

# Drowning Souls

by *almanera4*

Darkness lurking in those eyes, darkness in disguise. Come, be my friend—together, we'll ascend. This is the story of the turbulent journey that was the relationship of Albus Dumbledore and Gellert Grindelwald. A kindredship so perfect... that it consumed everything, even the epoch it was born in.

## I

*Chapter 1 of 2*

Darkness lurking in those eyes, darkness in disguise. Come, be my friend—together, we'll ascend. This is the story of the turbulent journey that was the relationship of Albus Dumbledore and Gellert Grindelwald. A kindredship so perfect... that it consumed everything, even the epoch it was born in.

... Hast du mir weiter nichts zu sagen?

... Nein Herr! ich find es dort, wie immer, herzlich schlecht.

Die Menschen dauern mich in ihren Jammertagen,

Ich mag sogar die armen selbst nicht plagen.

*Faust: Der Tragödie erster Teil* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Conversation of the Lord and Mephistopheles

*June 13th, 1899*

The weather was fairly warm. There was wind, an uncommonly piercing one for June, but otherwise, summer had truly started. Albus, however, remained oblivious to this shift. His gaze was glued to the ground. There used to be a flower bed at that spot; there still was one, except nothing had grown that year. The winter had been mild, but in March, there had been a series of unexpected blizzards, which had frozen the crops that had already started growing. The plants were dead. Just like Kendra Dumbledore, his mother.

When he had first heard the news, he had refused to believe it. Kendra Dumbledore had been nothing if not resilient and inflexible. Once set upon a decision, she would not budge no matter the discomfort it might entail for herself and her family. This trait had brought them a great deal of suffering, yet it had also testified to her inner strength. Her untimely death was unfathomable, as though a mere illusion designed to disrupt his plans, which...and the thought was mortifying...would not have been the first time. Despite being a talented and studious witch, she had never encouraged Albus's success. Perhaps it had been the fact that after her husband's imprisonment, she had found herself confined to the house, forced to care for Ariana and to perform the chores in the Muggle fashion to avoid spooking the frail girl. Perhaps it had been her frustration at seeing her own scholarly ambitions thwarted while he, Albus, had received all of his father's support. The truth remained that Kendra had become cold towards her firstborn, colder than a stranger. It was unspeakably selfish of him, but now that she had died, Albus could have sworn she had intended to foil him all along. All he had wanted was to spend one summer travelling with his friend Doge, only one; afterwards, he would find himself a situation and support his family. Everything had been ready: the money his father had set aside for the tour, the detailed plan, the research. And just when he had passed his exams, studying for many sleepless nights to

make everyone who had believed in him proud, this had occurred instead. Well, he knew the reason why: because life was unjust.

On top of this, he was also being compelled to endure the false condolences of the villagers. And how he hated those! If there was one thing he could not stand, it was hypocrisy; and here were the people who had always gossiped and spread nasty rumours about his mother, though the moment she had died, they had suddenly started pretending they had been her closest companions. Sadly, her own frame of mind had not helped. Far from accepting assistance or even friendship, she had embraced the solitude that she loathed as if it had been a Shield Charm, refusing to make her neighbours' acquaintance, to attend events, to greet passers-by or to follow the most fundamental courtesies. It was almost a wonder that the members of Godric's Hollow had found it in themselves to like Albus, to his family's disapproval. This double frustration caused Albus to want to scream, or Curse someone, or both.

Aberforth had remained in the graveyard, even though the ceremony was over and the attendants had dispersed. Albus had not seen him cry in years, and he knew that once they returned home, he would not glimpse that sight again. Partly, it was for Ariana's sake, for their sister became upset at the smallest altercation. Partly, however, it was their mother's influence in him. Out of her three children, Kendra had been kindest to Aberforth, and from his side, he had been devoted to her to the point of sacrificing his other interests, be it his studies or his friends. And along with the hostile manners and the many chores he had inherited from her, he was also carrying a passionate prejudice towards Albus. Never did Aberforth lose an opportunity to remind his brother that all their misfortunes were somehow his fault, either because he, Albus, was never around, or because he happened to be busy with his studies, or because he could not be bothered to think of their family. As far as Aberforth was concerned, it had always been *Albus, Albus, Albus*. It was simply too much.

