

Man Behind the Curtain

by *dracontia*

Summary: Rose's ambition was straightforward: to be the youngest Keeper ever on a House team and to go professional one day. A sequel to 'A Credit to Their Houses,' prior to 'A New Deal: Fog Lifts.'

5:00 AM

Chapter 1 of 5

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Disclaimer: The fanfiction author receives no compensation for unlicensed use of these characters; only (if lucky) reviews.

Note: Of course you know who the portrait is. But I'm humoring him by leaving his name out, all right?

5:00 AM

In some ways, the man behind the curtain was the most connected man in Hogwarts.

He spoke to every single Slytherin student at some point in their school career. He conversed with Tracey Davis, his former student and current Head-of-Slytherin House, almost daily. He even, once in a great while, spoke to some other members of the faculty. He overheard and spied upon many plots and schemes throughout the castle; he knew of all the Slytherin students' troubles and most of their hopes, fears and ambitions. He had advised most of them.

Some even listened.

"Where are you going at this hour, young lady?"

Rose managed not to squeak or jump, but it was a near thing. She turned to the Curtained Portrait. Much to her disappointment, the sitter chose to remain draped. For a wild, amusing, second she imagined an elderly man with an old-fashioned nightcap, sitting up in a green-curtained bed and vexed at being awakened before dawn. "I'm going to fly some drills before Quidditch tryouts. I want my pick of the brooms," she remembered to add, "sir."

"I don't imagine we have room for many more Chasers," he said. *We*. Al's assertion that the draped man was a Slytherin seemed borne out. *Bloody know-it-all Al...*

"Slytherin has a full roster of Chasers; they'll only take alternates today. It doesn't matter, though—I'm not trying for Chaser, sir. I'm a Keeper."

The portrait did not even try to hide a sound of disbelief. "While I have no doubt some young man will eventually express such a sentiment, the odds that it will be Bowles, in the context of Quidditch, are vanishingly small."

Rose narrowed her eyes at the hidden critic. "You've never seen me fly." She decided he would have to re-earn 'sir,' after that remark.

"I've never seen anyone Keep competitively whose armspan was less than half the diameter of the hoop," he countered.

"I've all the right instincts; I'm going to make up for size with strategy." Dad always said she should count herself lucky she had Mum's mind. Rose saw how Dad played Wizard Chess and privately opined that she was luckier, Quidditch-wise, to have his.

"An admirable goal, but not necessarily a practical one. I would have thought that Chaser was the path of least resistance."

Either he was especially shrewd, or a Legilimens. Could a portrait practice Legilimency? Rose tried to make her mind blank, a somewhat doomed effort given her aforementioned mother. "Perhaps getting on the Slytherin team is the path of least resistance. But I want on the team on my terms." She shrugged slightly, not realizing it was her father's gesture and brought out her resemblance to him uncannily, despite her smaller, stouter build. "Maybe it's a family thing. I have to fight for something. I have to earn it."

"Well. If you must fight, do not do so on an empty stomach. It will not take especially long to stop at the kitchens on your way to the pitch. I will not have any future member of our team, in any capacity, falling off a broom from lack of nourishment during trials," he said sternly.

Rose wondered if he'd been a professor or a father. *Perhaps a grandfather* she thought with an almost-giggle, considering her earlier mental image of him. He certainly had the authority for either. "Yes, sir," she said. She felt that perhaps he'd re-earned 'sir,' but she still had no intention of wasting time or weighing herself down on the affidavit of someone who refused to show his face. She hesitated a fraction of a second, but decided that the man would not do anything so inane—or polite—as to wish her good luck. She nodded in his direction and trotted off briskly.

As he watched her go, he tried to quantify how much of her father he saw there, and how much of her mother. There was no question in his mind about her intentions to heed his advice, however; so much so that he couldn't help saying (very quietly,) "Liar."

6:30 AM

Chapter 2 of 5

Scorpius wants to fly—just fly. A sequel to 'A Credit to Their Houses,' prior to 'A New Deal: Fog Lifts.'

Disclaimer: These characters are here of my own free will and none of their originator's. The only compensation I receive is to be graced with their presence.

In some ways, the man behind the curtain was the loneliest inhabitant of Hogwarts.

He spoke to neither friends nor family, for he had neither. The closest he had to a contemporary was the current Headmistress, and in his painted afterlife as in life, they were no more than acquaintances and sometime colleagues. His relations with his former students who now numbered among the faculty were respectful; but owing to their difficult history, he doubted they would ever be more than that.

The former student he would have most liked to address was not among them.

"Good morning, Scorpius."

