

**Albus Potter and the Dragonfang Wand**

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## Chapter 1: The Twisted Street

Of all the dark and lonely streets in the village of Carpelcobber, none would ever expect anything sinister or dark to happen on this one. This street was long and winding, twisting into various paths that led into a series of row homes, all of which were the same, dusty, grey color. It was a mundane street. A street no one would pay attention to. A street that would be perfect for hiding something.

The residents of this particular village were friendly enough. They helped each other, greeted one another when passing down the twisted streets, and were more than willing to welcome a new neighbor into their village. And yet, there was one member of the village who didn't seem to want to be welcomed.

The biggest row home, which sat on the edge of the longest and most twisted street, had been empty for decades. But a few years ago, however, someone had bought it. This person, whomever they may be, was rarely seen. The windows were always shut with the curtains drawn, so that no one could see their face, the door was always locked, so that no one could enter, and hardly a sound was heard from within it. To the pleasant villagers of Carpelcobber, the person who resided in that house did not want to be known. It was almost as if they were hiding.

It would come as no surprise to learn that on this particular warm summer night, no one was out on the twisted street leading up the house of the unknown resident. Why would they be? Nothing ever occurred there anyway.

But if someone *had been* outside on the street, they certainly would have been baffled to see someone appear there, in the middle of the street, with no car to drop him off. In fact, the only thing that even showed that this person had appeared was the loud *crack!* that came with them.

No one bothered to look out of their windows on this night, it was just a loud sound after all. It was nearly midnight, of course, which made it most unusual that there would be any noise at all, but it was just a noise. A harmless *crack!* It wasn't as if someone had just suddenly appeared there, or anything like that. As the villagers knew, that was impossible. Humans couldn't simply just appear out of no where.

The person who was now standing in the middle of the street following the loud noise was now glaring up at the big house at the end of the street. He (or was it a she?) was wearing a dark cloak. It was the darkest cloak anyone could have ever seen, though of course, no one bothered to look. Their hood was drawn up over their face; this person, whomever they were, did not want to be seen either.

The cloaked figure quietly walked down the twisted street, careful not to make any noise as they did so. The night sky made it very hard for this person to see, but it was probably better this way. This way, *no one* could see what was about to occur.

The cloaked figure was now directly in front of the door of the big house. They did not knock, nor did they seem to make any attempt to alert the house owner of their presence. They seemed

to know it was locked however, as the cloaked figure had silently plunged their hand into their cloak and pulled out a long thin stick. The second that they had done so, they tapped the doorknob with the stick, and a small clicking noise let them know that the door was now open.

Slowly, the hooded figure pushed the door open and walked inside. They found themselves in what looked like a reasonably comfortable sitting room.

There was a small couch in the corner, and a table that still had a dirty plate on it. The fire in the fireplace was certainly lit, but was almost out, and the rocking chair in front of it looked quite comfortable indeed. And it was still rocking. Whoever was just sitting in it had evidently just gotten up, and would no doubt be returning to it soon.

The cloaked figure took another look around, and began calculating their next move. There were two doorways in this very comfortable sitting room. One in the corner that looked battered, and the other directly next to the rocking chair, which seemed slightly more taken care of.

Before the cloaked figure had time to pick however, the door next to the rocking chair swung open. In the few seconds it was open, what looked like a brightly lit kitchen could be seen.

Standing in the doorway was a man who had not been seen the entire time that he had resided in the village. He had very thin glasses and a tuft of thick auburn hair that hung over one side of his head. He was very lanky, and was wearing robes of a deep midnight blue.

The man was not merely standing there staring though. In one hand, he had what looked like a very thin paperback book that was partially opened, and in the other, a small white cup that may have held tea. It was not hard to know the situation. The person had apparently been reading by the fire when they left to the kitchen, but upon returning, was not alone.

The cloaked figure stood still near the entrance to the house. The man with the thin glasses had resumed sitting down in their rocking chair, and was now back to reading his book. He had not noticed the dark figure in his doorway.

Realizing that they had not been noticed, the hooded figure, still holding the thin stick in their hand, closed the door behind them and walked forward one, maybe two steps.

The sound of the closing door snapped the man who was reading out of his concentration, he now stood up and backed against the wall near the fireplace, dropping the tea that he had been holding in one hand, and still clinging to the book in the other.

"What do you want!" the thin man with glasses demanded.

The cloaked figure did not speak. They took another step forward, but remained still after that. They were obviously counting on the terrified man before them to steer the conversation.

"I said what do you want!" the thin man repeated, now eyeing the thin stick warily. "Who are you?" he said, now slightly more nervous.

The cloaked figure once again stepped forward, and this time raised the thin stick in front of them, pointing it directly at the cowering man before them. Once more, they did not speak; they seemed to think that holding the stick up was threatening enough.

The cowering man was still near the fireplace, but a look of dawning realization seemed to have struck him. "You want the wand, don't you?" he said plainly.

The cloaked figure nodded their head.

"What's wrong? Yours isn't good enough?" he asked, motioning his head towards the thin stick in the hooded figure's hand.

The cloaked figure once more failed to speak. They had apparently not even heard the last comment, and had remained focused on the same spot since nodding their head.

The thin man seemed to have relaxed a little; the knowledge of why the intruder was there seemed to comfort him slightly. He crouched down and peered upwards, his eyes narrowed, trying to see who was under the hood of the cloak. "Ahh...is that you, Sebastian?" he said after a moment.

The man known as Sebastian did nothing but continue to stare, hand still firmly gripped on their wand.

The thin man was now smiling slightly. "It's a shame, Sebastian, it really is. You're doing this at his bidding aren't you?"

Sebastian tightened his grip on the wand even further, and there was no denying that he looked up slightly at these words, somewhat surprised.

"Oh yes, I've heard the rumors. It's hard, when you're surrounded by muggles, but I know a thing or two about what's going on. I never pinned you down as a follower though" the thin man said pompously.

Sebastian raised his wand and stepped forward so that it was now level with the man's face. He watched as the color drained from it, and the thin man's smile flickered.

"I'm afraid you're wasting your time. And his time. It isn't here" he said through gritted teeth, beads of sweat now trickling down his forehead.

Sebastian remained where he was standing, his wand just inches from his victim's face. He showed no sign of fear, no sign of what could be eventual remorse. He was giving him a chance...

"I said it isn't here, Sebastian!" the man yelled. "I sent it to the Ministry in London days ago. It's in the Department of Mysteries, where it belongs!"

The cloaked figure known as Sebastian took a few steps back, and in an instant, a jet of green light had burst from the tip of his wand. The rushing of the wind put out the small fire in the fireplace, and the green light collided with the thin man's stomach, pressing him up against the wall, off of his feet for several seconds, before he fell to the ground, huddled up against the cold stone. Blood trickled down the side of his head as his lopsided glasses fell off of his face, but it didn't matter. He had been dead the second that the green light had touched him.

Sebastian pulled the man away from the wall by his legs and began searching his robes, as if expecting to find something. There was nothing there. Had he been telling the truth? Had he really sent the wand away? But he couldn't have been...he must still have it. Had the wand been sent to the Ministry, then certainly, he would have known.

He had known that he would have to kill the second that the man identified him, but it would have been much easier to keep him alive long enough to torture the wand's whereabouts out of him. He was always doing that...killing when it wasn't necessary.

He stepped over the lifeless body on the ground and walked towards the battered looking door at the other end of the room. He would simply have to search for it. He pushed the door open and found himself in what looked like a dark workshop.

There were long tables with various pieces of wood stretched across them, wands not unlike the one that he had just used to take his victim's life. There were large shelves in the corners, of what looked like ingredients of some sort-wand cores. He could see Phoenix feathers at the top of the shelf, feathers that would never get to be wands. A few shelves below were containers of what he knew was Unicorn hair, and next to it, a container of Grindylow scales. On the bottommost shelf, there was even what looked like Chimaera hair.

The shelf across from this one had hundreds of thin boxes on it, boxes that no doubt contained wands. Was this wandmaker foolish enough to keep it here? Was he under the impression that he was completely hidden, that no one would ever come looking for it?

Sebastian strode towards the shelf and began removing random boxes from it, opening them up and throwing them at his feet. They were all shapes and sizes, and all appeared to very well made, but they were not the one that he needed to find.

In being honest with himself, he knew that he would not be able to recognize the wand he was looking for by sight alone. He had been told that when he found it, he would know. And so he continued rifling through box after box, becoming increasingly irritated as he did so.

And just when he was about to give up hope, he saw it. A thin golden box in the corner of the shelf, looking extremely dusty, as though it had not been opened for some time. He reached out and picked it up gently, then opened it.

He saw the strangest wand that he had ever seen within the box. It was slightly thinner than his own, but unnaturally long, and it was, like its case, a deep gold in color. But the handle-the handle was what was truly strange. It was jet black, blacker than the sky outside, blacker than the

cloak that he was wearing to conceal his identity. And it was curved and pointed at the end, as though it were a tooth. Or a fang.

He gently picked up the wand and held it in his hands. It did not feel any different than a usual wand. It gave him no sense of increased power, and yet, for some reason, *he* felt different. He could not explain it, but he knew. This was the wand that he was seeking. This is the wand that he had been told to retrieve.

*Of course*, he thought. How could he have ever believed that this man, however foolish he might be, would have sent this away? No one in their right mind would send away this treasure.

He placed it back in its golden case and tucked it deep inside his cloak. He walked away from the shelf and the discarded wands at his feet. He knew that he was doing a very poor job at concealing the nature of what had occurred here. If anyone knew of the wand's existence, they would know that it had been taken, and that its owner had been killed because of it. But he didn't care. He had what he had come for.

Stepping over his victim's body once more, he left through the door and out into the open street. He stared once more around the twisted street, wondering if anyone had seen the flash of green light, but alas, on this typical, twisted, dark street, no one seemed to notice. And with a whirl of his cloak, and another loud *crack!* the figure was gone.

## Chapter 2 : Broomsticks And Birthdays

### RUSSIAN WANDMAKER MURDERED

*Vladimir Chekov, famed wandmaker for several years, was found murdered in his home yesterday, by the looks of what may have been the Killing Curse. Wizarding authorities say that no one bared witness to the act, or indeed, an intruder of any kind, though it was commented upon that he lived in a generally secure muggle village in Moscow.*

*Chekov's reasons for residing there are unknown, as it is classified information by not only the Russian Ministry of Magic, but by our very own. Chekov proudly lived in London for most of his life, but a few years ago, unexpectedly vanished. Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister of Magic, admitted that his location was indeed known by the Ministry.*

*Vladimir Chekov is survived by no children, and had no previous recorded marriages. His friends who are closest to him, however, have claimed that what he most prized was his work, and that he considered "every wand he made to be one of his children."*

*The reasons for the murder are unclear, but it appears as though it must have been done by an outsider, as there is no registered wizard within ten miles of his home. When asked if anything was missing, Auror Ronald Weasley was quick to sardonically claim "Well, he was missing a bit of blood" before slamming the door in the interviewer's face.*

*Harry "The Boy Who Lived" Potter, conqueror of Lord Voldemort and Auror in the same department as Weasley, did make an official statement that he found the murder to be "highly irregular" and that he was doing his best to determine both the cause and the culprit. Some sources however, claim that may very well be exactly what he wants you to think.*

*Rita Skeeter, famed author of such best selling novels as "The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore" and "Cornelius Fudge - The True Hero of the Second War" says "I have known and been a friend of Harry since he was a teenager, and I can assure you, if anybody is likely to try and cover up a murder plot, its hi-"*

Albus tossed the *Daily Prophet* away from his hands with fury. Not because of what Skeeter had said, his Aunt Hermione had long since told him not to believe her, or because of the murder of this wandmaker, for he had never even heard of him before. No, he was mad because today was his birthday. Today was the day that he wanted to spend with his family. And today was the day that his father got called into work to investigate a stupid murder that happened a million miles away.

*Who cares?* He thought to himself bitterly. People get murdered *all of the time*. It's not new. But how many birthdays would he get to spend with his father? His father, who was too busy to talk last year, and was in the office almost every day this summer. His father, who was apparently the

only Auror in the entire Ministry of Magic. His father, who had *promised* him that he would be here for his birthday.

He stepped over the discarded newspaper and walked down the stairs of the Potter Mansion, eventually finding himself in the kitchen, where his mother was busying herself with what looked like an exquisite birthday dinner.

"Al" she said when he walked in. "Your father left a message. He said he promised that he would be here before we sing happy birthday."

She tried to muster a smile, but could not do so. He knew that she was very aware of how disappointed he was, even if she tried not to show it. She began prodding the flame on the stove under the roast beef with her wand, and wiped a large amount of sweat from her brow.

Albus merely sat down at the kitchen table, looking very bored indeed. After a moment, she turned back around to face him.

"Why don't you go open some of your presents now?" she asked.

Albus shrugged. "I'll wait for dad" he told her.

"Maybe you should write a letter to your friends? Tell them it's your birthday!" she said.

"They already know. I got two letters this morning. Both of them wished me happy birthday" he said through gritted teeth. His father, who had left before Albus had woken up, had not yet done so.

Morrison Vincent and Scorpius Malfoy were easily his two best friends at school, both in Slytherin like him. He and Scorpius had gotten off to a rocky start-in fact, if he remembered correctly, he had come very close to being attacked by him, but only because he had been spying on him. Morrison was his friend from the first day on the train, and had been sending letters back and forth all summer. Albus had managed to convince his mother to send him a signed Quaffle, to which Morrison had sent three owls in a single day, all of them bearing his thanks.

