg bolted in the direction of the false voice to the far side of the clearing. He found nothing. "I told you it is unpronounceable in your limited language."

Ventriloquus. "Really? Because Ozymandias, Ysbaddaden, Titaiaja, and Ingrboda didn't seem to share that viewpoint." Moody stepped carefully, moving with the wind in order to mask his disturbance of the grass. "I take it that the truncation was for the benefit of the humans you worked with?"

"Of course." Rogg ventured back in Moody's direction.

Ventriloquus. "Tell me, Rogg the unpronounceable, were you there when Stoker blew open Ozymandias' chest?"

"Still fishing for maggots, eh, Stick Monkey?" Rogg again chased after the spell; he swung his sword at mere echoes. "Stoker wasn't the trigger man, and neither were your Auror compatriots; then again, I have trouble telling your lot apart."

"You might've gotten away with it, if you hadn't've made *one* small slip-up."

The giant stilled, his interest piqued. "Oh? Do tell."

"When you escorted us out of the camp, you told the guards not attack for *thirty seconds*...the exact length of time it takes for a Redirectional Jinx to initialize."

"That wasn't so much a slip of the tongue as it was rubbing it in a bit; besides, I had to be sure you'd stick around just long enough before you engaged your Portkey." The giant approached Moody's position. "My only true mistake was relying on Wolf Squadron to finish you off."

Ventriloquus. "Still, that took split-second timing. My hat's off to you, mate."

Rogg ignored the spell. "Thank you. That's very gracious, considering I'm about to kill you horribly."

Shit! Moody took notice of the frayed edge of his invisibility cloak where Rogg's sword had ripped through. The threads were unraveling before his eyes. Rogg probed the ground mere feet from where Moody stood.

"Fee. Fi. Fo." Rogg raised his sword and sneered. "Fum!"

Moody threw off his cloak; his wand was already primed. "*EXPELLIARMUS!*"

Rogg's short sword flew through the air to stab the ground on the far side of the clearing. Human and giant faced each other.

"I don't need my sword to stamp the life out of you!"

Moody levitated off the ground to Rogg's eye level, his arms folded. "Do you know what I like about your armour, Rogg?" He pointed his wand at the control panel. "It's metal." And he reactivated the terrible weapon.

A bolt of lightning came down from the sky and struck Rogg, followed by a deafening thunderclap. Hot orange sparks shot everywhere, and the ground around the immediate vicinity was scorched. The giant collapsed to the ground.

Moody deactivated the weapon and sent word to his compatriots over the slug line. He waited a full minute before descending. He approached Rogg's still body, casually stamping out a few smouldering embers as he walked around to the giant's head. He removed the helmet; he thought it odd how the air smelled more of ozone than seared flesh.

Rogg's eyes snapped open. Moody gasped, but before he could react, Rogg grabbed him and began to crush him in his arms. Moody screamed and summoned all of his strength to repel the giant's deadly grip. But, Rogg was stronger.

The giant's mirth belied his sinister intent. "Allow me to impart upon you a fundamental law in electrostatics: the charge that resides along a uniform, enclosed surface...namely, metal armour...exerts no electrical force on particles *inside* said surface." Rogg could feel Moody's Shield Charm waver as the Auror struggled to breath.

"Do you now see why you were doomed to fail, little Stick Monkey? I am better than you in *every* way." He sneered as his fatal embrace tightened around the human. "Goodbye, Alastor Moody."

Two giants, each wielding a broad sword, pointed their weapons at Rogg, unawares. When they stopped short of impaling his neck, Rogg released his grip on Moody, and the human fell to the ground.

Moody struggled to his feet, but his limbs failed him. The familiar energy of the Levitation Spell cradled him and drew him to safety. He still couldn't breathe, and he started to pass out.

The maestro's familiar, cantankerous voice stirred him. "Easy, boy."

Moody's head nestled in a soft warmth that put his broken body at ease. Delicate hands graced his collapsed chest; Shacklebolt's voice spoke the soothing words. Her magic repaired his ribs and expanded his lungs. His eyes opened at the influx of fresh air and came into focus on her beautiful face; his head rested in her lap.

Shacklebolt's Patronus approached and licked Moody's face. She smirked when he sat up with a start. "I think she likes you."

Moody regarded her and rose to his feet. "Thanks." And he brushed himself off. "What's going on?"

The maestro, covered in dragon entrails, put his finger to his lips, shushing the young Auror. "The soap opera is about to start."

Humans and giants alike crowded around. The giant in gold armour stood over the detained Rogg, removing the helmet to reveal the face of Ozymandias' son, Ysbaddaden.

Rogg, still held at sword point, didn't dare move. "Ysbaddaden, what is the meaning of this?"

"*Ysbaddaden, what is the meaning of this?*"

The echo of his voice caused Rogg to look about for the source. The Patronus of a hyena...the transmitter...came out from its hiding place in the brush.

Everyone then looked to Shacklebolt. The Patronus at her side...the receiver...at her mistress' command, replayed a portion of Rogg's speech.

"*They are devolved savages, unworthy of natural selection!*"

Rogg remained silent.

The sting of Rogg's treachery was evident in Ysbaddaden's face. "Why did you betray our Gurg? My beloved father?"

"The betrayal was his," Rogg said in defiance. "The Sickness is *not* a sickness; it is a cleansing purge, rooting out the impurities in our bloodline. Our 'beloved' Ozymandias knew this, yet he didn't have the stones to take out the garbage. Instead, he nurtured it."

"So, you conspired to kill him like a savage!"

"I'm the Savage? Look at you... all it took was to trigger your lust for revenge, and you're already regressing, just like your brother did eight years ago."

"I am in complete control..."

"No, *baby* cousin. Even now you struggle to cling to what's left of your intellect, but you feel yourself slipping, don't you?" When Ysbaddaden lowered his eyes, Rogg raised his voice to ensure everyone around could hear. "In less than a week, you'll be like one of *them*. Everyone will then turn to me, and I will take our people to the next stage of our evolution!"

"Is that what this is about, Rogg? You want to be the Gurg of Gurgs?"