Yawning and stumbling his way down the corridor as he was, the voice rather startled Scorpius. He turned to find he was directly opposite the draped portrait without realizing it. "Um, good morning, sir," he said, pleased he didn't stutter. He was getting better at handling surprises.

"I trust your apprehension cannot be attributed to a guilty conscience," he chided. Scorpius thought he detected a hint of humor, but wasn't quite sure enough to be relieved.

"No, sir! Sorry, sir. I'm just terribly nervous. Quidditch tryouts are this morning, and I... I want so dearly to fly," Scorpius said, longing straining in him until he thought he must rise up a little of his own magic and will.

"Well, then, fly. I'm certain you will acquit yourself well," their mystery portrait said, this time with a distinctly more gentle tone.

"It's just... there are older students trying, and I don't know if we stand a chance."

"We?"

"Al—Albus and me. He says we're the best in the school, one and two and 'the only difference is who has the better wind that day. It would be a crime if we weren't one of us first and t'other second string,'" Scorpius quoted. He wasn't convinced of that, himself. Al had much more experience, what with having enough cousins and siblings and whatnot to field almost two complete Quidditch teams, on excellent brooms.

"That Potter boy is unlikely to have your best interests at heart," the man said in a distinctly nasty way.

Scorpius was used to hearing something like that tone—but it was usually directed at him. Hearing someone speak about Al that way... Al, whom everyone seemed to regard as some sort of Golden Child, Slytherin robes notwithstanding... twisted in his already unsettled stomach. "I shall thank you not to cast-cast aspersions on my best friend, *sir*," he said. He knew he'd taken 'polite' out behind the broomshed and hexed it inside out, and he was glad of it. He knew he'd done it brilliantly, too... almost as well as Grandmother, and no one could shrink someone down to size with just her tone of voice the way Grandmother could.

The man behind the curtain was quiet so long, Scorpius thought he'd left in offense and almost turned to leave himself. Suddenly, that curious sound he'd heard last time they'd addressed the portrait—that odd bark of laughter—echoed in the corridor. Scorpius fancied he could see the curtain move because of it. "Clearly she is still at the height of her powers," the man said, so drily it was rather droll.

Scorpius was utterly nonplussed. It almost seemed as if the mystery portrait meant to say he knew Grandmother...

Before Scorpius could pursue the thought any further, the man interrupted. "So. Mr. Potter, perfect gentleman and good friend that he is, naturally wished you luck before you both... took your separate paths to the Quidditch Pitch?" He was more polite than before, but Scorpius still objected to the taint of skepticism.

"He was still asleep," Scorpius said, well aware it sounded like he was making excuses. "I wanted to get to the pitch to practice a bit alone. I think better on my own." He could have added that he was more used to thinking alone because, well, he usually was. He might also well have said that he would rather, if he were to vomit from nerves, do so without an audience.

"Would you care for someone to wish you luck?" The man sounded genuinely curious.

"I don't know what to think of luck, sir. Rose insists there is no such thing, yet I know for a fact that she is carrying her Severus Snape Chocolate Frog card today. She considers it one of her more valuable cards, even though he refuses to appear in it after that first day. I can't think of any reason she would risk it, if not for luck. Al insists that luck is something you make, and not in a cauldron."

"Hmm." The man sounded as if he were trying to sound dismissive but was too intrigued by the thought to quite manage it.

"Honestly, I would settle for something to make my stomach hold still," Scorpius admitted.

Suddenly, the draped man was all authority and solicitous grown-up manners again. "Mr. Malfoy, whether settled or not, do put something in your stomach before you fly. I would be most distressed to hear that you fell from your broom due to faintness."

"I'll try, sir," Scorpius said meekly. This mystery portrait must have been either a professor or a father, he decided. The nicer sorts of both were always concerned lest you have enough to eat. He supposed this fellow didn't believe in luck, either. "Thank you." When he heard no clear signal of dismissal, he turned and trudged down the corridor, carefully considering whether his stomach would respond favorably to food of any sort.

"Scorpius..." The voice beckoned from the frame once more.

Scorpius turned. "Sir?"

"You don't need luck," he said firmly.

Scorpius found he had a small smile in him after all. "Yes, sir."

"I ought not to have greeted him by his first name," he chastised himself quietly for so startling the already nervous child. It gave him a pang to see a Malfoy, an inherently proud creature, in such reduced circumstances. Still, he could not deny that the resulting polite, modest, child was almost devastatingly appealing. It had been so very long since he'd allowed himself to... no, that wasn't quite right. He had been fond of several students over the years. What was rare was wanting one particular student, as an individual and not just a Slytherin, to *win*.