One of his other best friends, if you were to exclude his cousin Rose, was Mirra Tunnels. Or at least they had been. They had been arguing when they had their last conversation, and the last time he had seen her, she had been unconscious. He didn't even know if she would be attending Hogwarts this year.

Both Morrison and Scorpius had sent him birthday cards and presents, both of which turned out to be a very large assortment of sweets. He had been in such a good mood this morning when he woke up to their owls tapping at his window. But that was before he walked downstairs and learned from his mother that his father had been called into work to "investigate."



"Well then...your brother should be out in the field practicing Quidditch. Why don't you go talk to him? I don't think he's wished you happy birthday yet!" his mother said, snapping him out of his gloomy thoughts.

Albus shrugged again. He knew what she was doing. She was trying to keep him busy enough so that he wouldn't notice that his dad was missing from this very important day. Deciding that he had might as well do something to cheer up, he departed for the kitchen and out onto the field, where sure enough, his brother could be seen streaking around the sky like a bullet on his broomstick.

He approached him and looked up at the sky as his brother soared to the ground in a spectacular dive. He pulled upwards at the last second though, and with a broad grin flew directly at Albus.

"Hey!" Albus shouted as he ducked for cover, but there was no need, for his brother had made an abrupt stop just inches from his face.

"Do you have to do that every time?" Albus shot at him as he wiped the grass off of his knees. "It gets really annoying after a while."

James hopped off of his broomstick, leaving it floating in the air as he ruffled his hair, sending it into a tangled mess. "Sorry" he said with a smirk, though he clearly didn't mean it. "How's your birthday so far?" he asked.

Albus gave a shrug for the third time today. It seemed like the best answer to use.

"Heard about dad?" James asked him, his smile faltering slightly.

"Yeah. Mum says he'll be here for cake though."

"Oh...well that's good. Did I get any letters?" he asked hastily.

Albus rolled his eyes. It was the first morning that he could remember all summer where James *didn't* get a letter. He had begun dating a girl named Denise at the end of last year, who, like him, would be going into their fourth year this coming term. However, she was in Ravenclaw, making her an extra special prize for James, who claimed that "Ravenclaws were much too clever to fall for his usual charms" and that he had apparently gone through a great deal of effort to get her.

Despite being happy for his brother (and slightly sorry for Denise, who would no doubt be dumped before the Hogwarts Express left) he was extremely irked by their means of communication. It seemed that whether it be that she enjoyed her breakfast, thought of something funny, or took a particularly fresh breath of air, she had to let her boyfriend know about it at once. On more than one occasion, he had been woken up by the sound of his mother complaining at four thirty in the morning about owls tapping on the window.

James was hardly better. He frequently left the dinner table to send a letter mid sentence, having just thought of something that he knew Denise might possibly find almost remotely entertaining.

"No" Albus replied, watching the smile completely slide off of his brother's face this time.

He continued watching his brother fly around for what seemed like a good hour (though it was actually about ten minutes) listening to the insults that he only put up with because he knew that James was right.

Albus was terrified of flying. As far as he was concerned, people weren't meant to fly. And they weren't built to survive falls from one hundred feet in the sky either, so why cheat fate?

"C'mon, just get on the back" James said pleadingly as he slid up on his broomstick a bit further. "I won't go high. Once you get used to it, you'll really enjoy it. And you'll be really good too."

"How do you know?" Albus asked.

"Because *everyone* in our family is good, Al."

"Boys! Our guests are here!" came a voice from the mansion.

James shouldered his broomstick and followed Albus back into the mansion, where their guests had indeed arrived. All of them.

His Uncle Percy waved to him pompously from the corner of the room as Albus walked directly through the mess of people that were now talking. Everyone that had attended the previous Christmas was there, with the exception of the Scamanders-and his father.

Many of them stopped talking to wave to him, others were holding up large, wrapped, gifts. All of them began wishing him happy birthday, and Grandma Weasley even pinched his cheeks and said "My little Al is almost a teenager!"

Albus managed to shake his family off and entered the kitchen once more to find his mother decorating his cake.

"Out out out!" she hissed at him, doing her best to block the cake from his vision. "I don't want you to see it yet!"

And so Albus had to endure his entire family for more than twenty minutes, all of them asking him questions about his first year at Hogwarts, about being the first in his family to be in Slytherin, about if he would be trying out for Quidditch, and numerous other things that Albus had grown tired of answering.

As if his mother could sense the danger, she burst through the door of the kitchen and into the living room holding up a gigantic cake. "Okay...so who's ready?" she asked.

There was a murmuring from the large crowd of people as Uncle Bill conjured a gigantic table out of thin air, right in the center of the room. His mother lowered the emerald green cake onto the table, where in sleek silver letters he could see the words "Happy Birthday Albus".

His mother lit the thirteen candles atop the cake with a wave of her wand, then cast Albus a sad look. He instantly knew what had happened. His father would not be able to make it home to sing happy birthday.

The rest of the family looked around nervously, unsure of whether or not they should begin singing without his father there. Eventually however, they seemed to decide there was no point in letting the candles melt, and there was a sharp intake of breath to begin singing.

"Wait a minute-where's Harry?" he heard his Uncle Ron ask.

"Ron!" Albus' mother hissed. Even his daughter, Rose, said "Dad, honestly, you've got no tact!"

"Harry couldn't make it" his mother said. "He got called into the office earlier."

"Over this Chekov thing?" he heard Uncle Ron ask incredulously. "Blimey, why didn't he just ask me to fill in for him, I would-"

"Start singing!" he heard his mother screech, and the loud singing from the rest of his family drowned out his uncle.

Albus sat there staring at his cake with what he hoped was a happy expression, listening to the chorus of "happy birthday" ringing in his ears. What was so important that his father had to break his promise? Would he even be home tonight?

He heard someone shout out "make a wish" and, snapped back to his senses, he gave a tremendous blow that took all of the candles out, thinking to himself *I wish that my dad had more time to be home.*

His entire family began clapping and pulling their gifts towards him. He sat down at the table giving thanks and tearing open presents.

He received the usuals. Numerous Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes products from his Uncle George, some of which were not even available to the customers yet, books on everything from dragons to the history of Hogwarts' prefects, and a rather large amount of sweets. His parents had given him a large amount of gold for spending money, and now there was only one package left. It was long and, and he tore it open with curiosity.

He let the broomstick roll out onto the floor amidst many "ohh's" from his family. Whether you liked Quidditch or not, or even flying for that matter, it was hard to not be impressed. The broomstick was a dark brown, but sleek and shiny all the same. It wasn't bent at all, but rather curved for comfort. Every inch of it looked state of the art.

"Who got-" he started.

"That would be me" he heard his brother say.

"Your brother has been saving up for a long time" his mother said with a small smile.

Albus turned to his brother in shock.

"It's the best broom out" his brother told him. "It's called a Lightning's Edge. I was kind of hoping we could be on the same team at Hogwarts...but now that I think about it, I'd rather be playing against you anyway."

Albus looked at him in confusion. "I can't fly."

"You can once I teach you. Trust me, it's easy, and it's addictive" he told him.

Albus looked down at the beautiful broomstick in his hands. He did not want to fly now anymore than he did yesterday, when he was just as afraid of heights, but his brother had been saving up for it for so long...

"Erm...ok" he said. "I'll let you teach me" he added, with what he hoped was a convincing smile.

He began passing the broom around the room, where many people held it and whispered to each other excitedly. After about an hour, it was getting dark and people began leaving, patting him on the shoulders and wishing him happy birthday once more. Once Aunt Hermione had left with Hugo and Rose, his Uncle Ron, the last family member left, turned to him.

"I'm sorry your dad couldn't make it Al" he said with a frown.

Albus stared at him blankly. "It's fine" he lied.

"Albus you look tired, honey" his mother told him as she waved her wand once, and all of the wrapping paper on the ground vanished. "Why don't you go up to bed?" she added soothingly.

Albus kissed her goodnight and went to his room in silence. He felt bad, not only because he hadn't had a very good birthday, but because he knew that it had upset his mother. He lay there in his room, tucked in under his blanket, desperately trying to sleep, and cursing his father under his breath.

*Would he even be back tonight?* he asked himself. How many days would he go without seeing his father? Was one man's murder really so important? So strange? That he couldn't even attend his own son's birthday party?

*Crack.*

Albus shot up from his pillow. He knew that sound, even if it was from a distance. The opening of a door from the bottom floor confirmed it. His father had just Apparated home from work.

Quietly, he crept out of his bed and down the stairs. He could hear his uncle and his father both talking in the kitchen.

He surreptitiously moved towards the kitchen door and pressed his ear against it.

"...I think we can rule out Anifur though" his Uncle Ron was saying. "He's much too low in his department."

"Only problem is, you don't need to be very high up to hear a scrap of information" he heard his father say. "And recent activity in York suggests that they're finally staying put too. I think it's all connected."

"Did you tell Kingsley?" he heard his mother ask, before taking what sounded like a long sip of tea.

"I don't have to, he already knows" his father said. "But he's pulling a Fudge and ignoring it. I can hardly blame him. He's much too busy worrying about what's going on inside of the Ministry than out. You wouldn't believe who he made me question!"

Albus had no idea what the Minister of Magic had to do with chocolate, but now was the time to make his presence known. He pushed the door open and walked into the kitchen.

His Uncle Ron and his father were sitting at the large table while his mother sat above the stove, frying an egg. Apparently, his father was just getting to eat now. The conversation stopped abruptly and they all turned to him.

"Hi" his father said, looking guilty.

Perhaps it was simply because he had barely gotten the chance to see him all summer, but Albus thought that his father looked different. His cheeks were sunken and there were large bags under his eyes due to lack of sleep. He was still wearing his usual grin, but it looked out of place on his pale, overworked face.

Albus didn't answer back, but simply took a seat at the kitchen table.

"I thought you were in bed" his dad continued.

"Hoping you could go the entire day without seeing me?" Albus shot at him.

His father frowned. "I deserved that" he said. "I tried to make it back before you had your cake, I wasn't even planning on going in today at all-"

"Then why did you?" Albus cut him off.

"Don't interrupt your father, Albus" his mother said sternly.

"I want to know what was more important!" Albus exclaimed.

"Calm down" his father told him, while his uncle starting staring around the room as if he wasn't there. "Did you hear about the murder?" his father asked him.

"Yes" Albus said. "But I don't see how-"

"I'm going to tell you" his father said. "I got called into work today to investigate that murder" he said.

"Obviously" Albus said in a bored voice. "But why is it so important?"

At this, he saw his father exchange a quick glance with his uncle. "I can't tell you" his father told him.

Albus gave him an outraged look. He was right about to start an argument when he heard his uncle say "Oh go on, Harry."

They exchanged another glance, but this time continued looking at each other. "I don't want to tell him something that's going to scare him" he said quietly.

"I won't get scared!" Albus said, but both of them seemed to ignore him.

"He's twelve now Harry" his uncle said. "At his age, you were fighting a basilisk."

"He's right" his mother said as she poured another small cup of tea. "I was there" she added with a cynical smile.

His father heaved a huge sigh and turned back to Albus. "Well I'm obviously outnumbered" he said, giving his wife a glare. "So I'll tell you what I can. The reason that this murder is particularly devastating to the Ministry is because no one was supposed to know where the victim was."

"Because he lived in a muggle village?" Albus asked.

"Yes, because we put him there" his father said. "He was under Project Demiguise."

"Project what?" Albus asked.

"Demiguise" his uncle said.

"And it's called that because he was meant to be completely invisible. We put him in that village years ago, for his own safety. And his location was known only to high ranking Ministry authorities."

"But...just because he was hiding doesn't mean he was invincible does it? It's not *that* unusual..."

"I think that you're missing the point Albus" his uncle said. "Think about it. This person was somewhere that only certain people in the Ministry knew. There were no wizards miles from his house. But he was definitely murdered by one. Who could have done it?"

Albus thought about it. "Someone...in the Ministry" he said finally.

"Not necessarily" his father said, ruffling his hair. "But someone in the Ministry definitely told the murderer where he was."

"But they could have done it by accident! Let it slip to anyone."

"True, but it's unlikely. Maybe let slip that he was hidden, but few people know where" his father said.

"Bit unnerving isn't it?" his uncle said. "To know that the guy in the cubicle next to you could be a murderer. Or assisted one. Well not for me, I have an office" he said pompously, and he put his feet up on the table.

"Feet!" Albus' mother hissed, and he immediately took them off.

"So you can imagine how hectic work is" his father continued. "They've got me investigating a murder and a potential leak. It doesn't make me the most popular employee either" he added with a frown.

"But, why were you hiding him in the first place?" Albus asked.

For the third time tonight, his father and uncle exchanged a glance. They both turned back to him and his father said "We can't tell you that. Sorry."

Albus gave a frown and made to leave. He was partially satisfied with his father's answers, it all made sense anyway, but he was disappointed all the same.

"Hey" his father said, stopping him.

Albus turned.

"I'm going to come to Diagon Alley with you tomorrow, to get your books and stuff."

Albus tried not to look too surprised. It was almost always his mother who had gone before, even when James had been starting school. "Really?" he asked.

"Really" his father said.

"Erm...Harry, you just told me you had to go in tomorrow" his uncle said.

"Nothing wrong with bringing a guest" his father said.

Albus turned back to hide his smile and pushed the door open. His father had never taken him to work before. He had just begun walking up the stairs to his room when he heard his father yell something else.