"Gurg?" He smiled. "I want to be God."

Ysbaddaden looked into Rogg's eyes; his voice was quiet but deadly. "I see now that the Sickness has indeed taken its hold on you but in more insidious ways, dear cousin."

"On the contrary, I have proven to be its master." Rogg sneered. "Something your lovely, *fertile* sister and I have in common."

Ysbaddaden drew his sword and swung it at Rogg. "YOU WILL NEVER HAVE HER!" But, at the last possible moment, he stilled the blade before it would have severed Rogg's head from his neck.

The two stared into each other's eyes, neither backing down.

"No." Ysbaddaden finally withdrew his sword. "This is not our way. This is not the way of any civilized society." He relinquished his sword and placed it at the maestro's feet. At his command, the other giants followed suit; they dropped their weapons and removed their armour. Satisfied, the young Gurg addressed the humans, saying, "I have already ordered all tribes to stand down. You have our unconditional surrender."

"I accept," the maestro replied. He sheathed his wand and commanded every wizard to do the same. "My forces will likewise stand down, your highness. There will be no war between us."

Ysbaddaden averted his eyes. "My people... are sick."

"We will help you." Shacklebolt captured Ysbaddaden's gaze, and she smiled.

Ysbaddaden bowed respectfully. He spoke to his people, and the giants retired from the battlefield, leaving their implements of war behind.

Moody left Shacklebolt's side and caught up to the young Gurg. "Ysbaddaden." The giant regarded him. "Ozymandias chose well." He removed the giant ring from around his arm and levitated it to Ysbaddaden's waiting hand.

Ysbaddaden slipped the ring on his finger; the encrusting jewel glowed brightly. "Peace and reconciliation, Alastor Moody."

Moody stood there until the last of the giants disappeared into the fog. He was surprised when he found Reuben and Jeff had been standing next to him.

Reuben put his arm around Moody's shoulder brusquely. "That was abso-fucking-lutely brilliant, brother!"

Jeff slapped him on the back in similar fashion. "How do you feel, old man?"

"Like a tube of toothpaste." Moody massaged his wounded shoulder.

"Well, suck it up, brother. The first round of Firewhisky is on me!"

Jeff snorted. "What are you so chuffed for, Reuben?"

"Am I the only one that was paying attention?" Reben said, exasperated. "We saved the world, and it's not even lunchtime!"

"What? That hullabaloo?" Jeff waved his hand dismissively. "It's just all in a day's work, Reuben."

"Yeah, mate. This sort of thing is in our contract, if you'd bother to read it," Moody added.

"Who'd bother to read all three-hundred pages of that gobbledygook?"

Jeff shrugged. "I had a solicitor go over mine."

"Really, Reuben, you shouldn't be so high strung. It's unseemly."

Reuben started to respond but changed his mind. "I'll catch up to you tossers later."

"And where are you off to?" Jeff smirked as Reuben walked off.

Reuben didn't bother to look over his shoulder when he replied, "I have to go take a shit!"

Jeff snorted. "He's certainly in a foul mood."

Moody replied with a knowing smile. "I think we enjoyed that a little too much."

"Bah, it's the only way he's going to learn."

The two men were then joined by Shacklebolt, escorted by her pet Patronuses. She spoke when they stood at attention. "Good work, you two." She looked to Moody. "I'm glad to see you took my advice for once, Auror Moody."

"Yes, sir." Moody returned her smile. "Speaking of which, I wouldn't mind taking a few pointers on that Patronus trick of yours. That was very slick."

Shacklebolt patted Moody's sore ribs, and he winced. "By the looks of things, you would do better to take remedial courses in strengthening your Shield Charm, Auror Moody." She took her leave of the two men, parting with, "I'll sign you up for classes next week."

Moody snorted. "Thank you, sir." He continued to eye her as she walked away.

Jeff, taking note of Moody's lingering gaze, said, "What are you looking at, old man?"

"Er...Shacklebolt's... twin Patronuses."

"Ah, I see." Jeff looked her way and added, "Yes, they are odd, aren't they?"

Moody grinned. "*Hypnotic* would be a better word, I think." His brow then furrowed as he recalled Jeff's earlier comment. "Say, did you really get a solicitor to go over your service contract?"

Before Jeff was able to answer, a putrid odour alerted them to the maestro's arrival. The young Aurors stood at attention, resisting the urge to cover their noses.

"Auror Moody. I just want to make clear that you are to make no mention of any of the details that you and Shacklebolt uncovered regarding the Rotfang Land Trust."

"Understood, Maestro."

"Who else knows about the subject of your investigation?"

"I only mentioned it to Edgar Bones, but chances are Professor Dumbledore is also in the loop."

"I'll take care of them." He looked about. "Where did that gossip Auror Ledley go to?"

"He went to go take a shit, Maestro," Jeff replied.

The maestro's eyes narrowed. "Bully for him."

As the maestro turned to leave, Moody couldn't resist to ask him, "Er, Maestro, may I ask how you knew about the iron in the soil?"

"You may ask." The maestro sneered. "Do you care to share how you knew about the operation of their lightning shield?"

Moody smirked. "You wouldn't believe me, Maestro."

"I look forward to reading your report." He approached closer. "You look like hell. Take the rest of the day off." He left them, leaving pieces of dragon guts in his wake.

Jeff exhaled in relief. "Well, that was actually nice of him." As the rest of the Aurors cleared out, they started to walk back down to base camp. "So, what do you have going on today, mate?"

"I'm pretty much wide open seeing as how I had a war pencilled in for most of the day."

"Yes, it's a bit of a letdown for an otherwise eventful day, isn't it?" Jeff replied. "Wanna grab a bite, then?"

"I am famished, come to think of it," Moody said. "Do you want to eat at the Leaky Cauldron?"

"If you don't mind, I've been wanting to try this Muggle bistro that Poppy told me about."

Moody arched a curious eyebrow. "Poppy? You mean the nurse who works at Hogwarts?"

"Yes."

"Been chatting her up, have you?"