His feelings were more conflicted when it came to the witch who lived in the house just across their own: Bathilda Bagshot. Known across the village as the greatest of gossipers, she appeared to be responsible for spreading the false rumour of Ariana being a Squib before they could have corrected her. Yet she possessed an undeniable kind side: she had been the one to send his paper to the scholarly journal, *Transfiguration Today*, and she had always encouraged him to develop his talents. It only made it worse when trying to reconcile the different emotions that were tearing him apart. He did not need any more complexity in his life, and at this instant, there was so much complexity to be going on with that...

But she appeared to be speaking to someone: two foreign-looking boys. Albus could clearly see one of them, the shorter one. The boy was of an average frame with sandy blond hair and a fair complexion. He was dressed in a Muggle sailor suit. In truth, there was nothing particularly special about him, and for a moment, Albus was quite puzzled at his own reaction to this stranger. But then he looked closely and understood.

The way the foreign boy was dressed was impeccable. Had Albus seen him somewhere else, he would have taken him for a Muggle. His sailor suit and hat were decorated with the stripes typical of the fabrics from Imperial Germany; even his hair had been cropped to match the style. Albus had learned as much as he could about Muggle history to recognize these details. He and Doge had thought it best not to take chances in exposing the wizarding world, not even involuntarily so, though Albus had always secretly wished he could dress in the most outrageous shades of purple and sparkling yellow and Charm his outfit to emit a red glow, simply to irk close-minded people. Either way, it was for the purpose of their trip that he and Doge had gone through all the available books on Muggles and their mannerisms. And this boy, whoever he was, seemed to be quite knowledgeable as well. What was he doing here? Albus was certain he had never seen him before, or he would have remembered.

Curiosity won over; carefully, Albus moved closer, gauging whether he could eavesdrop on the conversation. They were not speaking English, but from his new position, Albus could tell that the foreign boy was feeling nervous and out of place. Nobody, however, was paying him much attention. Madam Bagshot was speaking to the other boy.

That one was taller and of an athletic build, dressed like a wealthy gentleman. He too was blond, but Albus could not see his face; he could only sense that the conversation was not a pleasant one. The witch looked cautious, perhaps even disappointed, while the tall boy's shoulders seemed tense. At last, the group reached something of an agreement as Madam Bagshot sighed and nodded, and the tall boy motioned for the shorter one to come closer. A brief introduction followed between the witch and the boy in the sailor suit, the two of them having manifestly never met, even though they were both familiar with the tall boy. Interesting.

For some reason, Albus felt a powerful urge to follow them. The funeral was over, his brother needed a moment alone, and Ariana was home, resting under the influence of Dreamless Sleep: the only way they could have left her alone for long enough to proceed with the ceremony. Quietly, he stole along the hedge, keeping his distance, hoping to stay unnoticed. Not a minute later, the tall boy turned around, as if sensing he was being watched. It was then that Albus first saw him: Gellert Grindelwald.

His gaze was alight with an inner vivacity one but rarely encountered in the others. His eyes were, in fact, so unlike the dull and deceitful eyes of the crones Albus had come to despise that he found himself taken aback. Nearly at once, the shorter boy turned around as well, and Madam Bagshot followed suit. Albus halted, suddenly feeling foolish in his impulsive pursuit and all too aware of his mourning clothes.

"Young Mr Dumbledore!" Bathilda called.

He was now obliged to approach them whether he wished to or not. He touched his hat.

"Madam Bagshot."

She took in his attire with an air of pity. "Ah, I see. I regret having missed the funeral, my dear boy. Had it not been for my family engagement, I would not have failed to pay my last respects to your excellent mother. A fine woman as ever I've met, upon my word. Such a tragedy! Please, once again, accept my sincere condolences."