"Happy Birthday, Al" he called up.



### Chapter 3 : Fair And Wilde

Albus awoke the next day with the same sensation that he had woken with the day he was to go to Hogwarts-that of pure excitement. Though still quite early in the morning, with the sun barely up, Albus was quick to slip on his clothes and make his way downstairs.

He was immediately met with the sight of his Uncle Ron fast asleep on the couch in the living room. Despite the many additional rooms in the Potter Mansion, his uncle always tended to sleep there during his stays over. For a moment, he wondered why he had stayed so late and decided to crash, but was snapped out of his thoughts by a loud voice.

"Hey...what are you doing up?" he heard his brother ask.

Albus spun around and saw his brother exiting the kitchen, holding a plate with a large stack of toast on it.

"Dad's going to Diagon Alley with us. And then taking us into his work" he said.

"Yeah I know, Uncle Ron told me. He's bringing Rosie too, her and Aunt Hermione are gonna meet us there."

"Hey, let me get some of that toast" Albus said as he watched his brother take an unusually large bite of the topmost piece.

"Get your own!" his brother shot, dragging the plate away from Albus as he reached for it. "It took me hours to make this!"

"It's just toast!"

"Hey hey, wuzzagoion?" he heard his Uncle Ron murmur as he tried to get up and fell off of the couch.

They both laughed and helped him up. He looked extremely disheveled, and he was still in the robes that he had worn last night.

"Who's yelling?" he said, rubbing his eyes as he staggered back onto the couch.

"No one's yelling Uncle Ron..." they both said.

He continued rubbing his eyes before blinking furiously and saying "What time is it?"

"Early" Albus told him.

"What are you guys doing up?"

"Getting ready to go to Diagon Alley -"

"- Well *he is*" James cut him off. "I was sending a letter to -"

"You were not, you were making toast!" Albus bickered.

"I can do two things at once Al!" his brother shot back.

"Okay boys stop, stop!" Uncle Ron said with a stifled yawn. "Well I guess I'm not going back to bed" he muttered to himself. Then he eyed the toast in James' hand. "Which one of you wants to make me breakfast?" he asked.

The next few hours passed by exactly as one would expect a morning to pass with Uncle Ron; filled with stories of his many heroic tales and feats, with his own sense of humor making them extremely entertaining. Albus and James sat in the kitchen with him, pounding their fists on the table with laughter at his jokes while munching on toast. He was just in the middle of telling a particularly adventurous story involving him fighting off hundreds of acromantulas when they were interrupted by a loud scream.

"Uncle Ron!" they heard, and there was a split second warning before Lily ran through the house and jumped onto his lap.

"Ow!" he said with a groan. "What happened?" he asked her. She was crying.

"Mum says I can't go" she pouted.

He gave her a stern look. "Now you know I can't do anything about that. Your mother terrifies me."

"But it's not *fair*" she moaned.

"Remember last time you went to Diagon Alley?" he told her with another stern look. "We told you if you didn't return that wand to that boy you couldn't come next time. And did you?"

She shook her head.

"What did you do instead?"

She stared at the ground. "Bit him."

"Exactly. Besides, Diagon Alley gets boring after a while anyway, wouldn't you rather stay here?"

"She has to" came a voice from the doorway. Albus' father had just entered the kitchen. "After what happened last time. She gets too excited. But she'll get to go next year anyway. She has to, after all" he added as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

"When are we leaving dad?" Albus asked excitedly.

His father stifled a yawn and took another sip of his coffee. "Whenever you're ready to go, I suppose."

"I'm ready now" Albus replied.

His father gave a small smile and said "You guys ready?" to James and Uncle Ron, both of whom nodded.

Ten minutes later they were standing by the fireplace in the sitting room, Uncle Ron reaching into a small pouch filled with glittering powder. "All right, I'll go first, then you after me Al" he said.

He took a small pinch of the Floo Powder and threw it into the fire, making it immediately turn an emerald green. "Diagon Alley" he said lazily. And with a single step in, he vanished.

Albus took the bag of powder and threw in another pinch happily. He loved traveling by Floo Powder; the sensation of constant spinning always made his day. "Diagon Alley" he said to the emerald green flames, and with a step in he instantly vanished, and was suddenly hurtling through space, elbows tucked in and eyes closed, until with a sudden stop, he found himself in a dingy looking bar. The Leaky Cauldron.

"Step away from the grate" his Uncle Ron said, giving him a rough pull to the side just as his brother emerged from the fireplace.

"Blimey, I'll never get used to that" James said, dusting ash off of his clothes. "Can't wait 'till I can apparate."

Their father appeared a second later, he too dusting ash off of his clothes. "Shame that this is the closest grate to Diagon Alley" he said as he straightened his glasses. "You used to be able to floo right into the Cauldron Shop."

They began walking through the Leaky Cauldron, his father shaking hands briefly with everyone who saw them. Albus was somewhat used to this. The previous time that he had been in the Leaky Cauldron, some people had even shook *his* hand simply for being his father's son.

"Glass of firewhiskey Harry?" asked Hannah, Neville's wife and landlady of the pub. "On the house" she added.

"No, no I'm fine" he replied. "Much too early for me, and I have to go into work later."

"I wouldn't mind a glass" he heard his Uncle Ron mutter, though he continued following them through the pub. A few moments later they found themselves face to face with a brick wall. Albus watched as his father took out his wand and tapped a brick. Nothing happened.

"Damn" he whispered, scratching his head with his wand. He turned to Uncle Ron. "Was it three down, four across twice, or four down, twice across three times?"

Uncle Ron raised his eyebrows. "I thought it was two down, two across, three times" he said.

His father groaned. "Maybe it was three *up*, two across, four times."

"No, there was no four" Uncle Ron said thoughtfully. "I think it's two up, three down, three times."

"What? That doesn't make any sense! That would just be one down three times! It would just be three down! There's an 'across' in there somewhere..."

Albus and James watched as they bickered. After a few more unsuccessful tries, they both turned to the staring children. "Do you remember it?" his father asked them.

"Nope" they both said. "Mum always did it, she remembers it" James said.

Their father turned back to their uncle. "Maybe three down, two across, twice."

"No, it can't be, you didn't mention a four."

"You just said there wasn't a four!"

"Oh right..."

So suddenly that it made Albus jump, a voice interjected from behind him.

"Having trouble?"

A man had just walked up behind them, the most plain looking man that Albus had ever seen. His hair was dark and short, parted in the middle, and he was wearing basic robes of black. For a second, Albus thought that he was angry with them, for he had a slightly sour look on his face, but he shook hands with his father nonetheless.

"Fango!" his father said, taking his hand. "What are you doing in Diagon Alley? When are you going into the office?"

The man known as Fango shook Uncle Ron's hand as well before answering. "Can't Apparate into work, and the floo network's been shut down."

His father raised an eyebrow. "Why?" he asked.

Fango shrugged. "Extra security measure most likely. Kingsley's been in a rage ever since-you know" he said, casting a tiny glance at Albus and James. Apparently he didn't want to say anything too important in front of them.

"So I'm using the phone booth method" he continued. "And there's a booth right here in Diagon Alley. Isn't that why you're here?" he asked.

"No, I'm shopping with my children. Could you help us out a bit?" he said, motioning towards the wall.

"Oh right, of course" Fango said. He tapped a brick on the wall with his wand, and Albus watched as it slid open to reveal a doorway. "It's three up and two across three times" he added.

"I knew there wasn't a four" Uncle Ron said.

They walked through the doorway and out into Diagon Alley. Filled with people shopping around in anticipation for the school year, it was hard to see through the crowd in which Fango disappeared.

"Who was that guy, dad?" James asked.

"His name is Fango Wilde" their father told them. "I don't know him very well, even though he's been at the Ministry for quite some time. Different departments."

"Is he one of the ones you had to investigate?" Albus asked.

"No, there would be no point. He's not very high up in his department, and even if he was, he'd have to have a few Extendable Ears to hear anything. The Department of Magical Transportation doesn't really deal with anything other than portkeys and floo powder" he told them as they walked through the packed streets.

"But what if he did over hear something?" Albus asked, but his question was drowned out by the sounds of children yelling near them.

"Mum, mum!" they were yelling. "The Edge is on sale!"

They skipped the visit to the Cauldron Shop, as both Albus and James already had one, but made a quick stop at the Apothecary to refill on potion ingredients. Albus was pleased to tell his father that he was quite good at the subject, his best in fact. He was able to name most of the things on the shelves as they picked them up, as well as many of their properties.

"And those are bezoars dad!" he said excitedly as he pointed to a large tub of grey stones. "They can cure most poisons!"

"I know" he said grimly, trading a glance with their uncle.

They left the Apothecary soon after, and meandered the streets for Flourish & Blotts until they saw a figure with flaming red hair running up to them.

"Rosie!" their uncle shouted as his daughter ran into his arms. They could see Aunt Hermione and Hugo in the distance.

"How come you didn't come home last night?" she asked him.

"Fell asleep there" he said with a slightly apologetic grin. "Was your mum mad?"

"I don't think so" Rose said. She turned to Albus. "Did you see Uncle George's new stuff?" she asked him.

"Yeah, I think he gave me some for my birthday-" he started, before James pushed ahead of him.

"I haven't" his brother said with a look of glee on his face. "Be back later dad!" he called as he ran around the corner, no doubt to restock on numerous products from his uncle's shop.

"Guess it's just me and you then son" his father said with a grin.

"I'll go with you guys" Rose said.

"Okay, then you three go shopping for books and we'll meet back at the Leaky Cauldron later" Uncle Ron said. And he hurried off to go meet his wife his son.

It was fun, walking around with his cousin and father as they visited the various shops of Diagon Alley. Much to his chagrin however, his father seemed more impressed with Rose's many high test scores than he did Albus' stories of night time wanderings. As they were shopping for *A Standard Book of Spells : Grade 2* however, his father turned to him.

"What do you say we take a peek in Quality Quidditch Supplies after we get your new books?" he asked him. "I hear you've got a new broomstick."

Albus agreed, though he felt nervous. He had only agreed to learn to fly because he thought his brother would be disappointed if he didn't. He didn't want his father to think it had become his new obsession. They shopped for their books and continued down the crowded streets, Rose still naming her numerous achievements.

"And you wouldn't believe what Professor Flitwick said about my color changing spells Uncle Harry..."

Albus walked slightly ahead of them to ignore his cousin's ostentatious ramblings. He entered Quality Quidditch Supplies and strode past the rows of Quidditch robes and gloves. This was easily the most packed store he had been in thus far. Young children were running back and forth in front of him, seeking their parents, probably to force them to buy them something. Albus was just thinking of how childish it was to beg your parent for a broomstick when he heard a familiar drawl from the aisle next to him.

"Oh *come on* father" he heard a boy whine.

"It's much too expensive Scorpius" came a stern voice that seemed like nothing more than a deeper version of the boy's.

Albus' heart leapt. He turned the corner and saw Scorpius Malfoy, one of his best friends at Hogwarts, with his back turned. He was speaking to his father, who looked very much like him, despite his receding hairline and slightly more narrow eyes. They stopped arguing when his father looked up and saw Albus staring at him.

Albus went slightly pink and went to back up; he had not heard very pleasant things about Scorpius' father, especially from his uncles. Before he could fully make it around the corner however, Scorpius turned and gave a cry of delight.

"Albus!" he said, and he immediately walked over to him, motioning over his shoulder for his father to do the same. His father gave a small sigh and followed after. "You here shopping with your dad?" he asked.

"Yeah but I've got no clue where-"

"I'm right here" he heard his father say. He had just appeared from around the corner and placed his hand on Albus' shoulder. With a sideways glance, Albus saw Rose standing next to them.

"Dad, this is Albus and Rose" Scorpius said, pointing towards both of them in turn.

"Pleasure to meet you" his father said, though he did not shake either of their hands. "And it is nice to see you again as well, Harry" he added, with a stiff nod. He spoke the last word with apparent discomfort, as if he did not usually use his first name.

"Good to see you as well Draco" Albus' father said, with equal discomfort in the name he had used. "Still working at Borgin & Burkes?" he asked politely.

"No" Mr. Malfoy said plainly. "I quit a few days ago. I am currently seeking work."

"Ahh" his father said, running his hands through his hair. "And how is Astalea?"

"Astoria," Mr. Malfoy corrected him icily, "is doing fine. She's out shopping for books right now. Scorpius insisted I see this new broom he's been badgering me about. The Lightning's Edge."

"Ohh, Al has one of those, don't you Al?" his father said cheerfully.

Albus nodded, while Scorpius gave him a bemused look. Albus had made it quite clear during the previous school year that he was not very fond of flying-or even sitting high up in the stands for that matter. Scorpius was obviously very curious as to why Albus had a broom.

"How's the rest of the family?" his father asked. Albus could tell that he was trying to keep the conversation going without letting it go into negative territory.

"Fine" Mr. Malfoy said curtly. "We are not on good terms with some extended family, and it makes for some quiet Christmas', but otherwise we are quite fine."

Scorpius looked up at his father. "Maybe they could spend the holidays with us dad!" he said with a grin. "I hear they have a huge family, they'd probably enjoy a quieter Christmas anyway..."

Mr. Malfoy looked down at his son and, with great effort it seemed, flashed a smile. "Maybe" he said in a falsely cheery voice. "But we really must be going now" he added in a bit of a darker tone. "We need to stop by Madame Malkin's...you're showing far too much ankle in your school robes. It was nice meeting you all."

He swept by them towards the door, Scorpius following along after him, looking back as they left.