"No!" Jeff's reply was rather abrupt.

"You're a terrible liar, Jeff." Moody nudged him playfully. "Have you shagged her, yet?"

"I, unlike you, am a gentleman, Alastor."

Moody smirked. "She's seen me naked, you know."

Jeff stifled a yawn. "Really, Alastor. Who *hasn't* seen you naked?" He failed to notice that Moody was no longer walking beside him. "There's nothing to tell, really.... The only thing we've done so far is talk. But, I think I'd have a shot if I decided to make a go at her..." Jeff stopped when he heard a groan. He looked over his shoulder to see Moody a few paces back doubled over. He ran to his side. "Alastor, are you all right?"

Panic had inexplicably overcome Moody. His hand clutched his chest as he thought his heart might stop beating. Though there was no enemy about, he felt like he was in mortal danger. He then realized that he wasn't the one in danger. *Titaiaja!* And he brandished his wand.

BAM!

He Apparated at the entrance of the giant strong hold. There was no one at the gate, so he ventured inside. He gasped at the sight of dead bodies strewn about the camp, mangled and burned. He paused to inspect one the victims; the wounds appeared to be magically inflicted. There were no signs of life as he explored the camp. He stopped to regard the giantess that helped Edgar the day before. She was left curled at the entrance of her tent; a tiny, still hand jutted out from under her.

He bolted when he heard a scream and raced toward the source. He found Ysbaddaden struggling against seven wizards. Their curses pelted him, and the Gurg screamed. With their attention focused on the giant, Moody engaged them, wielding a wand in each hand.

Your world is frightening...

Do you even know who you are?

Afraid of love, you embrace wrath

Blind to the woe that awaits on your path.

You prisoner of despair.

Unsatisfied, Moody profaned the assassins who were prostrated before him. He spat on them; his words were vulgar. A flash of red disarmed him of his primary wand. Moody looked to the wizard who disarmed him, and he reached for his reserve wand. When the wizard attacked again, Moody blocked the curse and disarmed him on the counter attack.

Though wandless, the wizard bored into Moody like a tank. He picked the Auror up and slammed him onto the ground. Moody nimbly vaulted to his feet, but the wizard picked him up again and slammed him onto the ground, causing Moody to drop his wand...that one hurt.

Coughing blood, Moody managed to his knees to regard his enemy. His eyes widened upon recognizing Norman, the wizard who pledged with him during his academy days...before Shacklebolt's Killing Curse prodded him to quit, that is.

Norman's eyes narrowed in mutual recognition. "Alastor Moody?"

"Couldn't make it as an Auror, so you decided to take up with the Hit Wizards, eh, Norman?"

"You Aurors think you're such hot shit, but it's always left to the Hit Wizards to clean up your lot's messes."

"The war was called off!"

"What?"

"THERE IS NO WAR!"

"That's not what I was told. We're just following orders, Alastor."

Moody squared off, though he staggered. "Tell me, Norman. Did those 'orders' involve the wholesale slaughter of the women... AND THE CHILDREN!"

Moody rushed him, and Norman held him by the scruff of his collar. Moody wailed his fists into Norman's abdomen then spun out of his grip; his backfist clipped Norman on the side of his ear. Two quick jabs from Norman made Moody's legs wobble, but he saw the follow-up...a right cross...and he ducked. Moody answered with a left hook aimed at Norman's nose.

The burly Hit Wizard caught Moody's arm and hoisted him off his feet. He dropped him, but on the way down, Moody hooked his arm behind Norman's neck, and they both tumbled into the dirt. Norman prevailed on top, and Moody covered up as Norman rained down blow after blow, punishing the Auror's forearms.

Enraged, Moody took a shot to the face so he could grab Norman's wrist; he bit into the Hit Wizard's hand. Norman screamed in pain, and he rolled off Moody.

The two scrambled to their feet. Norman found his wand.

"I oughta burn you were you stand," Norman spat. He pointed his wand at Ysbaddaden, its tip glowed green. Moody put himself between the Hit Wizard and the fallen Gurg. "One side, Alastor; I have a job to finish."

Moody did not move. "Over my dead body."

Norman's chest heaved. His lip curled when he saw the deadly determination in Moody's eyes; he eventually lowered his wand.

BAM!

They were suddenly surrounded by a team of Aurors led by the maestro. Jeff and Shacklebolt Apparated soon after, leading a second team. They proceeded to secure the area, but the gruesome scene gave them all pause. Shacklebolt dropped to her knees.

The maestro stared Norman down. "What is the meaning of this?"

The Hit Wizard stood tall and addressed the head Auror with confidence. "Hit Wizard Division Seven carrying out operation Green Purge, Maestro."

"No such order was given for the Hit Wizards!" the maestro said in a steely tone. "Hand over your slug." Norman complied. "Today's color is red, not yellow!"

"We were your backup, Maestro," Norman persisted. "The color was changed on the quarter-hour in order to coordinate the... cleansing."

"Are you telling me that the order to exterminate the giants has been given?"

"Yes, Maestro," Norman replied, nonplussed. "Surely, you gave the order, didn't you?"

"No. Interference from their lightning shield cut off my link to the outside."

"Then who gave the order?"

"It wa'n the Minister; I can tell you dat!" Shacklebolt said, her voice wavering.

Norman averted his eyes. "Merlin, what have we done?"

The maestro inserted the yellow slug into his ear. "This is the maestro speaking...all units listening on this slug line will stand down immediately! I repeat: Operation Green Purge is a no go..."

The frantic voices dulled in Moody's mind; the rest of the world seemed to slip away. Someone, maybe Jeff, tried to help him walk, but he shrugged him off angrily. His gait unsteady, he meandered over toward Ysbaddaden. The Gurg was dead...the ring on his finger dormant...everything was for naught. If only he arrived a minute earlier.

"Akha...."

The weakened voice roused him; he started searching for the source. Moody had never heard the word in his life, but he knew its meaning from a shared memory *Brother*.