"Thank you." His voice was clipped; this was the only time when his curtness could be interpreted as grief rather than rudeness. "I will pass your kind words onto my family. Please don't distress yourself on my account; I dare hope your family members enjoy their stay in Godric's Hollow."

This finally redirected her attention towards the tall boy in the gentleman's suit.

"Ah, yes. May I present my great-nephew, Gellert Grindelwald? Gellert, dear, this is Albus Dumbledore."

Albus offered him his hand with a polite *Pleased to meet you*, wondering why Madam Bagshot was paying so little attention to the other boy.

"I am sorry we are forced to meet under such circumstances; please accept our condolences," the young man replied, keeping it short as if sensing Albus was in no mood for speeches.

"This is Dieter Heiderfeld," he then said, gesturing towards his companion. "Dieter attends Durmstrang with me; we've come to spend the summer holidays at Aunt Bathilda's. Dieter's English is not very good yet, I'm afraid, and spending this summer in England is a wonderful opportunity to practice."

At this, the other boy joined him in greeting Albus, who studied the new arrivals with some puzzlement. He had been unaware of Madam Bagshot's family connections. As far as everyone knew, she was a solitary spinster, though rich in acquaintances and with an entire network of connections under her belt. She often declared herself married to History, which was why no one ever called her Miss Bagshot.

By all accounts, Mr Grindelwald was not a year older than Albus himself, yet something about his confidence felt quite out of the ordinary. Perhaps it was his consideration...of which he possessed rather more than his inquisitive great-aunt, as his brief and polite answer had indicated.

It was not long before Madam Bagshot claimed attention once more.

"I was hoping to see young master Doge with you," she started, her eyes darting across the street. "I know how much he cherishes history, and I have found just the thing for him."

Albus suppressed a sigh, knowing perfectly well the witch was mining for information.

"I'm afraid he has left for the continent, but he will be back before long. I will be writing to him one of these days, and I'll tell him of your kindness."

He turned towards the boy named Dieter, for whom he could not help but feel sympathy. Being ignored by his hostess minutes after their introduction could not be a reassuring start.

"Is this your first visit to England, Mr Heiderfeld?"

"Yes," the boy replied promptly. "Sehr... eet eez lovely here. Zank you."

"I am sure we will see more of each other, Mr Dumbledore," Gellert Grindelwald smoothly intervened. "Besides, Dieter will be delighted to get more opportunities for conversation. What do you think, Aunt Bathilda?"

"A splendid idea!" Madam Bagshot simpered. "Would you do us the honour tomorrow, my dear boy? It's nothing fancy, only a quiet family dinner. Of course, your dear brother and sister would be most welcome to attend. I know how much responsibility rests on your shoulders, and I wouldn't presume to intrude. A lady's company, however, is hardly suitable for two bright young men, and there is no one in Godric's Hollow whom I could recommend to them more highly than you. I promise you will not regret befriending my nephew."

The matter was delicate, and Albus felt slightly winded at the turn of these events. He was in deep mourning and bound by the etiquette to avoid entertainment for at least the next few months. Yet the prospect of spending his days in the tense atmosphere of his home, near his brother's resentment and his sister's unpredictable fragility, caused him to reconsider. Was one dinner such an offense after all?

Lost in contemplation, he looked into Gellert's eyes. Two young witches dressed in colourful shawls and flowered bonnets passed them on the pavement, their expressions undeniably appreciative as they glanced in the direction of the handsome foreign wizard.

Albus made his decision.

**Foreword:** The tale of tragic love of Albus Dumbledore and Gellert Grindelwald is often denied the opportunity to be told in its full glory, which is why the authors of this story have made it their goal to do so.

The idea itself occurred to me a long time ago, but it felt as though it was never quite the time to write it before now, and it is, in fact, Tarpeia's merit that the story is being continued after all.