"Well he didn't seem too bad' Albus said to his father as they examined the emerald Quidditch gloves on the shelf. "I wonder why he doesn't get along well with the rest of their family though."

His father looked down at him with a small grin. "I can only guess" he said sardonically. "Now let's go find your uncle. We need to head into the office soon" he said with a glance down at his watch.

They left Quality Quidditch Supplies seconds later, Albus scanning the streets for Scorpius. His father seemed to have done his best to steer him away though, and even with a clear view of the streets they were nowhere to be seen. They were just passing by Eeylops Owl Emporium when James came running towards them.

"Dad" he said, tugging at his fathers robes with a broad grin on his face.

"Yes?" his father said, apparently curious as why James was acting so giddy.

"I need twenty galleons" he said, practically bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet.

His father raised his eyebrows. "Why? What did you find in Uncle George's shop?" he asked.

"I can't tell you" James replied, still bouncing up and down.

His father gave him an intrigued stare. "Why not?"

"I just can't!"

The answer didn't seem to satisfy him. He continued peering at him through his glasses. "You remember the rules, right?" he asked.



"It can't be illegal, it can't be hazardous to anyone's health, and it can't be traced back to you" James said irritably, ticking them off his fingers.

His father heaved a large sigh and fished around in his pockets for gold. He pulled out a small handful and dumped it into James' greedy hands. "That counts as your allowance!" he called as James practically skipped down the street. "And hurry back, we're going into the Ministry soon!"

He heaved another sigh as Uncle Ron came bounding up the opposite street, with Hugo atop his shoulders and Aunt Hermione walking slightly behind him. "Just got back from Gringotts" he said when he reached them. "You lot got all of your things?" he asked. "Ready to go?"

"Waiting for James" his father mumbled.

"You were in Gringotts?" Albus asked excitedly. "Did you see a dragon?"

He had never been in the famed wizarding bank before, for he had never needed to go and retrieve money. But he had heard stories of the underground vaults, some of which were so well guarded they could suck you in and keep you there for years.

"Don't be stupid Al, there's no dragons in Gringotts" Rose muttered scathingly. She hated it when somebody said something even remotely imaginative.

"You never know" his father said, checking his watch once more. "Do you know where the phone booth leading to work is in Diagon Alley?" he asked Uncle Ron.

"I think it's right behind Florean's old ice cream parlor. And that's where we should be heading now, here comes James."

James had just emerged from around the corner, pockets bulging with items that he was desperately trying to conceal. He hurried up to them, panting. "Ready to go?" he asked.

They all nodded and followed Uncle Ron through the streets, which were beginning to thin now that the morning rush was over. They followed him for several minutes, watching as stragglers passed by them, until eventually they turned down a dark alley behind a boarded up shop that looked as though it hadn't been used in years.

"Florean Fortescue was a good man" his father told them as they walked to the very end of the alley. "But he was unfortunately killed during the second war. We've kept his shop here though, in his memory."

They walked to the corner of the alley, where a silver telephone booth was crammed into a corner. Albus looked up at his father, his eyebrows raised. "This is the entrance to the Ministry of Magic?" he asked.

His father entered the booth and took the phone in his hand. "Not exactly" he said. "There was originally only one booth, right above it. It's underground. But as more muggle born wizards and witches starting joining a few years ago, we've installed these booths in several places. They descend underground, and travel through a series of tunnels that lead directly to the main hall."

Albus looked at the shabby telephone booth. It was certainly big enough to fit all of them, but it looked clumsily made. He watched as his father dialed numbers on the phone and began talking to the receiver, for a cool woman's voice had just said "Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business."

"Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley, and Hermione Granger, reporting for work" he said. "Bringing four children with us as visitors."

James snorted. "I'm not a child" he muttered.

Small silver badges shot out from the booth into his father's hands. He pinned one to his shirt and passed the others along. Albus stared down at his badge as he pinned it to his own shirt. It read *Visitor to the Ministry*.

They all entered the phone booth, and immediately after the doors closed they began descending through the ground slowly. For a few seconds, Albus watched the solid concrete on the outside, but once they hit a certain point deep in the ground, an abrupt stop made him lose his balance. He got up while his brother laughed (for no one else, not even Rose, had fallen) and pressed himself against the side as the phone booth began moving slowly to the left. Then, with a sudden burst, the booth shot through the ground with great force, and all of them were knocked off of their feet.

Held down by the force of gravity, Albus watched the windows as the phone booths swerved in different directions, traveling for miles underground. For several long minutes, the phone booth simply didn't stop, and Albus was now beginning to feel sick. He toughed it out though, and a sudden stop let him know that the ride was over.

"Enjoy your day" said the cool female's voice as the phone booth door slid open. His father stepped out, followed by Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione, and then the children. Albus' jaw dropped.

They were standing in a magnificent hall with one of the most polished wooden floors he had ever seen. Second only in size to the Great Hall in Hogwarts, the walls were of equally polished wood, and the stunning ceiling was of a deep midnight blue. There were several more telephone boxes across the walls, with every few of them separated by a grate where wizards were popping in by Floo Powder. Albus noticed that flooing to work seemed more popular. Many of the telephone boxes remained quite stationary.

They proceeded through the large hall, Albus right behind his father and careful not to bump into anyone. Many of the people seemed in a great hurry, or slightly irritated. They were muttering things about tightened security and cursing under their breaths as they headed for large golden gates.

"Blimey, had we known that the grates were working we wouldn't have bothered with the damn telephone booth" Uncle Ron said as he passed a grate that shone with bright green flames.

"Ronald!" Aunt Hermione said. "Must you really curse over the smallest things?"

"He has a good point though" his father said. "They should have told us when the grates starting working again. I can hardly blame people for being irritated."

They continued walking down the large hallway, and right in the middle Albus saw one of the largest statues he had ever seen in his life. He moved closer and saw that it was actually a fountain, a fountain comprising of different stone shapes. There was a wizard with long hair and an even longer beard, who bared an uncanny but not exact resemblance to a portrait that he had once seen in the Headmaster's office. Next to the wizard was a woman holding a book who dressed very muggle like; Albus could only assume that she represented a standard muggle. The woman had a house elf on her shoulders in a manner similar to how Uncle Ron would sometimes carry his children, and the wizard the same, only with a goblin instead. On the right was a centaur turning away from them, as if minding its own business, and on the left a giant, which stood at least twice the size of the wizard. All of them were smiling, except for maybe the centaur, who was merely grinning. Water was shooting from the wizard's wand, the muggle's book, the goblin's and elf's ears, and the centaur's arrow. He bent low to read the description on the fountain.

***All proceeds from the Fountain of Brethren will be donated to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries.***

He could see silver sickles and bronze knuts in the pool; people were dropping them in even as he looked. He raised his head and saw that his family was nearing the golden gates. By looking at the fountain, he had straggled behind.

He hurried up to them and caught up as soon as they passed through the lift, taking them to a much smaller hall filled with golden lifts. A lift opened right as they reached it, and Albus and his family got into one with two additional people. One was a bearded man leaning casually against the side of the barrier, who shook his father's hand when they entered. The other was a blonde woman who greeted them all with an energetic "Hi."

"Hello Susan" his father said.

"Any clue why they stopped us from flooding in?" Uncle Ron asked.

The woman named Susan shook her head as the lift began to drop. "They wanted tightened security for some reason, I guess they didn't want someone to get in here. I only just received a memo about it, I came in a bit late today".

"Level six" the woman's voice said as the lift opened, but the rest of what she said was drowned out by two more people who got on the lift just as Susan was leaving it, arguing loudly. They both stopped abruptly when the lift began to move again.

They traveled down more lifts for several minutes, each time someone new getting on as someone else got off. On more than one occasion, Albus noticed that paper airplanes flew onto the lifts as well, only to leave at the next floor. Finally, the cool voice rang out saying "Level two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters, and Wizengamot Administration Services."

"Well this is us" his father said as the lift opened.

"I'm going to go back up" Aunt Hermione said, giving Uncle Ron a quick kiss on the cheek as most of them stepped out of the lift. "My department is back a few floors. Look after Rosie and Hugo, won't you?" she asked.

"Yeah they'll be fine" Uncle Ron said as they began walking down a corridor lined with doors.

She shot him a serious look before the lifts closed once more. Shrugging it off, he and his fellow Aurors led them around a corner until they were staring directly at a pair of heavy oak doors. They both stopped before opening it.

"Now we can't stay long" his father said. "But I figure you can at least have a look around headquarters."

He pushed the door open, and Albus felt a small twinge of disappointment. Whatever he had been expecting, this was most certainly not it. It was a gargantuan room, sure, but it was cramped and filled with many cubicles of which the tiny paper airplanes were rapidly shooting in and out of. It appeared to be very busy; the noise of chatter could be heard from the entrance.

"Are all of these people Aurors dad?" Rose asked.

"Not all of them" Uncle Ron said as they started moving towards the rows of cubicles. "Most though. Others kind of have desk jobs. And some people are only assigned here to make others look bad" he added, narrowing his eyes at a person in the cubicle nearest to them.

"That's my office back there" Albus' father told him, pointing to a door in the back. There were a few doors next to it, leading to other offices, but his looked the most official. "Let's go introduce you to some people."

He led them all in between the cubicles, poking his head in to see who might not be bothered with an interruption, but everyone seemed extremely busy. After a few moments, they entered a cubicle near the back, one slightly larger than the others, and saw a man with very long brown hair sitting at his desk, prodding strange instruments with his wand.

"Got a sec?" his father asked the man.

He turned around with an irritated expression on his face, but it softened once he saw who it was.

"Well hello there!" he said cheerfully. "These all yours?"

"Those two are mine" his father said, indicating Albus and James. "Those two, Ron's. Kids, this is Maximus Tohill, he's an Auror in my task force. What are you doing there Max?"

The wizard turned back to a small silver disk that he had been prodding, and Albus noticed that it was on top of a poorly drawn map. "Searching" he said gloomily. "I've been trying to track it, but this particular wa -"

His father coughed loudly, blatantly interrupting him. "Why don't you tell me later" he said, giving the tiniest of nods to Albus and the other children.

Max looked horror struck. "Oh...oh right" he said before he continued prodding his silver disk.

"Right...this was a bad idea" his father said as they left the small cubicle. "The Auror office is filled with a lot of...information"

"Dad come on, we can handle whatever it is you guys are talking about" James moaned.

"No...no really. I shouldn't have done this" he said.

Albus couldn't help but notice that his father was now sweating profusely. The fact that one of his colleagues had been stupid enough to let something slip greatly unnerved him. He led them back towards the lifts, hurrying through the cubicles, until he came to a stop so sudden that Albus bumped into him.

In the very corner of the headquarters, where there were no cubicles, but simply and open amount of space, two people were talking. Or possibly arguing. Albus immediately recognized the first as Fango Wilde, and he had a very disdainful look on his face indeed. It was quite curious to see this, as he now knew that Fango worked in a different department, but even stranger was who he seemed to be talking to. He was speaking to someone with neck length jet black hair that stuck up at odd angles. Albus could not see his face, but for a wild moment, he thought it was his father.

"No way" his father whispered, staring at the two men in the corner.

"What is it?" Uncle Ron asked, craning his neck from behind him to see what had stopped his fellow Auror.

Without warning, his father's face broke into a huge smile. He turned around at once, and instead of leading them towards the lifts, he began walking towards the two men, Albus and the other children following after him.

"Well look who it is" his father said as he approached the two men. The arguing (or maybe it *was* talking, neither had raised their voice) ceased at once. Fango Wilde looked up and walked away, keen to be out of the conversation, and the man with jet black hair turned around on the spot. Albus gasped. He even saw Hugo cover his eyes, and he heard Rose give a tiny yell.

The man was smiling. Or at least...half of him was. Though the entire right side of his face was perfectly normal, his left side was one of the most hideous things that Albus had ever seen. There were large scars all across his cheeks, and numerous bumps and indents. His mouth seemed to get thinner on the left side, as though he couldn't move it if he tried. It kept the same pale color as the rest of his face, but when he turned to the side to face the man walking up to him, you could clearly see where the bumps protruded.

It appeared as though his father was used to this appearance, because he held out his hand and shook the scarred man's hand vehemently. "Mr. Fairhart" he said with a smile. "And where have you been these many weeks? The office was getting boring without you."

Mr. Fairhart smiled back, pulling on the scarred and mangled skin on his face, making it look even more grotesque. He ran his hand through his hair, and Albus saw, with shock, a silver wedding ring on his finger. For a split second, he wondered if the person he was married to was aware of what their husband looked like, but he was cut off from his thoughts by the man's voice.

"I left the country for a bit" he said. "Had some things to find."

By this time, Uncle Ron had joined the group, his mouth wide open. "We thought you were kidnapped or something!" he exclaimed, and Fairhart laughed.

"No I'm afraid not, you'll have to put up with me still" he said while chuckling.

"Well it's good to have you back S-"

*BANG!*

Uncle Ron's sentence was cut off by a small explosion. Black smoke had begun issuing from James, who was now coughing as he tried avoiding the cloud around him. Many wizards had rushed from their cubicles and pulled out their wands, aiming them in James' direction, but his father had stood in front of him, arms stretched out.

"Don't! It's just my son!" he yelled at them as they gripped their wands. He pulled James out from the cloud of black smoke. "Am I about to discover what it is you bought from Uncle George's shop?" he asked.

James continued coughing, but still managed to speak in between breaths. "Not if I can help it" he grinned.