His heart led him to a nondescript pile of debris. He found his wands and used their magic to uncover Titaiaja, who was carefully hidden in the rubble, concealed by a brother's love. She lay there, restless, her mind struggling for consciousness. Moody waved his wand over her forehead to heal the wound that trickled blood. Her eyes fluttered open.

They beheld each other.

She touched him.

He allowed his tears to fall.

"Hello."

"Hi."

The Rotfang Conspiracy

Chapter 35 of 35

Alastor Moody's defining battle will not be fought without, but within.

Chapter 35

The Rotfang Conspiracy

Barty Crouch Jr knelt in front of an unconscious Alastor Moody. He dragged the cursed blade of his knife lightly across the old Auror's chin. It would be so easy to slit the codger's throat. Unfortunately, Polyjuice Potion works best from samples taken from living donors.

Unawares, Moody continued to mumble in his delusion. "... Greedy bastards... Fools..."

Crouch grabbed Moody by the hair and used his knife to cut off a greyed lock. This roused Moody from his trance, and he sat up with a start.

"At ease, Mad-Eye. The war is long over." Crouch placed the hair sample in the hip flask and closed the cap. "Funny, it's not exactly the way the history books painted it. But, such things are rarely portrayed accurately..."

Wheezing, Moody grabbed the young Death Eater by the throat. Though he squeezed with all his strength, it was but the grip of a babe.

"And here I was about to give you a break for the night." Crouch removed Moody's hand from his neck with nary an effort. "Well, since you have all this extra energy, let's have another go, yeah?" Crouch placed the tip of his wand to Moody's temple.

Moody's body convulsed.

o~o~o~o~o~O~o~o~o~o~o

"Will you stop pacing about, Jeff. You're giving me whiplash."

"Sorry, Alastor, I'm just wondering if Poppy got my owl, that's all."

Reuben, who was standing next to Moody, folded his arms as he shook his head. "This is pathetic: an Auror brought to his knees by the threat of being stood up by a schoolmarm."

Moody smirked. "Is that any way to talk to your new squadron leader, Reuben?"

"I'll talk to this tosser any way I please now that we're the same rank."

Jeff stopped pacing to regard them both. "I don't seem to recall you addressing me differently even when we were of disparate rank, Reuben."

"That's because I make no illusions about such things, brothers." Reuben strode casually to the mirror and adjusted the collar of his dress uniform. "In my case, I'm very accepting of the fact that they're just backfilling all the positions that have 'opened up' from the war. It's just compensation, I suppose: we risk our lives, and in trade, we get to don these spiffy uniforms that make all the women get slippery between the legs."

A wine steward passed, and Moody took a glass from the youth's tray. "It's nice to know that your acceptance of promotion was in answer to a higher calling, Reuben."

"I don't make the rules, Alastor, I just capitalize upon them." Reuben grinned. "I will say this:*Auror First Class Reuben Ledley* does roll off the tongue nicely, doesn't it?"

"Still, it doesn't explain why Alastor was passed up for promotion," Jeff said. "If anyone deserves to be an AFC, it is he."

"We're in agreement there, Jeff. Alastor must have really ticked somebody off."

Moody merely shrugged as he nursed his wine.

Jeff resumed his pacing. His boots clomped loudly on the hard floor. "What if she didn't get my owl... Worse yet, what if she did get it but doesn't show up?"

"Of course she'll show up," Moody said. For a brief moment, he considered casting the Petrificus Totalus Spell.

"How can you be so sure..." Jeff paused when, upon looking over from his perch at the top of the staircase, he saw Madam Pomfrey enter the ballroom with Minerva McGonagall at her side. Pomfrey was dressed splendidly in her laced evening gown. Her hair was styled into a single braid that ran the length of her back. They shared a look from across the room. Jeff admired her in the moment, emblazoning her beauty upon his soul.

"As I told you: women can't resist the uniform." Reuben hooked an arm around Jeff's neck. "Suck in your guts, and hold in your farts, brothers; it's time to give these pure-blood tarts the what for, eh?" He led the way down the staircase.

Moody placed his half-finished wine glass on the railing and followed his friends. The fanfare of the orchestra seemed to accentuate their descent as they stepped, sure footed, as gods in the prime of their lives and at the height of their powers. Moody took on a detached air as he penetrated the crowd.

Wizards from the upper crust of society had come to congratulate themselves once again on this latest example of Wizarding supremacy, for the Aurors were victorious against those who were the lesser of wizardkind.

Reuben was proven to be right as Moody found it difficult to ignore the many inviting glances of the available witches hungry for pure-blood mates. The Order of Merlin medal pinned on his chest served to afford him more attention than one of his rank would normally receive. He took it stride, however, as he knew from experience that such affectations were illusory.

Moody lost track of Reuben and Jeff as he mingled in the crowd, stopping for the occasional handshake and to exchange war stories with comrades. He graciously accepted introductions through mutual friends on behalf of many a fetching young lass, any one of whom was a worthy vessel to carry on his line. The trumpets signalled the assembly to take their positions. The floor managers made certain everyone was on task.

Oh, how he yearned for the simplicity of the battlefield.

Though there was no shortage of dance partners, at the first opportunity, Moody left the dance floor and retreated to the receiving area that adjoined the foyer. He soon found that he was not alone as he heard familiar voices engaged in pleasant conversation. In favour of solitude, he thought not to intrude until Shacklebolt's voice caught his ear.

"Auror Moody, please join us."

Moody approached from the far side of the fountain to find Shacklebolt and McGonagall standing by the buffet tables. His eyes were immediately drawn to Shacklebolt in her exotic evening gown. The bright colours that imbued the fabric on her form-fitting dress stood in stark contrast to McGonagall's, whose style was more reserved. The women continued to talk amongst themselves until he came within earshot.

"I didn't realize you two were on such familiar terms?" Moody said.

Shacklebolt smiled. "If you'll remember, Alastor, Minerva accompanied Albus and I to the Minister's very doorstep. She and Albus were instrumental in getting the Minister to reverse her decision over the war declaration."

McGonagall blushed. "Queenie is being kind."

"I'm sure that it was a team effort," Moody said. "And, for me, the reversal came in the nick of time, for which, I thank you both."