He firmly willed Scorpius to do so as he watched the boy disappear down the corridor.

7:30-ish AM

Chapter 3 of 5

Albus Severus Potter cuts it close—but he has a plan for that. A sequel to "A Credit to Their Houses."

Disclaimer: Not my world, not my characters, not one sickle do I receive (for anything.)

In most ways, the man behind the curtain was the most isolated man at Hogwarts.

He never spoke to the subjects of other portraits; his own frame was Unplottable to them and proof against their wanderings. On the rare occasions he left his curtained portrait, he did so briefly and carefully, sticking to the obscure parts of large landscapes where he might be reduced to an unnoticed speck amid the scenery. Students in other Houses generally didn't know he existed.

While he would show himself to other teachers when they conversed, he had only revealed his identity to two students in his years of guarding the chief approach to the Slytherin Common Room, and then only on their graduation day—when he was more than certain they could be trusted never to mention his identity to anyone. He was not some curio for First Years to gawk at, as his curtain so plainly indicated.

He ought to have supposed that one day, there would be a First Year who would not take the hint.

Albus Severus was not precisely late; however, his plan to stop by the kitchens on the way to the Quidditch Pitch was going to need a bit of tweaking if he was to have time to eat before the older students arrived and tryouts began. He hit the corridors at a brisk trot.

Still... it couldn't take too long to stop at the draped portrait and try to eke out a bit more information on the mystery man. Food... mystery... Quidditch. Oh, and homework at some point as well. Al wondered if he could get his hands on a Time-Turner.

"Good morning, Professor Curtain!" he said, with entirely too much cheer for even a somewhat reasonable hour of the morning.

"What are you about, Potter?" Al noted the tone of voice and added 'Not a Morning Person,' to his list of traits for the mystery man. He'd already decided the man was a Slytherin Professor. Non-faculty portraits in the castle seemed little interested in House issues, and his bias in that regard was unmistakable.

"Quidditch tryouts, naturally," Al replied. "We're fresh out of Seekers."

"I don't suppose it matters that Scorpius is likewise trying for the Seeker position. Is all fair in love and Quidditch, or are there no such creatures as 'best mates' in either?" he asked, in a tone both insinuating and scathing.

After a decidedly nonplussed instant, Al realized that it made more sense that the curtained professor had already addressed Snidge this morning (given the empty bed beside his) than that he had some form of divinatory power. Surely Snidge didn't doubt their plan to be one and two, however that fell out? Perhaps the man had mistaken nerves for mistrust—Snidge certainly had a few issues there, as his general green tinge before an examination attested.

Al narrowed his eyes at the green drape. The temptation to do something very nasty to the canvas was strong, but in light of his suspicions as to who lurked there, he held back. If he was to be the best at gaming the system this was an ally he needed. And truth be told... if it was who he suspected, it was someone his curiosity demanded to know better. "Nothing 'alleged' about it. We're the best, he and I; if I'm not it, I don't want anyone else to get it but him." Al kept his voice level, but he well knew that he'd failed to keep the ferocity from it, and couldn't be arsed to care. He also filed away the 'Scorpius' vs. 'Potter' as another bit of evidence.

"A likely story," the portrait murmured, but Al sensed he's taken a measure of wind out of the man's sails.

"Besides, with the casualties Slytherin takes, we'd do well to have backups for every position. There's nothing to say we won't both Seek, sooner or later," Al said.

Al wasn't sure how, but he felt that somehow, the man behind the curtain was currently responding to that argument entirely in ellipses...

After a period of no definite response, Al shrugged. "Well, it's been a pleasure, sir—mostly—but I really do have to make the pitch. At this rate, I'll have to skip breakfast to arrive before the good brooms are all gone," Al lied blatantly. No power on earth could keep him from breakfast, and he fully intended to... borrow... James' broom from the Quidditch lockers (or if James had finally learned to secure his belongings better after a decade of living with Al, Louis').

"Damn your eyes, boy, do you want your head of house to have to tell your parents that you fell off a broom doing fool stunts on an empty stomach?" Al could hear a deep breath being taken. The man reigned in his little flare of temper and returned to the insinuating tone with which he'd first greeted Al. "Even your two accomplices stopped for food."

Al smiled. This fellow had definitely been a pretty stern professor once upon a time, and maybe a no-nonsense dad as well. No one else could be such a proponent of chewing one out for one's own good. Of course, it wasn't a good idea to leave either sort annoyed if it could be helped. "I appreciate your concern, sir, but I've got that covered. Tinky!"