His father rolled his eyes. "Okay I think its time to go now."

"But dad-" both James and Albus started.

"No, you've seen where I work, that should be enough" their father said firmly. "I'll walk you guys back to the main hall now."

Albus hung his head, defeated, as his father waved goodbye to Fairhart, who turned around on the spot and hurried off, no doubt to continue his argument with Fango Wilde. He began walking them through the halls and back onto the lifts, and once the doors had closed and they began moving up, James spoke.

"Dad, who was that guy with the weird face?" he asked.

"That's Mr. Fairhart" he said. "He's in my division, but he doesn't actually go out and fight. Now that I think about it...I'm not entirely sure he even has any field experience. He's a good guy though, funny. You'd both like him."

"Oh yeah, he's great" Uncle Ron said as the lift doors opened on the topmost floor. "He's been gone for a few weeks now though, I wonder where he went?"

Albus watched as his father shrugged his shoulders. "Haven't got a clue" he said.

"What happened to his face?" Hugo asked as they walked past the large fountain.

"I've never asked him" Albus' father said. "And I probably never will. We all have our secrets, after all."

They walked to the very end of the corridor, where telephone booths were zooming in and out of the walls and green flames were erupting from grates. Albus looked up at his father, nervous that he might just throw up if they went back in the telephone booths. "Dad, can we floo home?" he asked.

His father smiled at him and reached for some powder.

## Chapter 4: The Return To Hogwarts

For some strange reason, summer seemed to end much quicker than any other season did. Albus was not dreading the return to Hogwarts; on the contrary, he was quite keen on seeing his friends again, and learning new spells, and even visiting Hagrid. But he still couldn't help but feel slightly gloomy at the thought of no longer being able to sleep in, or do as he pleased for the entire day without worry of homework. But if there was one thing Albus thought that he might miss the most, it was flying.

How could he have ever been stupid enough to dislike flying? The week before school was to start, James had taken him out to the field by the Potter Mansion to give him some tips and teach him the basics. Though at first he was quite scared of falling, a minute in the air confirmed his brother's suspicions; he was good at flying.

His broomstick seemed to move at the slightest touch, and within minutes he was swerving around his brother, racing him to the ends of the field, seeing how well he matched up to the Gryffindor chaser.

"You'll make your house team for sure" James told him as he slid off his broom and ruffled his already windswept hair the day before they were to board the Hogwarts Express.

Albus shrugged at his brother's reassurance. As much as Albus liked flying, he wasn't entirely sure if he was any better than the other Slytherins on the team.

They entered the house and he began packing his things-James decided that he would have plenty of time in the morning and went to make himself a sandwich instead.

Albus tossed his books into an enormous suitcase packed with jet black robes. He carefully laid out his clothes for the next day; they would be dressed as muggles until boarding the train.

He seized a big textbook off of the floor and threw it into the trunk, shocked that he had even attempted to read it over the summer, and watched as it flew open to a random page. He peered into his trunk and saw that it was a history of magic textbook. He could see text on one page written in fancy writing, and on the other, a picture of a suit of armor leaning against a wall.

Without warning, he heard his own voice ring in his ear. "*Expelliarmus!*"

He remembered all too well the last time he has seen a suit of armor slumped against a wall. It was the day he had had that horrible argument with Rose. It was the day that he had befriended Mirra.

With a slight pang in his gut, he wondered if she would even be attending Hogwarts this year. And if she was, would everything be okay? He had saved her life, true...but they hadn't been particularly nice to each other prior to that...



"Al, I washed your underwear" he heard his mother say from the door. He snapped back into reality and turned to watch his mother enter with a basket of clothes. She began placing them carefully on top of his robes.

"Thanks mum" he said.

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The next morning found Albus quite awake and eager to board the Hogwarts Express. Helping himself to a bowl of porridge, he and his mother took part in what was now seemingly a Potter household tradition-watching James scamper around the house looking for his things.

"Are you sure you gave me my socks?" he was yelling in the kitchen as he frantically bustled around, his shirt half off and his jeans unbuttoned.

"James, I put them on your bed!" he heard his mother say as he poured himself some orange juice. "You were right there! You probably knocked them off in your sleep."

He gave a tremendous moan and left the kitchen.

"So are you excited about school?" she asked him after James had left.

Albus shrugged, his mouth full of porridge. He swallowed. "Yeah I am. I'm gonna' try out for Quidditch" he told her.

"What position?" she asked him, taking a small sip of tea.

"Haven't the slightest idea" he said, which was perfectly true. He really didn't care what he ended up playing.

There was a loud knock on the door. For the second return trip to Hogwarts in a row now, his father had failed to accompany them to King's Cross Station. They would instead be accompanied by dull Ministry workers.

"Got all of your things?" his mother asked him.

"Packed them last night" he replied with a grin, and he rose from the table and moved towards his trunk. He watched as James came skidding to a halt in the kitchen.

"Tell them to wait!" he said. "I can't find my wand."

The trip to King's Cross station was easier than last time, as Lily had opted not to accompany them (she seemed to think that as she was going next year anyway, it wasn't as important) but it was certainly wet. It began raining just as they were putting their trunks inside the magically expanded ministry car, and by the time they had entered the vehicles themselves they were all soaking wet. Even worse, James had apparently forgotten more than just his wand, as twice he

yelled "Stop! Go back!" only to return to the mansion and emerge again with his pockets bulging.

With the rain being hazardous to their vision as it was, the Ministry officials point blank refused to "speed up the process" magically as they had done once before, and by the time that they reached the station, they had only ten minutes to spare.

"Hurry up, hurry up" his mother shot as she urged them through the stone barrier leading to the Hogwarts Express.

"I'm going" Albus said as he casually leaned against the barrier with his trunk. His father had told him that the trick was to not attract any attention, and to gently slide through it. Moving his back towards the wall, he pretended to pick his fingernails as he surreptitiously slid through the cold barrier. He turned on the spot and saw that he was once again successful.

He wheeled his trunk to the corner as James came following after him, and started scanning the thin crowd for familiar faces. He saw Dante Haug, a fellow Slytherin housemate in his year wave goodbye to his mother as he boarded the train. Close to him was one of his least favorite people at Hogwarts-Charles Eckley, an extremely pompous Gryffindor. He had just turned his head to the left when he heard someone shriek "Albus!"

He was nearly knocked off of his feet; he thought he may very well have hit the floor if he hadn't been supported by his trunk. He found himself completely wrapped in two arms, and when he came face to face with the person (who was slightly shorter than him) he saw Mirra Tunnels.

She looked almost exactly like she had when he had last seen her, though there were a few small differences. Her hair was slightly shorter and shinier, and her complexion had changed. She was still pale, though not as ghastly white as she had once been. It looked as though she had seen a great deal of sunlight over the summer, and she was smiling a genuine smile that previously looked forced.

"Erm...hi" he said uncomfortably as she removed her arms from around his neck and beamed at him.

"Hi" she said, and he watched the smile slide off of her face in the rain. He could tell that she was thinking the same thing that he was-that they had had no contact over the summer, and how extremely awkward it was for them to pretend like nothing had happened.

"So...how's your parents?" Albus asked. He gave himself a mental kick after doing so.

"Incarcerated" she said brightly as she wrung rain out of her hair.

"Oh...oh" he said flatly. "Umm...I'm sorry?" he said.

"No no, don't be!" she said with a big smile. "I live with my grandparents now. They don't live too far from here, so I can still come to Hogwarts!"

"That's- that's great!" he stammered. Why wasn't she bringing up what happened only a few months ago? Had she perhaps forgotten? Had the Mist somehow affected her memory? But that didn't make any sense...she certainly remembered him.

They stared at each other in silence for several seconds as hard rain pounded down on their heads. Albus heard a whistle sound from what seemed like very far away, and the next second he knew, he was being roughly pulled aside.

"On the train!" his mother screeched through clenched teeth. She didn't seem to have even noticed Mirra.

"Right!" Albus said as his mother steered him towards the scarlet train. She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, whipped out her wand and used it to place his luggage on the train, then practically pushed him up. He could see Mirra hurrying towards them. She too had apparently lost track of time in the awkward moment. His mother levitated Mirra's trunk up onto the train as well, but the rain was now pouring so hard that he doubted whether she even knew who she was helping. A whistle sounded again, this time much closer, and with one last wave from his mother the train doors had been slammed shut. They had begun moving.

"Want to find a compartment?" Mirra asked him hesitantly.

"Sure" he replied, trying to sound nonchalant.

They walked in silence through the train, peeking through compartment doors to find familiar people. He saw James in one compartment surrounded by fellow Gryffindors, with the exception of one Ravenclaw, his girlfriend, who looked rather bored as she watched them talk. A few compartments down he saw some vaguely familiar Hufflepuff second years, and in the final compartment that he checked, three people who looked quite familiar.

He opened the glass door and looked in on his friends. There was his cousin Rose; she seemed to be arguing with a pale boy with pointed eyes and sleek blonde hair. He looked up and grinned at the two of them as they entered and placed their luggage on the ground. The final person in the now full compartment looked radically different from the last time Albus had seen him. Morrison's hair was shorter now, and he looked like had a few more muscles too. What's more, he looked as though when he stood up he would be a full foot taller.

Scorpius stretched out his hand and casually slapped Albus', whereas Morrison stood up and thumped him on the back. They both looked in surprise at Mirra, who was still standing in the compartment entrance. Rose however, took a single glance at her, shrieked, and rose to her feet to hug her.

"How was your summer?" Morrison asked him, motioning for Albus to sit down across from him. His voice seemed slightly deeper.

"Not bad. Starting flying" Albus added with a grin, taking the seat. "Yours?"

"Grew a bit" he replied with a smile.

Scorpius snorted. Rose and Mirra were still both standing, arms still slightly embraced as they chatted away about their summers. Albus took this time to motion to Mirra and raise an eyebrow at both of his friends.

"We had no idea" Scorpius muttered.

"I thought for sure she wouldn't be coming back" Morrison said quietly, leaning in so that he wouldn't be overheard by the chatting girls. "She seems okay though" he added. "And I don't think she's holding a grudge."

The girls sat down, Mirra across from Albus and Rose, in between Scorpius and Morrison. Mirra was looking around cheerfully, apparently waiting for someone to talk. She opened her mouth and Albus saw that her teeth were chattering.

"Here, let me get that" Rose said, pulling out her wand and aiming it at Mirra. "*Evaporis*" she muttered.

Mirra's robes instantly dried, and her teeth stopped chattering. "Thanks" she said.

"That was a pretty impressive spell" Scorpius said. "Where'd you learn it?"

"Pretty basic really" Rose said smugly. "I just picked it up from a random book. I can't imagine someone not knowing it" she continued with a smirk, as though she were waiting for a challenge.

Scorpius opened his mouth to retort, but Rose cut him off. "*So*, James tells me you've started flying?" she asked Albus.

"Huh?" he replied, distracted. He had been focusing on something else. "Oh right...yeah. Got a new broom and everything" he told her.

"You any good?" Morrison asked him excitedly; he was a big fan of Quidditch.

Albus shrugged. As far as he knew, he was pretty good, but he didn't want to say anything in case he ended up a disappointment. "I'm not bad, I don't think" he said a bit hesitantly.

"Are you trying out for the team?" Scorpius asked him.

"Maybe" he replied.

"I am" Morrison said proudly, his voice cracking a tiny bit. Rose suppressed a giggle that only Albus heard. "Keeper probably" he added.

The Quidditch conversation carried them for most of the train ride, broken momentarily by only the occasional arguments between Rose and Scorpius and the trolley lady. Albus kept the conversation up; he was at least now in familiar territory, but he found that his eyes almost always subconsciously trailed to Mirra. She still seemed happy, and she was contributing to the conversation, but she was starting to seem slightly uncomfortable.

The rain had stopped and it was now approaching night time. Albus heard a bustle just outside of the compartment door and looked to it just in time to see it open.

"Care to join us?" Charles Eckley said with a broad grin to Rose and Mirra. He didn't seem to have noticed the three other people in the compartment. Albus could see Donovan Hornsbrook, one of his Gryffindor friends, standing at his side, head poking in slightly.

"Erm...hey Charlie" Mirra said. She turned to the rest of the people in the compartment. "I saw him on the platform earlier" she said a bit uneasily. "I told him we'd meet up with him later" she said to Rose.

"Sure!" Rose exclaimed. She picked up her bag and stood up along with Mirra. "We'll see you guys later" Rose said. They followed the two boys out, Mirra waving good-bye to them as they went.

Scorpius stood up and closed the compartment door. "Ugh, that kid's an arse" he said as he took his seat.

"Which one?" Albus asked him.

"Both" he answered. "What I'd give for a go with that Eckley one on one..."

"Weird seeing Mirra again though, wasn't it?" Morrison said.

"Yeah it was" Albus said, shifting in his seat slightly.

"Well, it was weird seeing her awake anyway" Scorpius said. "She looks healthier though. What's up with her parents? They get some sense knocked into them?"

"She lives with her grandparents now" Albus told them. "Do you think she remembers us arguing?"

"Well if she does, she's probably over it" Morrison said.

"What makes you say that?"

"Well I'm sure she'd remember us saving her life too, so she'd have a pretty weak argument. And she seemed fine here. I mean, she was talking and everything."

"We'd better slip into our robes" Scorpius said as he peered out the window into the night sky. It was pitch black.

They got changed in silence, Albus still pondering if his friendship with Mirra was going to be the same. What should he say? Should he just ignore the whole thing? Quite suddenly, he wished he could hear what Mirra and Rose were talking about. He wished he had brought one of Uncle George's extendable ears.