"I'm certainly glad that, at the very least, you did not come to harm, Mr Moody," McGonagall replied.

"That is one sentiment we have in common, Miss McGonagall," Moody said. "And may I add that your attendance tonight is an unexpected pleasure."

McGonagall lowered her eyes. "That's very nice of you to say, Mr Moody. It being a school night, I wouldn't normally attend such a function were I not asked to chaperone a friend."

"That friend wouldn't be Madam Pomfrey, would it?" he questioned, though he already knew the answer.

"Yes. She is here on the invite of an associate of yours, I believe?"

"That would be Auror First Class Geoffrey McKinley," Moody confirmed. "Madam Pomfrey is a little young, but she doesn't seem the type to be in need of a chaperone, Miss McGonagall."

"It's more for moral support, if anything, Mr Moody."

"I understand. If it's any consolation, I can attest that the Auror at her side is beyond reproach. Moreover, I ask that you not judge him too harshly on account of his friendship with me."

"I drew a similar conclusion upon meeting the man, disparagement to your character notwithstanding. Although, hearing Queenie go on about you, I had wondered if there was *another* Auror going by the name of Alastor Moody."

Moody's eyes narrowed in Shacklebolt's direction. "Am I to understand that I have been the subject of discussion?"

"Only in passing," Shacklebolt said at McGonagall's hesitance to answer.

"Then I must insist that you ladies tell me what was said of me."

Shacklebolt arched an eyebrow. "Whatever for? It's just girl talk."

"So that I may correct any inconsistencies, of course."

"I assure you any such inconsistencies only served to your endearment," Shacklebolt replied. "You shouldn't be so paranoid, Auror Moody."

Moody smirked. "Ah, but paranoia is easy when pitted against two witches who are sufficiently formidable in the singular as to be invincible in the plural."

Shacklebolt regarded him with amusement then turned to McGonagall, saying, "Was he like this growing up, Minerva?"

McGonagall sighed. "I wouldn't know, Queenie."

"But you and Auror Moody were both Gryffindors, weren't you? Surely your paths have crossed on numerous enough occasions?"

"Miss McGonagall was a year ahead of me, sir," Moody interjected.

"Mr Moody and I had divergent interests," McGonagall added.

"That's a shame," Shacklebolt said. "You two would have gotten along so well."

Moody chortled, more so by the fact that McGonagall had to stifle her own amusement. The moment soon passed, however.

"Well, I think Poppy is in very good hands here," McGonagall said all of a sudden. She wrapped her stole around her shoulders and gripped her purse tightly. "No point in me sticking around, really."

Shacklebolt pouted. "Must you go so soon, Minerva? I'll have no one worth talking to if you were to leave."

Ouch.

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I've underestimated the lateness of the hour," McGonagall said with an apologetic smile. "All those papers aren't going to grade themselves, you know."

Thinking McGonagall's change in demeanour odd, Moody soon found the source of her apprehension. Benedict Billings, McGonagall's ex-fiancé, had entered the room. Billings eyed the three of them from the bar, but showed no interest at their presence otherwise. Moody shared a look with McGonagall and asked of her, "Would you like me to escort you back to Hogwarts, madam?"

McGonagall averted her eyes. "That's hardly necessary, Mr Moody. You and Queenie should enjoy the party." She left the two Aurors and disappeared into the lift. Billings likewise returned to the main hall after getting his drink.

The less than subtle exchange was not lost on Shacklebolt. "Did I miss something, Auror Moody?"

"No, sir." The reply was disingenuous, but Moody was eager not to broach the subject. "So, what were you two ladies doing out here so far from the festivities?"

Shacklebolt shrugged. "For the same reason you were, I imagine."

"Right... genocide doesn't exactly foster notions of revelry."

Shacklebolt smiled. "No doubt. However, I was referring to our proximity to the confection table." She directed him to the table that was arranged with an assortment of odd delicacies and lush desserts. She picked one of the specimens out from the floating tray.

Moody snorted louder than he meant to in the quiet room. "I see that you were telling me the truth when you said that you were fond of truffles?"

"Why would I lie about something like that?" She presented the candy. "Try one."

"I've never been one for confections, sir."

Her brow furrowed. "You don't like chocolate?"

"It's not that. Chocolate has just never been on my radar... until now." At her insistence, he allowed her to place the candy in his mouth. He closed his mouth slowly around the truffle to allow her fingertip to linger on his lips. The taste of it was rich and sensual.

Shacklebolt continued to regard him as he chewed slowly. "What do you think?"

"Alastor!"

Reuben's piercing voice did nothing to distract Moody as he watched Shacklebolt pick a sample from the tray for herself. Her full lips enveloped the chocolate confection.

"Hey, Tosser!"

Unfortunately, Reuben's voice became harder to ignore as he neared. Moody swallowed and clenched his jaw as he turned to rebuke him. "What!"

"What are you doing out here? The maestro is looking for you..." Reuben stopped and snapped to when he saw Shacklebolt. "Oh, sorry for the intrusion, Auror Prime."

Shacklebolt sniggered. "It's quite alright, AFC Ledley; after all, the maestro doesn't like to be kept waiting, does he?" After giving Moody a knowing look, she left, pausing as she passed by Reuben to say, "Congratulations on your promotion."

Reuben nodded in return. "Thank you, sir." And he remained at attention until Shacklebolt left.

Moody sighed when they were finally alone. "What does the maestro want with me, I wonder?"

"How the devil should I know?" Reuben spat.

"Say, you've worked with Auror Shacklebolt in the field, haven't you?"

"Once or twice."

"What was your experience with her like?"

"She's the consummate professional: each time was a learning experience," Reuben replied. "How was yours?"

"The same, I suppose."

Moody parted company with Reuben and, at his instruction, took the lift to the floor above. The torches along the wall flickered dully in the sparse hallway. He struggled to read the faded sign posted above his destination: *The Hall of Aurors*. He opened the aged door to a stuffy, oblong room. As he made his way to the shrine at the end, he regarded the many effigies of fallen Aurors that crowded the walls. A few he recognized from their battle with the giants the previous week. He met the maestro at the foot of the shrine and stood at attention.