That being said, please keep an open mind when reading this story. Since the events take place in the Victorian era, many beliefs and mannerisms dominating the wizarding world reflect those dominant in Muggle world of the time. It is also important to mention that this story openly deals with romance between two young men...keep this in mind if you are easily offended or if you fundamentally disagree with the claims of Albus Dumbledore being romantically interested in the Durmstrang wizard who would later become notoriously known. It would be best to take this story as an independent novella set in the wizarding Victorian England and enjoy it for what it is...a forbidden love story.

On that note: happy reading!

## II

### Chapter 2 of 2

Darkness lurking in those eyes, darkness in disguise. Come, be my friend—together, we'll ascend. This is the story of the turbulent journey that was the relationship of Albus Dumbledore and Gellert Grindelwald. A kindredship so perfect... that it consumed everything, even the epoch it was born in.

It was in a state of physical soreness that Albus advanced towards Bathilda Bagshot's house the following evening. He was exhausted after a full day of Muggle chores, which had been neglected since his mother had died. Being forbidden from using magic was nothing short of frustrating. He loved magic, every discipline of it, and he had reached the point of mastery where his wand felt more like an extension of his hand than a separate object. It was appalling to think that a single day had been enough to break his goodwill and reduce him to the state of hatred for household tasks. Especially when Aberforth had adapted to their new routine without a word of complaint.

His flush, caused by their latest argument, had not yet subsided. His brother had categorically refused to attend that night's dinner, let alone take Ariana out to socialise with a *vain gossip* and *her flashy relative*. The world had always been black and white to Aberforth, and there were times when Albus envied his simplistic certainty. Wherever he looked, nothing was remotely simple. He himself did not always enjoy Madam Bagshot's company, but he had to concede she was well-connected and, perhaps, in a position to help them out. For a solution to their difficulty had come to his mind: obtaining a house-elf. They could not manage on their own for long.

Hiding his sombre sentiments under an expression of demure and courteous grief, Albus walked through the protective wards of the garden and knocked on the front door. It swung open to reveal Bathilda in her dinner dress, her features firmly set in a look of compassion.

"Albus, my dear boy."

With a kiss on her hand, he proceeded into the parlour, where his eyes were drawn at once to the figure of Gellert, who was perusing one of his aunt's own publications.

"Good evening," Albus said.

Gellert smiled. "Good evening, Mr Dumbledore."

They shook hands, and Albus glanced around for the other German boy, Dieter, who was looking out of the window. Exchanging a greeting, Albus decided to engage him in conversation, especially as Gellert appeared to be absorbed in his book.

"Where do you come from?" he inquired.

But Dieter had barely drawn a breath to answer when Bathilda hurried over with a tray of glasses full of claret, as if determined Albus should waste as little of his time as possible on this boy, who was no relative of hers.

"Some old wine a good friend gave me last spring," she announced.

They drank. Now Albus was feeling distinctly uncomfortable on Dieter's behalf. He decided to steer her attention in a different direction.

"My brother has asked me to apologise, Madam Bagshot. He couldn't come tonight. He sends you his fondest regards, and so does my sister."

Bathilda laid a heavy hand on his shoulder. "I understand. I do hope to see them sometime, my boy. You can't know how fond I am of all of you, and yet, it goes back one decade. Ah, how well I remember: one morning, your mother appeared in the house across mine, as if she'd lived there forever. Her dress was simple, quiet dignity her only ornament, but she bore herself like a queen...she had no need for jewels when her personality shone through, proud and strong like a man's." Bathilda took a gulp, her eyes uncharacteristically reminiscent. "Would you believe it, she actually shut the door in my face the first time I came to welcome her into the village. Nor was I the only one. Everyone knew her from a distance, talked about her, but was not admitted anywhere close. It took time for us to understand and accept her for who she was. Ah, a fine woman; there aren't many of them left any more."

He had heard similar speeches from the other villagers in the last days, but at this moment, a mere day after the funeral and only half an hour after another emotional row with his brother, listening to a new litany was difficult. Albus took a sip, hoping his silence would not be interpreted as impertinence.