The train slowed down shortly after they got changed, and Albus was happy to leave once it came to a full stop. He could barely see where he was going, but he had grown tired of being crammed into a compartment. The rain had fully subsided finally, and off in the distance, he heard Hagrid calling for the first years.

"Come on" he heard Morrison say from beside him. He followed Morrison's outline to the horseless carriages in the distance. Of course, they were being pulled by something, but Albus could not see what. His father had once told him that they were pulled by invisible creatures, and that, if he were lucky, Albus would never get to see what they looked like.

He followed a Prefect towards the carriages, listening to the whispering of his classmates as they went.

"I wonder what's pulling them-"

"Think they might skip the sorting? I'm starving-"

Albus climbed into a carriage with Scorpius, Morrison, and a Slytherin third year that he vaguely recognized. He glanced into the open darkness as the carriage began moving. He could see the large castle off in the distance, the glowing lights of its windows all the more welcome compared to the chill outside.

They arrived at the castle entrance several minutes later. Albus was helped out of the carriage by a Ravenclaw prefect who also helped out Morrison and the third year boy. Scorpius ignored the boy's hand and jumped out on his own, stumbling as he tried to keep his balance. Even in the darkness, Albus could see his confident smirk slide off of his face slightly.

The large group of students walked towards the castle in the darkness and approached the giant doors to the castle with palpable restlessness. Albus had to admit, he was quite excited to enter the castle once more and be met with what he knew would be a terrific feast.

A burly seventh year who looked like he was probably the Head Boy knocked twice on the enormous doors. Off in the distance, Albus could see the lanterns of the tiny boats crossing the black lake.

The doors swung open and Albus followed the rest of the crowd through a miniature hallway that took them to a second set of doors. As if on cue, these doors swung open as well to reveal the Great Hall.

The teachers were already seated at the high table in the Hall, as the enchantment of the ceiling's bright stars in the night sky shone down upon them. Albus took a quick second to re-familiarize himself with the setting he was in before taking a seat at the Slytherin table with the other Slytherins. He sat on the side of the table where he would have a clear view of the other tables. Farthest away from them, he saw Mirra laughing at an apparently hilarious joke that Eckley had just told. He felt a stab of annoyance. Eckley wasn't even funny.

Scorpius and Morrison sat on the right and left of him, and Albus ended up directly across from Atticus Sanders, a member of the Slytherin Quidditch team and a Prefect. Albus was friendly with him, and immediately engaged him in conversation.

"I've started flying" he told him excitedly.

"Good" Atticus replied. "You trying out this year?"

Albus nodded. "What's open?"

"Seeker. Though you can try out for anything. Assuming it even matters. They might ban it after last year."

Albus grimaced. The previous year's Quidditch Final had been a disaster. A full blown riot had occurred on the field (Albus was one of the few who didn't participate) and a winner hadn't even been decided. Had it not been for the timely interference from Headmaster Ares, Albus felt that things would've gotten way worse.

At this thought, Albus instinctively looked up at the teacher's table. Neville's seat was empty, as he would be bringing in the first years for their sorting. In the center, the Headmaster was in deep conversation with a young man with long blonde hair. Professor Darvy, the potions professor. He was Albus' favorite teacher, and Potions was definitely his favorite class. He grinned at the thought of what exciting and unique lessons Professor Darvy would be giving this year.

The doors of the Great Hall burst open and all conversation immediately ceased. Albus watched as Neville (or Professor Longbottom, as he would soon be calling him) strutted through the Hall with timid looking first years. Most of them looked terrified, others bewildered, and a rare few looked confident. Neville pulled out a raggedy stool with the Sorting Hat on it and walked away from it. The first years merely stared at it with amusement. Then, quite suddenly, the brim of the Hat opened to reveal a mouth, and the Hat began singing:

*"Oh, here you are at Hogwarts, where learning and fun are assured*

*At a school with no dull moments, and you'll never feel bored*

*Here magic awaits you, the time to learn is now  
But first you must be sorted, and so I'll tell you how  
Just place me you head, and let your mind roam free  
I can see your every thoughts, and know where you should be!  
You might belong to Gryffindor, where bravery is cherished  
Or you could go to Ravenclaw, where your mind will flourish  
You might end up Slytherin, if you're confident and cunning  
Or perhaps you're best in Hufflepuff, where disloyalty gets you nothing  
Just know that where you're sorted, shows not where you will end  
It shows who you are as seen by you, not whether you're a foe or friend  
Apart you will collapse, but united you stay strong  
Forget your house and accept all around you, and now I end my song!"*

The tables burst into applause, Albus among them, as the first years looked around at each other curiously. Albus leaned across the table to speak to Atticus.

"That sounded like mine last year" he told him. "A lot like it."

"Mine too" Atticus shouted over the applause. "I heard it used to make a new one every year, but it stopped. Just uses the same one. Doesn't want to change its message or something." He shrugged.

Albus watched as Neville pulled out a long list of names and peered down the list. "Bailey, Tabitha" he called out.

A small girl with dark brown hair tripped over her robes as she stumbled to the stool. She nervously crammed the Hat onto her head, and several seconds later, the Hat shouted "GRYFFINDOR!"

Applause burst from the table farthest from Albus, and he watched as the girl stumbled over her robes once more before sitting two seats down from Rose.

"Curdur, Barnabus!" Neville called out.



A small boy with dark brown hair and a confident smirk on his face made his way to the stool. He sat down and placed the Hat on his head. Within seconds, the Hat had called out "SLYTHERIN!"

Albus clapped with his fellow Slytherins as the brown haired boy practically strutted to the table. A large seventh year clapped him on the shoulder as he peered up and down the table. Albus looked up and expected to see Darvy clapping, as he was head of Slytherin house, but he didn't seem enthusiastic at all. He was sleeping.

Albus chuckled and wondered vaguely what was so tiring that it drained his professor's strength, especially when he had been in full conversation with the Headmaster just minutes before. He was snapped from his thoughts with a loud bellow of "RAVENCLAW" as a girl with pigtailed joined the table next to him.

The sorting got boring after the next few people went; two girls were sorted into Slytherin, but the majority of students seemed more inclined to go to Gryffindor. Hufflepuff only received about five new students, which Scorpius chuckled merrily at, claiming "I'd probably just leave if I were them."

Finally, the Hat fell silent and Neville put the stool away, off in the corner of the Hall. The newly sorted first years were all chatting excitedly while the teachers at the high table talked in a more serious manner. The ghosts flew around the Hall for a bit (something that Albus had never grown used to, particularly because his house ghost terrified him) and the older students waited for the feast to begin. After a few moments, Headmaster Ares rose from his chair.

"Hello students! It's is good to see so many of your faces here again. This is only my third year as your Headmaster, and I can only hope that it will be equally as good as my previous year. To the first years, I welcome you to this castle with the hopes that you will gain many unique and beneficial experiences".

Despite being extremely loud, his voice retained the same lazy, bored tone that it had had the previous year. In fact, Albus thought that the beginning of his speech sounded awfully familiar- as though, like the Sorting Hat's song, it closely mirrored the one from the previous year.

"There are a few things I have to say before we begin this marvelous feast. The Forbidden Forest is, of course, forbidden. Anyone who enters will be not only in grave danger from the forest itself, but from me as well, as I assure you, I will be extremely disappointed with anyone who not only neglects this rule, but is foolish enough to do break it after hearing my warnings. Also, flying lessons are no longer mandatory for first years, and are now completely optional due to the large amount of injuries we've had with the subject."

Albus saw Neville flinch in the corner and immediately felt as if he had lived this entire scene before. The Headmaster had definitely said the exact same thing at the beginning of the feast during Albus' first year.

"And now that I've made those two things clear...I don't think we have much more to discuss here. Let the feast begin!"

He beamed around the Hall once, wearing an obviously fake smile, before sitting down as food magically appeared on the plates. The goblets filled themselves up with tasty pumpkin juice and Albus merrily dug in.

"That sounded a lot like what he said last year" Albus shouted to Atticus; the Hall was especially loud on the first day of term.

"And what he said his first year as Headmaster too" Atticus shouted back. "I get the feeling he doesn't like us too much, Ares. Don't ask me why he started teaching here. I don't even think he could tell you."

Albus ripped off an enormous chunk of a turkey leg as he listened to the conversation between Scorpius and Bartleby, a fellow Slytherin second year. He reflected on the change from last year, when Scorpius had been much too shy to talk during the opening feast.

"I'm just saying, if the Cannon's want to win a game this season, they need to replace their beaters. Jenkins is what? Fifty? And Bossly? I swear he's insane, he's more likely to hit himself with that bat" Scorpius said.

"They weren't doing so bad when they made it to the semi-finals last year" Bartleby said coolly.

"Exactly" Scorpius smirked. "*Semi*-finals."

They continued bickering, Morrison attempting to say something but choking; his mouth was full of food. Albus turned away for the Slytherin table and tried peering over to the Gryffindor table. He could see his brother talking to both Mirra and Eckley. All three of them were laughing.

An hour later, his plate empty and his stomach full, Albus lay back in his chair while the chatter in the Hall gently died down. He could hear Prefects calling to the lower years to follow. Begrudgingly, Albus heaved himself up from his chair and tried to straighten himself. He almost toppled over. He felt fifty pounds heavier.

"Okay, follow me to the common room!" he heard a girl shout.

Atticus and the female Prefect led them out of the hall; the Headmaster was apparently too busy in deep conversation with Professor Handit to wish them good night. Albus followed the Prefects through the winding corridor that led to the dungeons. He could see the anxious faces of the new

first years next to him. Even in the dim candlelight that illuminated the dungeon, it was easy to see that some of them looked quite confident.

They were navigated to a large stone wall that gave Albus chills when he saw it. His second home.

"Okay" Atticus said. "This blank stretch of wall you guys see here? This is the entrance to our Common Room."

Several first years stared at him blankly, but he merely continued. "Password is *Salazar*. Now it changes kind of frequently, but if you ever don't know it, you can come ask me, I'll be happy to help. Boys, your dormitory is to the right, girls, you're all on the left. Check the board for notices, your schedules should be passed around tomorrow. Now let's go."

"*Salazar*" he said to the blank wall, which immediately opened.

The eerie green light of the Common Room didn't match the warmth at all. Albus had forgotten how bright the fire was, and how comfortable the armchairs looked. He exchanged a quick smirk with both Morrison and Scorpius.

Scorpius gave a tremendous yawn and headed for the stairs to a room that said **Second Years** in black letters. Morrison followed after him. "You coming?" he asked.

"Yeah I am" Albus said hastily; he had been eyeing a tapestry on the wall. He took another quick glance at the tapestry of the disgruntled looking man whom he knew was Severus Snape, then turned and entered his dormitory.

## Chapter 5 : The Seeker And The Sound

If Albus had to compare the first week of his second year to the first week of the year prior, he would have had no trouble at all deciding which was better. James had once told him that the further you got along at Hogwarts, the better it was, and for the second time in a few weeks, Albus was forced to agree.

It had been a beautiful sight to wake up to on the morning that their classes were to start, helping himself to porridge and pumpkin juice, and by the time he received his schedule, he was already elated. It was nearly identical to his previous schedule, the only frustrating bits being that Potions class was still only held on Friday afternoons, and that it was with the Gryffindors.

The teachers aided in his new found love of the school, providing him with class work that, though hard, could hardly be called unenjoyable. Professor Bellinger was teaching them transfiguration that was no longer refined to just similar objects. On the very first day, Albus was given a balloon and an incantation. By the end of the lesson, he was supposed to be able to present a shiny new red bicycle. He failed, but Professor Bellinger was quick to point out that no one had succeeded, and that he had been one of the few to make his balloon turn a different color.

Of all the classes that had improved however, Albus was pleased to say that Neville had reworked his system over the summer. Gone were the days where Albus dreaded entering the humid greenhouse to plant an abnormally smelly creature, or wear gloves to prevent himself from being coated in acid. The majority of their classes consisted of the professor simply giving demonstrations to the class, some more fun to watch than others. Though, as his friends were quick to point out, Albus frequently watched other things in class.

"You're doing it again" Scorpius hissed.

"Huh?"

Albus snapped his eyes away and forced himself to look at Professor Longbottom. He was holding up a small green plant that appeared to be snoring. "When it wakes up" he said, "it will be able to secrete venom that not only sedates its prey, but also makes it just a bit tastier as well."

The class laughed, giving Albus enough time to ask Scorpius "Doing what?"

"Staring" he hissed back. "At them". He jerked his head to the left, where Eckley was passing a note to Mirra.

"I wasn't staring" Albus hissed back.

"You were mate" Morrison whispered from beside Scorpius. "I saw it too."

"I *glanced* in their direction for a sec-"

"Boys?"

Albus stared straight and saw that Neville was now staring at he and Scorpius. He had raised his voice when talking to his friends.

"Sorry Professor Longbottom" he said.

Neville continued staring for a second before picking up another plant, this one light blue with what looked like two mouths. "The Relaxing Rosebush is a most unique plant, in that it is lazier than even some of my seventh year students."

The class laughed again. "As you can see, it has both a mouth for chewing, as well as a separate mouth for swallowing..."

Albus looked down and saw a small slip of paper. He glanced up and saw Scorpius looking at the teacher. He nodded curtly, indicating that the note was from him. Albus surreptitiously unfolded it and held it up against his bag.

*You've been staring over there all day. And every day in this class. What is with you?*

Albus pulled a quill out from his bag and turned the note over.