The elder wizard did not acknowledge Moody's presence. He instead stood enrapt, face to face with the shadow of a beautiful, young woman. He reached out to touch her cheek, and she dispersed into mist. "At ease," the maestro ordered Moody, though he kept his back to him. "Sorry to pull you from the festivities, but I thought you'd like to know that Gurgess Titaija has been spirited safely out of the country to an undisclosed location."

"I appreciate you telling me that, Maestro."

"She asked about you...."

"Did she?"

"I suppose you're wondering why we're meeting in the Hall of Aurors?"

"The thought had crossed my mind, Maestro."

"I've found that this place is ideal if you're ever in need of a private moment. People walk by this place every day, but few rarely deign to stick their heads in."

"Probably because it's rather depressing in here," Moody commented dryly.

"No. It's because this place represents an inconvenient truth."

"What truth is that?"

"Do you really have to ask in light of recent events?" The maestro finally turned to face the young Auror; his hands remained clasped behind him. "With the promotion of your partner into the AFC program, that makes you the oldest active member ever in second rotation."

"That is a dubious distinction, I take it?"

"That is correct. Aurors are expected to progress, not remain stagnant. You bring shame to those that have come before you when you squander what little potential you have."

Moody met the maestro's glare. "Since 'truth' seems to be the prevailing theme of our discourse, may I infer that I am free to speak plainly?"

"You may."

"I could care less if you keep me on second rotation for the remainder of my career. I didn't join up for the pretty uniform or the accolades. It is within your power to dismiss me, of course, but it is not within your power to make me feel unworthy of the colours that I have bled for."

It would be several seconds before the maestro allowed a thin smile to curl the corners of his lips. "Didn't you ever stop and think that the reason why you are still on second rotation is because you do not belong in the AFC program? I was hoping you would have learned that on your own by now, but you've proven to be a little thick in that regard."

"I don't understand."

"Have you given any thought to specializing in Dark Arts Investigations?"

"You want me to be a Dark-wizard catcher?" Moody asked, nonplussed.

The maestro snorted. "*Dark-wizard catcher*... I never did like that parlance: it's inaccurate. But, yes."

"But, Maestro, I'm not trained in DAI."

"It is my experience that, sometimes, instincts are more valuable than book learning, Auror Moody."

"Why me, if I may ask?"

"The perpetrators of this... *Rotfang Conspiracy* are no friends to wizardkind. As it stands, everybody is so eager to downplay what is staring them in the face because the giant threat has been eliminated."

"Not to mention the money to be made from all their land," Moody added.

The maestro nodded in agreement. "I suspect the perpetrators to be those already in positions of power. As a result, any official investigation will be doomed to failure because my movements will be scrutinized, and I fear that if I get too close, they'll just go underground. My strategy, therefore, will be to purposefully follow unlikely leads drawn from far-fetched conclusions...this in the hope of luring our suspects into a false sense of security."

"You're talking about disinformation."

"Precisely. In the meantime, I will need someone on the back end...someone invisible...with a fresh perspective."

Moody did not hesitate. "When do I start?"

"Believe it or not, you already have." The maestro snapped his fingers and three files Apparated before Moody. "These dossiers are all that I have on the three surviving members of Wolf Squadron."

Moody took the dossiers and skimmed their contents aloud. "Brignast and the Sweets siblings...."

"Inside you'll find their psyche profiles, skills, abilities and my thoughts as to their weaknesses. As for the rest, I suggest that you follow the money trail."

"I won't let you down, Maestro."

The maestro guffawed loudly. "You should go mingle, seeing as how you're now on the clock."

"Sir?"

"I guarantee you that the conspirators are at tonight's gala as we speak, revelling in their victory. I'm afraid that you're going to find that the hardest parts of your job are the... *social* aspects."

Moody snorted. "Does that mean the pay is any better?"

"No, the pay is still shit." The maestro gave him a rare, genuine smile. "On the bright side, you get to put more pretty colours on that uniform of yours."

Moody grinned in response. "May I ask one more question, Maestro?"

"You may."

"Why make a formal inquiry known in the first place? If these events are being hidden from the public, wouldn't it be better to feign going along with the status quo? *Unless*...Moody paused as his train of thought led him to a conclusion..."unless, by not doing so you run the risk of arousing a suspicion that ~~we~~ *we* know that *they* know?"

The maestro approached and placed his hand on Moody's shoulder. "Welcome to the party, boy."

Moody left the maestro at the shrine. As he walked to the exit, he noticed that his dress uniform had started to change colour from grey to black. A double chevron magically threaded at the cuff of his sleeve. He closed the door behind him and was surprised by Shackbolt, who had been standing guard outside.

She brandished her wand as she leaned relaxed against the column. "Congratulations, Detective Auror."

"Did you have something to do with this, sir?" Moody questioned, presenting his magically altered raiment.

Shacklebolt shrugged. "I might've reinforced the maestro's notions, nothing more."

"Why didn't the maestro put *you* on this case, I wonder?"

"As the maestro's Number One, I'll be expected to work too closely with him on his investigation to be of any real help on the back end. Besides, I imagine he feels that this case calls for someone more idealistic"...she placed a hand on his chest, picking out a few lingering strands of grey before finally resting her fingers on his medal..."and hungry."

"Thank you, just the same."

She sniggered. "He wants to thank me... again."

Moody allowed her to straighten his accolade that was thrown askew by the transformation of his uniform...he wouldn't have minded if it took her all night. "Will you be returning to the ball?" he asked just above a whisper.

"I have someplace I need to be." She withdrew her hand. "Why?"

"It is tradition that a lady cannot refuse an invitation to dance when asked."

Shacklebolt regarded him with a hand rested on her cocked hip. "Do I look like a traditional sort of girl?"

"Is there something wrong with a gentleman asking a lady to dance at a ball, Auror Prime?"

"No... but, our style of dance might not be well received, Detective Auror."