An elf with a particularly sad, squashed-looking nose and unusually wide bat-ears popped up beside Al. "Yes, young Master Albus Severus Potter?"

"Please bring the breakfast for three out to the Quidditch Pitch—keeping things out of the way of practice, of course. You know Rose and Scorpius' favorites, right?"

"Yes, Tinky knows. Will Master Albus Severus—"

"Tinky, old chap, please remember to call me Al—and don't trouble yourself, just pile on extras of what Rose and Snidge are having, thank you," Al said. It was fun to be nice to house-elves. If only a little politeness went that far with other beings...

After displaying excessive effusiveness regarding the exceptional kindness of Potters, Tinky popped off on his errand.

"Rose will be out there flying the twigs off best school broom she can get her hands on without a single thought for her stomach, and Scorpius will have had just enough fresh air that he won't sick up all over the pitch," Al said, making no effort whatsoever not to sound like a know-it-all. "Happy, sir?"

"Ecstatic," the man drawled, in a manner Al immediately resolved to learn and imitate at the earliest opportunity. "Oh, Mr. Potter... tell your cousin that if she wants the benefit of carrying a... lucky... Chocolate Frog Card, she'll have to put it where the subject of the card would have a good view of the tryouts."

Al looked askance at the portrait, but only said, "I'll be sure to tell her. Good day, sir," he added, in an affectionate-if-cheeky imitation of Scorpius.

"Goodbye and good riddance," he could have sworn he heard the draped man mutter behind his back.

"Irritating little twit," he added.

The most irritating part was that he didn't entirely mean it.

7:30 PM

Chapter 4 of 5

Chocolate Frog cards make a mediocre vantage point even under the best circumstances.

Disclaimer: With every chapter, I do solemnly swear, my bank account is up to nothing.

In one way, the Man Behind the Curtain was the luckiest man at Hogwarts... because barring the destruction of his portrait, with him in it, he would 'live' long enough to learn how the stories of every one of his Slytherins would end.

He wondered if he would have to wait for official word on the new roster, or if he would receive the blow-by-blow account directly from the young Hippogriffs' mouths.

Al's voice echoed down the corridors. "I'll be shocked if Kent survives this season," he said. "His instinct for self-preservation is nil. He's just as likely to block a Bludger with his body as he is to try to hit it with the bat. I give it two games, tops, before you replace him."

"Oh, why don't you take Divination?" Rose grumbled.

"If he does get injured, he might make a passable Keeper once he recovers," Scorpius said, as if to comfort the apparently doomed Kent, who was likely out engaging in foolish horseplay with his mates and entirely oblivious to their dire predictions. "He definitely blocks a lot of daylight."

"Anyone'll be better than Dunstan," Rose muttered.

"Why, you're welcome, dearest Rosie. I was happy to make the suggestion that got you on the team," Al said, aggravating her all over again.

"I got on the bloody alternate bench, and by beating the starch out of the Bludger," Rose countered.

"Please, you two," Scorpius all but whined. The eavesdropper in the portrait found the tone rather familiar.

"I still can't believe you flew against your best friend—and beat him," Rose said, clearly still vexed with Al.

Scorpius intervened. "It's fine, it really is. I'd be too nervous to catch the Snitch a real game. I'll keep Rose company on the bench until her turn comes up," he said.

"Well, unless they get Rose on the pitch as the better Beater, you'll get your chance to replace me sooner rather than later," Al said, sounding entirely too cheery for someone who was contemplating getting crushed by a Bludger. "I trust Rankin and Kent about as far as I can throw them without magic. Work on those nerves, Snidge."

"Yes, and please find a better way to settle them than by visiting Hagrid's beasts—or at least, if you must visit, find an excuse to get away before he invites us to lunch," Rose complained.

Al sighed. "Yeah, talk about having a bad stomach. I could hardly fit in any dinner."

"**That** will be the day, Albus Severus Potter," Rose said in an uncanny imitation of their grandmother.

"I know, I know! I just... don't know how to beg off without upsetting him," Scorpius said defensively. "He's rather emotional, and it's simply not Quidditch, seeing such a big fellow snuffing into his handkerchief."

"I don't think it would upset him to say that we have to study," Rose said, in some danger of sounding prim.

"Good plan, except you'd actually make us do it," Al joked, keeping the back-and-forth echoing right down the corridor to the Slytherin Common Room.

He managed to pretend to read for three entire minutes before slipping off to the landscape in Professor Davis' sitting room to demand all the details of this season's roster.

While he was at it, they must seriously discuss the possibility of placing some sort of painting in the faculty box—away from those damned flapping banners.