*It's nothing. I just don't like Eckley. It's his hair. It pisses me off.*

Feeling he had given a satisfactory answer, he folded the note back up and passed it along to Scorpius, who read it, smirked, and passed it to Morrison. The bell rang soon after, and Albus, packing up his bag, threw one more glance to his right.

"So you really don't like Eckley huh?" Scorpius asked him as they walked up the hill leading them back up to the castle. They had History of Magic next, and then lunch. Albus already had fresh parchment ready for hangman with Morrison.

"Yeah..." he replied curiously.

Scorpius exchanged a quick smirk with Morrison. "Well, we were waiting for your support on it, and now we've got it. Me and Morrison have got a little prank planned."

"A prank?"

"Okay, so a few days ago, we were talking to Rose" Morrison quickly explained as they entered the doors to the Great Hall. "And she mentioned that Eckley is trying out for the Gryffindor team. And their tryouts are tomorrow, right before yours."

Albus gulped; he had momentarily forgotten that his tryouts were tomorrow. He had asked specifically for them to be on the first Friday back, and Atticus, as a favor, had put them there.

He figured that if he embarrassed himself, his classmates would have the whole weekend to forget about it before seeing him in class.

"Okay, so...what's the prank?"

"Morrison reckons he can perform a Hurling Hex" Scorpius said. "It's a hex that makes your broom throw you off of it. The really advanced ones can be set when to kick in, but he figures that even a weak one can get him to at least lose the tryout. I mean, can you imagine? He goes to hit a Bludger or make a shot or whatever, and he just goes flying?"

"Isn't that...kind of dangerous?" Albus asked him, though he had to admit, he was intrigued.

"Pfft, he probably can't even get off the ground anyway. And the pitch is soft. And you don't fly too high during tryouts anyway" Scorpius explained eagerly.

"Why are you asking me like you need my permission?" Albus asked.

Scorpius shrugged. "Good point. We just thought we'd let you know in case you wanted to see it. I know I'll be spectating."

They entered their History of Magic class seconds later. Albus yawned, pulled out a quill and some ink, and began drawing spaces for letters.

The rest of the day proved entirely uneventful, and the next morning, Albus woke up sure that he was going to throw up. This could be one chance to live up to his name. Everyone in his family- his brother, his father, his grandfather, almost all of the Weasley's- they all had proven to be great Quidditch players. Now if only he could join them...

The morning classes passed by in a blur, and the next thing Albus knew, he was walking down the chilly tunnels to the dungeons for his first Potions class of the year. He met the rest of the class at the door, waiting for Professor Darvy to let them in.

"Hey!" Mirra said as he approached the crowd of people. "Looking forward to Potions? Favorite class right?" she asked.

"Mhm" he replied.

Albus still didn't feel entirely comfortable around her. When they would get together in the library, or even talk in class, he would usually try and stay out of the conversation and let Scorpius and Morrison handle it. As they had not been arguing with her the year before, they were much happier to have her part of the "group" again. But Albus had talked to her only a few times, and on these rare occasions, she seemed inclined not to mention anything that had happened. Indeed, with each passing day, his theory that her memory had been wiped seemed to grow increasingly more accurate.

"So Rose told me that you're trying out for Quidditch today" she said. "Your practice is right after Gryffindor's?"

"Yup" he answered, silently praying for the door to swing open.

"Well me and Rose were going to stick around to watch it" she smiled. "I hope you do okay-"

The door opened, revealing their Potions Professor. He looked exhausted. His long blonde hair was not the sleek and shiny hair that it once was, but frizzy and unkempt. Even the slightly maniacal look in his blue eyes seemed tired.

"Come in, come in" he said, motioning for them to follow.

The students exchanged excited looks with one another; Professor Darvy always had the most unique lessons.

They took their seats, Albus in the front, in between Scorpius and, though he pretended not to notice, Mirra. Behind them sat Morrison, Rose, and much to Morrison's apparent dismay, Eckley. He seemed to have abandoned Donovan Hornsbrook, his best friend, in favor of sitting near Rose and Mirra.

"Good afternoon class" Professor Darvy said as he stood near the black board.

"Good afternoon" they chorused back.

"How was everyone's summer?" he asked.

There was a murmur of "good's" throughout the students. One student raised their hand. "How was your summer Professor Darvy?"

"Oh, it had its moments" he shrugged. "I traveled for a bit, read some good books, really just did anything to take my mind off of my absurdly low paychecks."

The class sniggered as he clapped his hands together. They fell silent at once. This was the moment they had been waiting for.

Professor Darvy waved his wand and random letters appeared on the board. In the far corner of it all, there was a box with **A = E, X = Z** written inside of it.

"More important than knowledge of spells, raw power, or even proper tutelage, a wizard needs logic above all else. Instructions are on the board" he said. "They may appear as random letters now, but there is a pattern to the words. When you recognize the pattern, you will know what ingredients to use and what directions to follow. You have until the end of the lesson. Good luck!"

There was a small murmur in the class as students began frantically asking each other "Can you do this?"

"I could probably figure this out," Scorpius said, "but I don't feel like deciphering anything right now."

"I haven't got the slightest idea what that means" Morrison said, scratching his chin with his quill.

"It's quite easy" Eckley said pompously. "I should have this thing cracked in a bit."

Albus could tell that he had deliberately said it loud enough to get Mirra to hear him, but she didn't seem to pay the comment any mind.

"Then get cracking!" Bartleby Bing, a fellow Slytherin in Albus' year snapped at him, to hearty laughs from most of the class.

"Want to help me with this?" Mirra asked him.

Albus almost threw up. "Erm...yeah sure" he said.

"Any idea what this means?" she said, moving her chair closer to his.

Albus scanned the board, and after a minute or two, figured it out completely. "The first word is 'lacewing'" he said.

She leaned in closer. "Whisper it" she said. "I don't want anyone stealing your work."

"As opposed to you?" he grinned, which felt odd. He hadn't grinned near her in a while.

"That's different" she said, grinning back. "I'm your partner. How did you figure that out?"

Albus shrugged. "Every vowel is actually the vowel that comes after it, same with consonants."

She looked at the board and pondered it. "Then shouldn't Y be Z?"

"Y is counted as a vowel" he answered her. "So A is E, E is I, I is O, O is U, and U is Y. Meaning B is C and so forth. Z would be B. It skips over the vowels, see?" I'm guessing the second word is 'flies' because it's five letters and I already know the first letter is F, because it says D."

She gaped at him. "How did you figure that out?"

"Well...I figured what each letter had in common. A and E were vowels, and they were in succession, so I applied the same thing to X and Z".



He shrugged again. He didn't feel like explaining it. He didn't find logic problems like that hard at all. Now transfiguration...that was tough.

"Wow" she whispered softly. "You're really good at that stuff."

Albus felt himself go inexplicably red. For some strange reason, Mirra's compliment seemed different to him than they used to be last year. "How about I crack this thing, and as I'm writing it, you get the ingredients and make the potion?" he asked. "We'll get it done in half the time."

"Okay!" she smiled. "I'll go and get the flies..."

She walked to the cupboard filled with ingredients, while jealous students looked up, disappointed that someone else was making progress.

"Now was that really that hard?" Scorpius said.

"Was what hard?" Albus asked, going even redder.

"Talking to her. You guys used to be good friends, and you were ignoring her. Don't pretend."

"I can't help it" Albus admitted shamefully. "It's like nothing ever happened. It's weird."

Scorpius shrugged. "It will get better. You guys just need to have a quick chat about it, and it will all be good. She's coming" he added.

Albus turned quickly and went back to working.

"Got the lacewing flies" she said, smiling. "What's next?"

He finished deciphering it in about twenty minutes, giving Mirra plenty of time to make the potions, which ended up being a basic concoction designed specifically for someone with a bad cough. They took their vials up to Professor Darvy, who had his feet up at his desk and was reading a magazine. He peered up at them as they approached. "Done already?" he asked.

"Yup, both of us" Mirra said.

The Professor took their vials, opened them, dipped his finger in each and tasted them. He smacked his lips and made an atrocious face. "Yup, that's right. Take twenty points to both Gryffindor and Slytherin. Don't help the others" he added darkly.

Albus spent the rest of the class period talking to Mirra about her summer with her grandparents, careful not to mention her actual parents, and was just starting to enjoy himself when the bell rang. Quite suddenly, the urge to throw up returned.

The class left in a bustle, most of them severely disgruntled. Apart from Albus and Mirra, no one else had managed to solve the puzzle and complete the potion. He even heard Rose indignantly say to Mirra "You couldn't have told me!" through the crowd.

"Okay, you ready?" Scorpius smirked at him as they walked back to the common room.

"Gryffindor tryouts are in about half an hour. This is going to be *hilarious!*"

"You know this probably won't work right?" Albus told him. "You're not going to be allowed to watch. I got in trouble last year for 'spying' on James when he was trying out."

"Well we're not going to be obvious about it or anything" Morrison said. "We're going to be watching from under the bleachers, on ground level. Where no one looks."

"And how do you plan on jinxing the broom?"

Morrison and Scorpius exchanged a sneaky glance. "I'm going to distract them by coming onto the field and making a big scene about how I thought Slytherin tryouts were first. Morrison's going to whisper the spell and aim it perfectly. Then, we'll admit defeat, retreat back to the 'Common Room', but secretly hide under the stands" Scorpius told him confidently.

Albus groaned. He knew this was going to backfire.

They waited in the common room for about twenty minutes, Albus skimming through his Potions book while Scorpius and Morrison discussed numerous possibilities, everything from Eckley flying into the Black Lake to going through a window. By the time the Gryffindor tryouts were approaching, Albus had to admit he was curious as to what was going to happen. With a sigh, he followed them to the Quidditch Pitch.

The crowd of Gryffindors seemed to comprise of at least five students from every year. He could see James standing casually, supported by his broomstick, deep in conversation with the other two Chasers on the team. Off in the distance of the Pitch, surrounded by a few older students, Albus saw Eckley standing nervously, clutching a school broom.

He saw Mirra and Rose waiting in the stands with some other Gryffindor girls. "I'm going to pick us out a seat under the stands" Albus told them.

"Okay, pick us good ones" Morrison said as he and Scorpius walked towards the center of the field.

Albus began walking towards the stands opposite where Mirra and Rose were sitting, but made a slight detour to where his brother was.

"Hey" he said as he approached.

James turned and looked at him. "What's up?" he asked. "How's your first week?"

"Not bad" Albus told him. "Hey...what do you think about Charles Eckley?" he asked.

James gave him a quizzical look before shrugging. "Meh, he's a prat. Donnie's not bad though." One of his teammates nodded in agreement. "You might want to head out of here though, you know what happened last time."

"Yeah" Albus said, nodding his head. He saw a small group of people form in the center where Scorpius and Morrison were. In the distance, he heard Scorpius yell "Professor Darvy told me tryouts were now! *You're wrong!*"

Albus snuck past the group and hid under the the bleachers farthest from were Mirra and Rose were sitting. On close inspection, he saw Morrison hastily stuff his wand in his robes.

"Whatever!" he heard Scorpius yell as he and Morrison walked towards the end of the pitch. Once most of the heads had turned away, they both ran to the bleachers and hid with Albus.

"Did you jinx it?" Albus asked Morrison.

He smiled. "I think so."

They waited in silence, watching as numerous students tried out. There weren't that many open spots on the team, and the group that was aiming for Seeker (which included Eckley) seemed to be the biggest. After about forty five minutes, James had apparently gotten tired of scoring on all of the Keepers, none of whom seemed to be able to save more than one shot apiece. Finally, it was the Seeker's turn.

Eckley was called up first. Albus could tell he was nervous, but from the view that they had, slightly marred by the bars of the stands and being a considerable distance away, he had to admit he was pulling off his confident swagger quite well. He strode to the center of the Pitch, his broom slung over his shoulder, and waited for the whistle to be called. At that time, Albus knew that a Snitch would be released, and that he would be timed on how fast he could catch it.

There were a few moments of silence before the whistle blew, and in a matter of seconds, Eckley was soaring higher...and higher.

Albus saw the back of the broomstick buck, even from ground level. The movement was so sharp it was as if there were springs in the back of his broom. Albus heard a yell, noise from the crowd of people watching, and a sickening thud that told him that Eckley wasn't going to get back up.

He turned his head to his friends and saw them staring in horror. He knew that whatever it was they had said, they had not been expecting him to actually get hurt. He saw Mirra and Rose run down the stands and into the crowd that had encircled him. Albus, without thinking, rose from his hiding place and ran towards the crowd as well.

"He lost control of his broom-"

"No way, it was a Hurling Hex, I saw it-"

Albus pushed through the crowd and straight to the center, where Eckley was moaning on the floor. He was on his back, and every time he wanted to turn it seemed like he would yell in pain. Two burly Gryffindors picked him up and another one conjured a stretcher for him.

"We'll take him up" Rose said. Albus watched as she and Mirra walked the floating stretcher off of the pitch.

"Was it a Hurling Hex?" one of the Chasers asked James. He didn't speak for a moment; he was eyeing Albus very intently. He knew what he was thinking-Albus had mentioned him minutes before it had happened, and he was in some way responsible. This was it-

"No, he definitely lost control of his broom" James said, turning his eyes away from Albus. "I could see it from this angle. He pushed forward and tried accelerating, but must've thought he was going too fast and came to a stop. I've seen it happen before."

"Think he's going to be okay?" a Gryffindor girl asked.