"A rain check, then, Queenie?" he asked, undeterred, with that same lopsided grin.

"Persistence *can* be an admirable quality, I suppose, Mistah Moody." She denied him further scrutiny and left. "Good night."

They parted ways as he headed in the opposite direction toward the lift. A dull grin remained etched on his face as he pondered upon Shacklebolt's ever inscrutable demeanour. She remained a difficult person to read.

Moody returned to the atrium leading to the ballroom. When he stepped out of the lift, he was surprised when he came upon McGonagall and Billings conversing quietly in a remote corner of the corridor. He decided to interrupt them. "Is everything all right, Miss McGonagall?"

"Of course, Mr Moody," McGonagall replied matter-of-factly. "Why wouldn't it be?"

Moody was taken aback. "I... just thought..."

"You remember Mr Billings, don't you?" McGonagall paused to allow the men to regard each other civilly, though it was obvious neither had any intention of acknowledging the other. "Mr Billings was just leaving."

"What a shame," Moody replied.

Billings' response was a fleeting glower in Moody's direction. "Have a nice life, Minerva." He started to leave.

"You've forgotten something, Benny." McGonagall reached into her pocket and placed the object therein into Billings' hand.

Billings closed his fingers around the engagement ring and left without another word.

"Is there something on your mind, Mr Moody?" McGonagall asked in response to the Auror's quizzical look.

"I'm beginning to suspect that your role as chaperone was not the only reason you attended tonight's function, Miss McGonagall."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean, Mr Moody."

"Of course you don't. My mistake," Moody said. "Perchance, is it still your intention to see yourself home at this late hour?"

"It is."

"Then permit me to renew my offer to escort you."

She eyed him warily. "How would it appear, I wonder, an unmarried wizard escorting an unmarried witch to her place of residence?"

"I wouldn't think to imply something so crass. It would be merely in my capacity as a public servant to see you home safely, my dear Miss McGonagall."

She rolled her eyes. "Really, Mr Moody...."

"Come on then." He sneered as he offered his arm. "That is, unless I frighten you?"

With a glare, McGonagall took the Auror's proffered arm, and they walked leisurely down the hall. Her fingers were drawn to trace the outline of the chevrons on his sleeve.

He couldn't help but notice her reverie. "Where are you?"

She blushed. "Sorry, was I miles away?"

"It's alright. You looked at peace for a change."

"I suppose I'm still wondering if you're the same Alastor Moody that Queenie described. She seems to think highly of you."

"Why do I get the feeling that surprises you?"

"Surely you jest? During your latter years at Hogwarts, you cost our house more points than any single student to date!"

"Well... yeah... but, if you divide it over the course of my seven years, the per annum demerits are acceptable."

"They still call you the *Scourge of Gryffindor*, Mr Moody."

"Do *you* believe that, Miss McGonagall?" He slowed their pace and looked down to regard her.

She blinked and retreated under his gaze. "No...well... not anymore."

"Then I shall easily weather the title, seeing as how I am in your good favour, madam."

"I didn't say that you had my favour, Mr Moody, just my willingness to concede that 'scourge' is too harsh of a moniker to apply to a person of even your dubious character."

He smirked. "Do you care to share these supposed deficits in my character so that I may correct them, Head Girl McGonagall?"

"It will have to wait for some other time: we're here." She stopped when they reached the third fireplace from the end of the corridor.

"Pardon?" Moody said at a loss.

"The headmaster authorized a Floo for Poppy and I to use tonight."

"Right. Of course he did."

"Surely, you didn't think that we were going to leg it all the way to Hogwarts did you?" She released his arm. "And in these heels, no less?"

"How stupid of me."

"Hmph. Some detective you are." She tossed her powder into the Floo. The fire turned green. "Thank you for seeing me safely down the hall, Mr Moody."

Moody waited until McGonagall disappeared into the flames before expressing his amusement at her cheek with a hearty laugh that echoed in the empty hallway. It was short lived, however, as he remembered that he had a job to do and no clue as how to do it. He made his way back to the receiving area and pushed through to the ballroom floor and into a room full of potential suspects. Daunted by his new perspective on the sheer number of people in attendance, his first instinct was to reach for his hip flask. He reversed himself, but he gave no thought as to where he walked and inadvertently bumped into the witch standing next to him. "Sorry."

"Pardonne-moi."

Moody knew that voice. Druella's accent was unmistakable. He turned to regard her; she gasped when their eyes met. "Bonsoir, Madame Black."

"B-bonsoir..." Druella's eyes widened upon regarding his unfamiliar uniform and the rank on his sleeve. *Inspecteur* Moody?"

"Oui," he confirmed.

"Félicitations pour votre nouveau poste."

"Merci, madame." He bowed his head. "Comment allez-vous?"

"Très bien, Inspecteur." She curtsied in response. "I'm glad that all of my efforts to teach you French were not in vain."

"Indeed. Although, we have probably reached the limits of my conversational prowess all the same."

"You don't remember anything else that I have taught you, then?"

Moody thought inwardly for a moment and replied, "Où sont les toilettes?"

"*Atroce*," she giggled. "Your accent is still terrible."

Her laughter made him smile involuntarily.

Druella blushed under her former betrothed's gaze and averted her eyes. "I was... worried about you.... It must have been awful, fighting those savages."

Moody stood tall and dared to venture closer, relieved that she did not pull away. "Don't believe everything you read in the *Daily Prophet*, Druella."

She smiled weakly. "Still, I'm relieved that you weren't hurt, Allie."

They regarded each other in silence and were oblivious to her husband's arrival...Cygnus Black. Druella flinched when he spoke:

"There you are, darling. Come, the Malfoys are waiting." Cygnus paused when he recognized the Auror standing before him. "Hello," he greeted.

"Sorry, dear," Druella said nervously. "I had just, literally, bumped into an old friend."

"Yes, I do remember Alastor Moody," Cygnus replied.

"It's good to see you again, Cygnus." Moody extended his hand since Cygnus had initiated the greeting.

"Likewise." Cygnus returned the handshake. "After all, all of this wouldn't be possible without your efforts. You Aurors make the world a safer place for all of us."