"Aunt Bathilda," Gellert spoke up suddenly, "I think we are overwhelming Mr Dumbledore. He is just too polite to say so."

It was true, and to Albus's surprise, Madam Bagshot seemed to realise her mistake as soon as Gellert had voiced it.

"Oh, but of course! Forgive me, my boy, of course, you must be hearing this all the time... Now, being two fine gentlemen that you are, you must be curious about each other. I haven't had the chance to properly introduce my great-nephew, have I now?"

The atmosphere noticeably relaxed at this, so that even Dieter smiled. Albus could tell that Gellert possessed the ability to assess the situation and cut all formalities short whenever people needed to feel more at ease. Madam Bagshot became positively perky at the prospect of presenting her handsome relative.

"Now, can I proudly announce that Gellert here has the honour of being one of the brightest students who have ever attended Durmstrang? And they don't admit just anyone."

"I was lucky enough to make the acquaintance of several bright minds," Gellert protested modestly, looking over at his friend.

The latter did not shy away from the compliment, though his smile was devoid of arrogance. If anything, Albus fully believed him to be a thorough and serious student. It was unusual for a wizard to be able to pass for a Muggle this flawlessly, and on the day of his arrival, Dieter had been dressed as a prim and proper Muggle.

They went to table, the boys now more favourably disposed towards each other. Gellert broke the silence first.

"Dieter here is a great admirer of Goethe despite the latter's Muggle origin...very scandalous, as far as Auntie is concerned."

"Now, now, I am first and foremost a historian, my boy," Madam Bagshot disagreed, "I fully acknowledge great minds, be they wizards or Muggles. The fact remains that the man's ideas...great as they were...were dangerous in their own right."

His interest roused, Albus considered the two German wizards, lowering his already forgotten drink.

"Truly? I had the great pleasure of reading Faustus...sadly, using an English translation, albeit an excellent one. I can only imagine the beauty of the verses in their original language. In fact, I deeply appreciate Schiller's plays. It's debatable, of course, but I feel there is nothing quite like the atmosphere of theatre. What about yourself, Mr Grindelwald? Do you have a preference?"

"Both thinkers deserve our respect," Gellert replied readily. "I feel their greatest works come from later in their lives when they worked together. Unlike many in their position, they weren't focused on a single discipline, you see...they dabbled in history, politics, science, literature. This combined knowledge allowed them to gain a full picture, and by joining their wits, they created what perhaps solitude could never have achieved. It is often the collaboration of talent and friendship that produces true gems."

It was a very different answer from the one Albus had expected, and he contemplated the idea for a few seconds, half-wondering if he had imagined the elusive complicity in the other boy's words.

His eyes narrowed, not in a hostile manner but in attention, as if trying to glimpse all the way to the bottom of that extraordinary person.

"I quite agree." He paused. "Forgive my curiosity, but could it be you were born in England? Only, your manner of speaking is more elegant than that of most Englishmen."

Gellert flashed him a truly appreciative if modest smile.

"Oh, no, I wasn't; but thank you, Mr Dumbledore. My father was of English descent, so I grew up speaking the language."

"He was my nephew," Madam Bagshot chimed in, bringing a meat pie to the table. "My dear late nephew, was he a talented young man! And Gellert here was his pride and joy...an equally skilled wizard, one of the best in Durmstrang. It's all in the blood, like they say."

Albus gave her a polite nod, as if to agree, but was rather impatient to hear more of Gellert's story. "So you come from Germany, is that right? Or perhaps Austria?"

Gellert looked a little apologetic on behalf of his great-aunt, though he quickly took over the reins of the conversation to satisfy Albus's curiosity.

"What on earth gave me away? Not my horrid accent, I hope?" he exclaimed. "But very well guessed, Mr Dumbledore; my mother was from South Bavaria...very close to Austria...though I myself partly grew up in Hanover. Dieter here is from a rather Northern part of the Empire, where they speak Low German. Needless to say, I need to be led by hand wherever I happen to come for a visit."