Epilogue: After Hours

Chapter 5 of 5

Albus Severus' ambitions are many and varied, and spotlight is optional. A sequel to 'A Credit to Their Houses,' prior to 'A New Deal: Fog Lifts.'

Disclaimer: All characters property of entities other than myself, though I tossed in a few random names of individuals who exist for the sole purpose of filling out the Slytherin Quidditch roster. Still not getting paid.

He wasn't really surprised when Albus Severus Potter showed up late that night.

"I suppose it is too much to ask that you mind your curfew for once," he said. He snatched his foot back from the edge of the curtain and reminded himself not to let his guard down in the late hours.

"I mind it frequently," young Potter said winningly. "There's ten minutes yet until curfew and a four minute walk back to the common room, tops. That's five to six minutes, give or take, for me to catch you up on tryouts, sir. Of course, if you aren't interested, I suppose I ought to simply trot off to bed."

"You, young man, are on the platform for the express train to Detention," he said irritably. No, damn it, he couldn't quite bring himself to send the brat packing.

"There's still time to get tickets for another," Potter replied. "So, no surprises—no one budged Stebbins, Bowles, or Cahill from the Chaser spots, though Cahill's elbow is looking a little stiff these days. Gould and Michaels were the only ones worth picking as alternates. One of them will suit well enough when we lose Stebbins end of year—which I expect we will, since he may not be bright enough to be Captain, but he's never been held back yet. Pitkin's too slow to make a Seeker, but he's got the makings of a Chaser if he's willing to re-train and try again next season. Rankin and Kent got picked for Beaters. With any luck, one'll drop in the first game and be replaced with Rose, so I'll actually stand a chance of surviving to Christmas hols."

He couldn't help a small editorial noise at that. Rankin was all right, but Kent was dense enough to bend light around him. He was big, too.

Potter continued without acknowledging it. "Dunstan's Keeper; not much to recommend him but his arms, so it's up to the Chasers and Yours Truly to win it before he lets too many through. If I need a break, Snidge'll nail it," he finished, radiating self-satisfaction.

"This may come as something of a shock to you, Potter, but being the Seeker does not make the school, nor the team, yours." Bloody Potter. It didn't help that his assessment jibed uncannily well with Davis—and his own, for that matter.

Potter proved smugly unfazed. The professor rather wished he'd paid more attention to the Weasley girl while she'd been his student; he was at a loss to determine how the little dunderhead kept his cool, given his father. "Maybe so. But I've already got my two best friends on the team as alternates, and they'll both be starting before the season's over."

"I didn't realize you were such a prodigy in Divination," he said dryly. "What, pray, is your specialty? Cartomancy? Scrying? Wait... wait, it's coming to me... Tasseology."

"I don't know that I have any particular skills in that area. I've just got a few things planned. See, I'm not nearly as interested in playing as I am in running the show."

"No one is going to let a first year captain the team." He only managed to refrain from adding *I would step out of this frame and hex the daylight out of Davis if she were fool enough to allow it.*

Al grinned slyly. "I don't need to be named Captain," he said. "Bowles' confidence is shaky; his imagination is nonexistent; and he's convinced my name has...*Magic* powers."

That was an unfortunately apt assessment of Bowles. He was a very solid Chaser with a drive to win, a good knowledge of the game, and the discipline to keep his nose clean on and off the field. Professor Davis had done well to make him team Captain. But he was the least imaginative Slytherin since Greg Goyle, and equally, better suited to follow than to lead. It might... not be the worst idea for Potter to pull his strings on occasion.

He wondered if it was time to look for a painting of a dragon and provoke the creature into putting him out of his misery.

The sly grin never budged. If anything, it was joined by a particular gleam in his eye that said he meant more than he was telling, and Slytherin's painted protector extraordinaire could not quite pin down that bit of intelligence with the powers at his oil-based disposal. This Potter was far more subtle than young Miss Weasley or the distressingly transparent Scorpius. "No, I don't need to be the captain. I'd be happy to be the man behind the curtain." He skipped down the corridor lightheartedly, somewhat undercutting his Machiavellian digressions. "Evening, sir," he tossed carelessly over his shoulder as he turned the corner.

An irritated sigh fluttered the curtain. "And I thought his father was a living ball-ache."

FIN

Note: Rose is still demanding, 'Show me the Quidditch!' and my own Scorpius read this in disappointment, opining that they actually ought to have played. So there is the possibility, however remote, of a spot of Quidditch tryouts in the future.

Update: A companion piece, 'Quidditch Trials,' is now posted.