"That's very kind of you, Cygnus."

"Say, my firm sponsors the upcoming annual Fall Formal; you should attend. There's never a shortage of upper middle class maidens on the lookout for an eligible bachelor of your supposed breeding."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Excellent. I'll have my secretary send along an invitation." Cygnus took his wife by the small of her back, and Druella said her goodbyes. "Now, if you'll forgive us the abrupt departure...."

"Of course." Moody watched the couple disappear into the crowd, unaware that Rueben was now standing next to him.

"Wasn't that Druella?" Rueben said.

Moody nodded. "What are you doing here on the sidelines? Have you danced with every woman in the room already?"

Rueben ignored the question. "Tell me, Alastor, do I have 'Muggle' written across my forehead or something?"

Moody gave Rueben a sideways glance. "What's wrong, now, mate?"

"These stuck-up trollops are what's wrong."

"You don't think they're picking up on your negative attitude towards women?"

"No. I'm sure that's not it," Reuben said. "There's something else... something I'm missing..."

"*Couth*, perhaps?"

"Why? Because I don't put on airs like the rest of you?" Reuben gasped when he finally took notice of Moody new uniform. "Eh, now, when did this happen?"

Moody casually adjusted his cufflinks. "It's the reason the maestro called me away."

"He suckered you into working DAI?" Reuben snorted. "A bloody Dark Wizard Catcher."

"It's just temporary, I imagine. I'll transfer back into the AFC program once my tour is done."

"Congratulations just the same, brother. Now, maybe you can put those detective eyes to work on scoping out some choice birds."

Moody smiled in amusement. "Do you have your eye on anyone in particular?"

"That sexy, full-bodied redhead standing over by the sculpture will do nicely."

Moody peered in the direction of the woman in question, and he snorted. "You do realize that's Angie...the same 'Angie' who graduated from Auror training with us and who has been like a sister to you?"

Reuben grimaced when he finally recognized Auror Angie Prewitt. "Well, 'sister' is a strong word, but I get your meaning. I wonder why Angie's dressed like a girl?"

"Because she *is* a girl, pot-tosser."

"I know that, *toss-potter!* I simply meant, why is she not in uniform?"

"Mess dress is voluntary for the women," Moody pointed out. "You know, you'd probably get a dance out of Miss Angie Prewitt if you asked her nicely."

"That's a waste of my time, Alastor; I don't shit were I eat."

"You mean to say that you follow a code, Reuben?"

"Of course. What kind of ninny would consider chatting up a co-worker?"

At that Moody clenched his jaw. "Not even if they fancy each other?"

"Are you daft? That makes it worse."

"How so?"

"There's no break in the torment: can you imagine living with a woman *and* having to work with her?" Reuben said with an exasperated snort. "And heaven forbid the complications brought about if she happens to outrank you... who needs the headache?"

Moody clenched his jaw again. "I have to admit I haven't considered that." He straightened as he contemplated Reuben's words. "But, what if the man were to outrank the woman?"

Reuben grinned. "In that case, it's alright; give her a good rogering, and then order her to fix you a sandwich."

"You're terrible," Moody chuckled.

"I know."

"Evening, gents," Edgar Bones said in greeting as he happened upon the two Aurors. "Good to see you two again, this time in more agreeable circumstances."

"Always a pleasure, Edgar," Moody said, shaking Edgar's hand. While Reuben greeted Edgar in kind, Moody took notice of Pomona Sprout on Edgar's arm; she seemed uncharacteristically submissive and did not regard the men until Edgar presented her.

"You know your lovely cousin, Pomona, of course..."

"Cousin?" Confusion washed over Reuben face, knowing full well that Pomona and his former partner bore no relation. A firm elbow from Moody, however, discouraged him from following up on it.

Fortunately, the exchange was lost upon Edgar, who continued on to say, "I wanted to tell you that I did some digging around on that land trust you asked about, Alastor. However, despite my best efforts, the details of the Rotfang trust agreement are not public record. You would need a court order from the Wizengamot...which I assume you were trying to avoid."

"Yes, I was," Moody said. "Thank you for trying, just the same."

"Well, it wasn't entirely for naught," Edgar replied on the sly. "As head of the business guild, who do you think is the Chairman of the Board of Trustees?"

"Septimus Weasley?" Moody answered under his breath. Edgar nodded and referred him in Septimus' direction. The affluent, red-haired wizard was engaged in conversation with a group of wizards of comparable social rank. Under normal circumstances, Moody would never think to associate with such a man, even with a proper introduction. All his life he had witnessed, first hand, how the disparity of wealth acted as a blight upon society. After all, those with money invariably have the means to ensure they stayed wealthy, often at the expense of those less fortunate. It was all a game to *those* people, and Septimus Weasley's status, being the richest wizard in the room, suggested that he was exceptional at it. However, as it stood, Moody was in desperate need of a lead, and this very wealthy wizard happened to owe the Auror a debt of gratitude for rescuing his children from certain death.

"Are you a believer in fate, Alastor?" Edgar said, arching an eyebrow.

"Not in the least." Moody returned Edgar's knowing look with a grin of his own. "Say, do you think you could do me one more favour and work me into their conversation?"

"I figured as much. Give me a minute, and then casually walk by." With Pomona in arm, Edgar set off in Septimus' direction.

"Did you make a new friend when I was away, Alastor?" Reuben said when they were finally alone.

"What do you mean?"

"You and Edgar Bones seem awfully chummy."

"Are you're jealous?" Moody teased.

"Naw, you know what you've got, babe."

"You wanna tag along, then?"

"No, you bore me. Besides, I just made eye contact with a right piece of totty." Reuben elbowed Moody playfully. "Wish me luck; hopefully, you won't see me again me till morning with a smile on my face."

"Don't forget to use the Prophylactic Charm."

"I never go into battle without it, brother." Reuben said, with a wink. "What are you going to be up to, in the meantime?"

Moody set off when Edgar flagged him over. "Oh, I've been thinking about expanding my investment portfolio."

The music started up again.