Dieter nodded in confirmation. Against his will, Albus found himself grinning at Gellert's self-deprecating humour. He was now burning to ask more questions yet was afraid of giving too enthusiastic an impression, both because the other, quieter German boy was not receiving as much attention and because he was not *supposed* to be enjoying himself while in deep mourning. After acknowledging the answer with a smile, he took a bite of the meat pie, his mind more excited than it had been since the exams.

"I hear you are rather fond of Transfiguration, Mr Dumbledore?" Gellert asked in turn.

"Fond?" Bathilda interrupted. "Ah, dear Albus is the most brilliant student to have attended Hogwarts in decades! Now, I was sceptical at first when he approached me for help on getting his paper published, but when I took a closer look, I was impressed. All the more so, considering how... Ah, my dear boy, you truly are uncommonly gifted."

Caught in the process of sipping water, Albus fought the impulse to hide behind his goblet, his face the colour of a tomato. It was pleasant to hear Madam Bagshot praise him, truly, but for some reason, the compliment made him feel more insecure. Not only had she practically discredited the rest of his family; he also felt as though such trivial achievements weighed nothing next to Gellert's type of brilliance. Grades and trophies were a trifle when in competition with an agile mind and charisma.

"You are too kind, Madam Bagshot," he uttered.

"Vot eez 'Ogwarts like?" Dieter asked, coming promptly to Albus's rescue. His friend looked equally interested in the matter.

Albus mentally reproached himself for not having paid the timid boy more attention from the start.

"It's a very beautiful castle in the mountains, overseeing a lake," he started; and indeed, the fond reminiscence washed away his embarrassment in a wink. "It was founded

in 11th century by the four greatest British witches and wizards. They established a House system that bears their names and is maintained to this day. Due to its age and history, the castle has many different manifestations of magic: ghosts, animated armours, moving staircases, even a Poltergeist. Our Headmaster, professor Dippet, has been at his post for over two hundred years."

Madam Bagshot made a sound of disdain, though her mouth was too full to allow her to speak.

"Durmstrang was founded two centuries later by a rather extraordinary Bulgarian witch," Gellert returned, smiling. "The castle itself may not look impressive at first glance since most of it is hidden in the mountains, but the sheer extent of the place, the crystal-clear, ice-blue lake, the endless stars in the night sky and the aurora borealis reflected in the waters... All of it is breathtaking, to say the least."

His companion nodded enthusiastically at these words.

"Eet eez ze second 'ome to us."

"You must forgive us, Mr Dumbledore; I suppose it is natural for us to be rather fond of our respective schools," Gellert commented hastily upon noticing that Albus had stopped eating at the sound of this slightly melancholic reminiscence. "That being said, I do wish our schools...as well as the wizarding society in general...paid more attention to magical cooperation. I'd say it is rather neglected at the moment, wouldn't you agree?"

"I certainly would," Albus replied seriously, his food forgotten for the second time. "It's been centuries since the Triwizard Tournament was organised, and even though the reason behind its cancellation is understandable, it's a pity we cannot have more exchanges between schools or encourage all the students to seek penfriends. They say it is important to guard a school's secrets, but truth be told, how can one steal a secret? The schools have been there for centuries, and they will remain so. Each of them has its own magic. For my part, I would have found it fascinating to visit Durmstrang and attend a few lessons that aren't taught at Hogwarts. Knowledge is expanded by challenging ourselves, not remaining rooted in our old ways."

"Not to mention the mutual benefits both parties would receive," Gellert agreed. "Imagine how much time we could spare if we could simply learn something that has already been invented somewhere else, rather than try to come up with a weaker solution on our own. Secrecy, on the other hand...no matter which way I look at it...ends up being more harmful than beneficial. When there is no reliable knowledge exchange, it often leads to an atmosphere of fear and mistrust, which, in turn, rarely results in anything good."

"Now, now, boys," Bathilda protested, "you are young and...forgive me for saying so...rather idealistic. The Statute of Secrecy was put in place for our own protection, and by much older and wiser wizards than yourselves. And don't you give me that look, Gellert; I am far more knowledgeable than a boy freshly out of school. It's all due to too much dangerous literature, upon my word..."

She then muttered something under her breath that sounded suspiciously like *Goethe*, as if to mock the boys even further.

It punctured their momentum like a balloon. A little disappointed, Albus seized his cutlery to finish his piece of pie. He thought of Ariana and of the way his parents had lied to the authorities about her condition, knowing she would otherwise be taken from them and secluded in St. Mungo's as a threat to the Statute of Secrecy. He thought of the way his father had been sent to Azkaban while the Muggle boys who had tormented little Ariana had been healed and Obliviated to walk away unpunished.

"It's an excellent pie, Madam Bagshot," he remarked politely.

This seemed to put her back in her good spirits. "You're welcome, my dear boy. Ah, you need to be careful to eat well, now that the circumstances... have changed. Learning to make a few dishes can save your life, even if you do have a preference for academia. I dare say you will love the pudding. My raisin pound cake...let me fetch it."

She walked out into the kitchen, and Albus caught sight of Gellert's expression, which appeared to be slightly concerned. He answered with a minute shake of his head and a smile to indicate everything was all right.

"To be perfectly honest, I agree with you," he whispered before Madam Bagshot came back in with a new tray.

"Zo your favourite lesson eez Transfiguration, or?" Dieter asked to resume the general conversation.

"It is," Albus nodded. He had to marvel at the boy's tactful, unassuming demeanour. "I like Defense Against the Dark Arts as well. Every discipline is unique, to be fair. What is your favourite?"

"History of Magic," Dieter admitted. "Zere eez not much to do wiz a wand, yes, but ze debates and discussions are very interesting."

"Mine is choir practice," Gellert affirmed lightly.

Bathilda rolled her eyes.

"Now honestly, Gellert...singing with witches...Albus here won't take you seriously any more. Choir practice, Merlin's beard; thank goodness we are in a small company. Keep that up, and the whole village will turn you into a laughing stock."

Gellert only shrugged and smiled at Albus in a conspiratorial manner, as if it had been his intention all along to annoy Madam Bagshot.

"Wizards are in the choir too, Auntie," he said innocently.

Dieter was now laughing as well. It had worked like a charm, and despite himself, Albus joined in.

"Is it true? I do love music, very much so. Is there... uh, is there any chance you would sing something for us?"

It was half a joke, for only ladies ever sang at dinners, and that exclusively when wanting to impress their suitors. He was genuinely curious, though. And to his amazement, Gellert met the suggestion with a grin.

"Why, certainly. Can we, Auntie?"

She grimaced. "If Albus insists... only for his sake, so be it. You know how to use a clavichord, do you not?"

And a moment later, she and Albus were seated in armchairs while Gellert positioned himself at the old instrument Madam Bagshot appeared to have inherited from her ancestors. Had it not been for magic, it would have been long out of tune. The two German boys proceeded to sing *Lux Praecantationis*, an energetic and yet transcendent ballad that thoroughly enchanted Albus. He himself had never attended the choir lessons at Hogwarts, not due to shyness but because there simply had been no time left, what with his Head Boy duties and the extra lessons he had been taking.

He found himself observing Gellert's straight posture, his relaxed gestures, the small flame of enthusiasm in his eyes while he sang, as well as the graceful manner in which his hands moved over the keys. It felt like a trance of sorts with Albus's sight and hearing becoming one. He did not even realise it until the music died down and Madam Bagshot's voice rang out feet away from his ear.

"But you are tired, Albus dear. Just look at you. I shouldn't have kept you this late. Off with you, my boy, you need bed rest. You've been through a lot already."

Jolting from what felt like a daydream, Albus looked up, a little languid and pink in the face but more comfortable than he had felt in a while.

"I'm all right, Madam Bagshot. I only meant to..."

"You need rest. Come now, my boy; Gellert isn't going anywhere for the whole summer, so you will have plenty of opportunities to converse. I trust you to talk some sense into him. Some English manners wouldn't go amiss either, Merlin knows."

And rather more quickly than expected, Albus was escorted to the door, having only fleetingly wished the boys a good night. For a second, it had seemed as though Dieter had given him a penetrating look.

As he crossed over to his house, he reflected what an enjoyable affair that night's dinner had been, even with Bathilda Bagshot's rants. Gellert was quite unlike any other young man he had met so far: he had an answer ready to any question, and all his thoughts were invariably unique, well thought-out and articulated with utmost eloquence. Indeed, it occurred to Albus that Gellert would have been able to make an unendurable demand sound easy and inviting if his attention came as a reward. This was not an easy talent to handle. Besides, the boy held a palpable sway over Madam Bagshot, who became somewhat more cultured and polite in his presence. As for Dieter, what Albus had initially taken for meekness had proven to be delicate manners and an impressive amount of consideration. There was warmth to that young German, and pure decency.

His hat floated towards the coat stand when Albus entered the hall. Now that he was back in the tense family home, he was certain he would receive an earful for having enjoyed a delicious dinner in an erudite company while his sister was confined to the house and his brother was up to his neck in chores.

This certitude all but intensified at the sight of Aberforth kindling fire with his wand in the sitting room, his face set in an ominous scowl. They had parted badly before dinner after all.

"How is Ari?" Albus asked softly.

Aberforth stared back at him. It was plain he had been considering pursuing their argument...he was not a person to let go of resentment easily...but in the end, he must have reconsidered, for his voice betrayed but a spark of anger.

"Don't wake her up," he said. "It's been an ordeal for her." After a few minutes of silence, he spoke again. "I told Ari the *Shadow* will not be coming back to hurt us...that we will protect her." He met Albus's gaze. "It means we *must* protect her, do you understand?"

Albus let himself slide into an armchair, a sigh ready to escape his chest. It had now been nearly eight years since Ariana's magic, repressed by her fear and trauma, had morphed into an Obscurus, the parasitic force that threatened to lash out at the slightest provocation. But it had been getting worse in the last years. For all of Kendra's strong will, she had possessed a short and impatient temper, and one of her tantrums was what had caused this repressed magical force to go on a rampage, Albus was certain of it. Fortunately, Ariana did not remember causing her mother's death, for the fit had knocked her out. Yet on some level, she appeared to understand what had happened. Perhaps it was for the purpose of coping with this knowledge that her fear of her parasitic twin had conjured the notion of this disconnected *Shadow*.

"We *are* protecting her," Albus said.

He had no idea what they were going to do. None at all.

"You have to stay in the house from now on," Aberforth declared. "No more dinners with the gossip and her flashy relatives. A few chores won't kill you; it's not like you can't cook yourself."

Albus arched an eyebrow; he could not help it. If Aberforth ever happened to be in a position to lead, he would face rebellions left and right, provoked for no other reason but to spite him.

"How do you imagine our future?" he asked wearily. "The three of us never leaving the house for the rest of our lives?"

Aberforth glared at him. "You really don't care, do you?"

"I do care," Albus retorted. "And I know you do as well, Aberforth, but...and I'm sorry to say so...you reason like a child. What you propose is impossible for many reasons. One of which is that you have to go back to school in September. I will not have you drop out."

"You can't give me orders," his brother objected, firing up at once. "If you can't be bothered to protect Ari, I will do it."

He turned on his heels and ascended the stairs at a run.

"I'm the head of the family now," Albus called after him, his tone exhausted, "and I can give you as many orders as I deem right."

All he got in response was the sound of a door being slammed. Then there was silence.

**AN:** It should be noted that the authors of this story do not view Gellert Grindelwald as an incarnation of evil but rather as his own person (his personality has been pieced together from the tiny clues scattered across the last HP book rather than the later cash-grabbing films). As such, there are more complicated reasons for the events unravelling the way they did.

This being said, any opinions will be appreciated!