James shrugged, but went back to eyeing Albus.

Ten minutes later, Albus was fuming in the boys dormitory. "Was it really that funny?" he shot at Scorpius.

Both Scorpius and Morrison were sitting on their beds. Thankfully, it was only them in the room; Dante and Bartleby had left seconds prior.

"Is he okay?" Morrison asked.

"Do they know it was us?" Scorpius asked nervously.

Albus sat down on his own bed. "No, they think he just fell off from his own mistake. And I don't know how he is" he added.

"We weren't trying to hurt him or anything!" Morrison said. "And you agreed with it!"

"I know I did" Albus admitted. But quite suddenly, he forgot what had made him agree with it in the first place. Eckley was pompous, sure... but he must have done something to have ticked him off...

"Right, well I'm going down to tryouts" he said, slinging his new broomstick over his shoulder.

Ten minutes later Albus was waiting outside on the Quidditch pitch, staring around at the other tryouts. The crowd in the stands had significantly thinned, but Albus saw that coming. Of the

many things that he had learned the previous year, the most prominent was that Slytherins weren't nearly as popular as any of the other houses.

"What are you trying for?" Atticus asked him as he pulled a quill out of his pocket and put it near his clipboard. Albus could tell that he was trying to be professional during his first year as captain.

"Seeker" he replied.

Atticus leaned in a bit. "Do you want to go first? Just get it over with?" he asked.

He thought about it. "Yeah" he said. "Thanks."

"Okay we're going to have Seeker tryouts first. So...we'll have Albus up first. Come on over here Al..."

He walked to the center of the pitch and mounted his broomstick. He could see the two Slytherin Beaters bring over the heavy chest that had the Snitch inside of it.

"Okay, when I blow my whistle, I'm going to let the Snitch go. Take as long as you want to catch it, but keep in mind that if someone beats your time, you don't get the spot. We're going to release a Bludger too" he added. He bent down low, so that only Albus could hear him. "Good luck Al." He blew the whistle, and Albus was off.

His broomstick did most of the work, he had to admit. He soared through the skies, seeing the glimmer of the Snitch off near the center hoop at the end of the pitch. He accelerated, ripping through the sky, feeling the wind blow through his hair. More than once, he narrowly missed the Bludger that was tailing him. Down below, he heard shouts from the crowd. One person even yelled "He's as good as his brother!"

He smiled and continued his pursuit. The Snitch was now floating lower, and its golden glimmer was harder to see. Deciding there was no point in waiting, he accelerated more, entering a steep dive that made the wind whip against his face.

He snatched the Snitch to general applause from the crowd below, and descended with his hand in the air. He thought, for a moment, that he saw his brother grinning near the edge of the pitch, but the crowd swarmed around him and when they dispersed, he was gone.

"Excellent flying Al -"

"I didn't know you could fly!"

"Just under three minutes" Atticus said, grinning. "Sharp flying Potter. Why don't you go sit in the stands and keep an eye on the competition."

Albus grinned back and handed him the Snitch. All thoughts of Eckley and his injury gone, he practically floated over to the stands.

Twenty minutes and three tryouts later, Albus was Slytherin's official seeker. He stayed around for the rest of tryouts however, in order to get a better look at his teammates. Thompson, the Keeper from last year, was staying, and Atticus was still a Chaser, but the other two spots were filled by two fifth years, Connie Orik and Damian Peesley. They received a new set of Beaters as well, a seventh year named Osmund Hall and a sixth year named Patrick Parcher, who Albus knew was a friend of Atticus'. Albus sized up his team as Atticus told them about the practice schedule, and felt discomfort. Not only was he younger than the other players by at least two years each, but they all (even Connie) had at least a foot on him in terms of size. Secretly, he wished that he could have a Morrison-esque growth spurt right then and there.

He walked back to the castle with his teammates for dinner, and after making a quick stop at his dormitory to drop off his broom, entered the Great Hall and made for the Slytherin table to tell his friends of his triumph.

"Albus! Hey Al!" someone called. It was Mirra. She was sitting next to Rose at the Gryffindor table, waving towards him, motioning to come and see her.

"Did you make it?" she asked when he approached her.

"You weren't watching?" he asked, slightly disappointed. Hadn't she said earlier that her and Rose were going to stick around?

"Sorry, we were in the hospital wing with Charlie" she said.

"Oh" he said, hoping he came off as unconcerned. "How is he by the way?" he asked in what he hoped was a genuinely sincere voice. Leave it to Eckley to hog all of the attention.

"His back was broken" she said through gritted teeth. "He's okay now though, Madam Clearwater fixed him right up."

"That sucks" he said without thinking.

She frowned slightly.

"I mean-about his back being broken and everything. And missing tryouts and all. It's great that he's better though! Oh, and yeah, I made it. Seeker" he finished proudly.

"That's great!" she said. "But don't expect me to root for you when we play-"

The rest of her sentence was drowned out by a chorus of booing from the Gryffindor table. Apparently they had just now noticed that there was a Slytherin near their table.

"I better go before they stone me" Albus said, and she laughed.

He walked over to his own table and away from the shouts of the Gryffindors, finally settling himself in a seat between his two best friends.

"We already heard Mr. Seeker" Scorpius said, thumping him on the back.

"Nice job Al" Morrison told him. "Atticus already told us."

Albus shrugged. For some strange reason, he wasn't nearly as excited about being on the Slytherin team than he had been half an hour ago.

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As he lay in bed a few hours later, he reflected on his day. It had been so strange-and eventful. He wondered what Rose and Mirra had said to Eckley in the hospital wing, and if James was going to rat his friends out. He was Seeker now, too. The first Friday of the year had proven to be more than he could handle. His eyelids felt heavy. He was exhausted. He rolled over. What he needed now was a good night's sleep...

*BANG!*

A noise like a thousand gunshots being fired at once went off. He heard a crash and saw Bartleby lying on the floor; he had evidently fallen out of his bed. The other students had awoken as well.

"What was that?" Morrison asked.

"It was so loud-"

"People are gathering in the Common Room" Scorpius said. "I can hear them."

They moved through the dark and into the common room, where the fire provided them with light. The entirety of Slytherin house had gathered. Apparently, everyone had heard the noise. Atticus was trying to get everyone to quiet down, but failing miserably.

"It sounded like it came from near the lake" someone said. "Probably the Forest."

"But then it must've been really loud" someone else said. "We're under the lake."

"Everybody stay here!" Atticus hissed. "*Lumos.*"

His wand tip ignited and he vanished through the door, leaving the other students to talk even louder. When he returned ten minutes later, he looked as though he had been around the entire school.

"Okay quiet, quiet. Be quiet! Everyone shut up for a sec!" he snapped, and the crowd turned silent. "I just got done talking to Professor Bellinger, and she told me that we were supposed to be kept in our Common Room by our Head of House."

"Where's Professor Darvy?" someone asked through the darkness.

"I don't know" Atticus said shortly. "Probably still sleeping, nutter like him. They don't know what the sound was, but it came from the Forest. They're still investigating. Everyone needs to get back to bed. They'll know what it was in the morning."

There were moans from the group of people, but everyone reluctantly returned to their dormitories nevertheless.

Albus crawled back into bed more awake than he had been at the Quidditch tryouts. That was, without a shadow of a doubt, the loudest noise he had ever heard. The other boys were chatting about it fiercely, but he simply rolled over. *Great*, he thought. One more thing for him to think about.



## Chapter 6 : The Stray Wand

Albus didn't actually remember falling asleep; the conversation around him about the thundering sound had went on for so long. But he did remember waking up, and remembered being alone, and the next thing he knew he found himself at the Slytherin table for breakfast, where the conversation had hardly changed.

No one knew much about the sound. Theories ranged from dragons attacking the castle to every living creature in the forest getting together and having a party. All that people knew for sure however, is that when the teachers went to ask what the Headmaster knew, he was nowhere to be found.

"What do you think it was, Al?" Bartleby asked him through a mouthful of eggs

Albus shrugged and lazily spread marmalade on his toast. He was thankful it was Saturday and didn't have to attend class.

"It always could have been Darvy" Scorpius said with a chuckle. "He was no where to be found after all."

"Neither was Ares" said Denise, a girl in Albus' year. "And I doubt they were playing a practical joke together."

Albus looked up at the staff table and grinned. Ares was looking just as normal as he always did while he scanned his newspaper; bored, like he didn't have a sense of humor. Darvy was there too, chatting with Neville. He looked as though he was completely clueless about what had occurred the previous night.

"What do you want to do today?" Morrison asked him.

Albus shrugged again. He was way too exhausted to be thinking about anything except for the toast he was chewing on.

"We have a ton of homework" Scorpius said. "We might as well get started on that."

Morrison rolled his eyes. "We'll have all of Monday morning for that. Let's go and visit Hagrid! We haven't seen him yet!"

Albus swallowed a large chunk of his toast. It was true, they had yet to see Hagrid. He stifled a large yawn. "Should I get Rose and Mirra?" he asked.

"I'll do it" Scorpius said, pushing his plate away and hurrying off.

"You talk to Mirra yet?" Morrison asked him in a hushed whisper.

Albus stifled a yawn that he didn't even have to take. "About?"

"About...you know. You two arguing."

Albus narrowed his eyes. "I don't even think she remembers" he told him, which was a perfectly honest answer. "We were talking fine in Potions."

"I don't think she forgot. I think she's waiting to apologize. Or vice versa" Morrison added thoughtfully.

"She better not be expecting anything on my end" Albus told him, in a tone more menacing than he thought it would be. "I didn't do anything wrong."

"They're not coming" came a voice from behind him. Albus turned and saw a defeated looking Scorpius standing by his side.

"Why not?"

"They're doing homework with 'Charlie' and 'Donnie'" he sneered. "Why do they shorten their names? I mean seriously, no one calls me 'Scorpy'!"

Albus blushed and tried hastily changing the subject. He much preferred 'Al' over his given name any day. Not that he wasn't proud of being named after one of his father's friends; he just found the name to be too eccentric. "Just us three going to Hagrid's then?"

The cold air outside smacked against their faces as they tucked their arms in their cloaks and walked to Hagrid's cabin. Albus smiled happily at the sight of smoke coming from the chimney. It would be a relief to sit near the fire while talking to Hagrid. Albus approached the door and knocked three times. The door swung open.

"Al!" Hagrid bellowed. "Come in, come in" he said, waving his hand towards Albus and his friends. But Albus didn't move. He was standing in horror, gaping at Hagrid's face.

On Hagrid's right cheek was the biggest hoof print that Albus had ever seen. He had only seen one that matched it-the one on the chest of the centaur Firenze. It didn't take long for Albus to realize who had done it. "Hagrid, were you attacked by the centaurs?" he asked.

Hagrid groaned. "Though' you wouldn't a noticed it" he said. "Come on in, don' wait out in the cold. Bring your friends. I'll explain."

They walked through the cabin door and Albus saw that he was not disappointed with the fire. It was quite warm. They took their seats at the table. "Got any of that treacle fudge, Hagrid?" Morrison asked excitedly.

Hagrid brought forth a large tin of it as Morrison smacked his lips. "I'll pour us some tea too" he said.

"So what happened to your face?" Scorpius asked him. "Did the centaurs attack you?"

"Yup" he grunted as he busied himself with the teabags. "Not their fault though. It was dark. They though' I was someone else."

"Who?" Albus asked him.

Hagrid gave another groan as he placed a mug in front of each of them. He took a seat at the table. "Couldn't tell ya'. They're damn secretive. And I don' remember a lot 'bout las' night."

"This happened last night?" Scorpius asked him. "Like around the time of the sound we all heard?"

"You lot heard it too?" Hagrid asked. "Cause it damn near blew me house up."

"Hagrid what happened last night?" Albus asked. Now that he was a bit more awake he was quite keen on discussing the sound.

He heaved a tremendous sigh. "I was in my bed, when what sounded like the loudes' clap of thun'r hit. I went outside an hour later and went into the fores'. It definitely came from there. I got right at the edge of it...there's a small clearing there. And then a ruddy centaur kicks me right in the face! I don't even remember which one it was. But they said 'aye, it's not one of them. Sorry Hagrid'."

"One of who?"

"I jus' told ya I don' know! I reckon whatever they were up against is what made the noise though."

Morrison picked some fudge out of his teeth. "But who could get into the Forest?" he asked.

"Ain't no one in that Fores'" Hagrid said. "It's impossible. No one can get in or out of the castle grounds without the Headmaster. Charms an' such you see. He'd have to remove them."

"Not necessarily" Albus argued. "My dad got in last year. He broke through the spells."

"Blimey Al, not all wizards are yer dad. Very few could break through ol' Red Ares' spells."

"But if they could-"

"They can't" Hagrid said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "There's more fudge on the coun'er" he added to Morrison, who had already devoured his plate.

"Mind if we take a look around the Forest, Hagrid?" Albus asked.

Hagrid roared with laughter. "Yer too much like yer dad for your own good" he said through gasps of air. "It's ruddy cold ou' there."

"I'm pretty curious too" Scorpius said. "Do we have your permission? Just in case we get caught?"

Hagrid heaved a sigh. "I guess there ain' no harm in bein' near the edge. But you kids watch yourselves! Them centaurs 'av been mean lately..."

They tucked their arms into their sleeves and left Hagrid's Cabin, breathing in the chilly air as they strode towards the Forest. Even in the daylight, the tall trees seemed to cover everything in darkness, so that it looked just as forbidden as its name implied. Albus took his first steps into the forest, Scorpius and Morrison following.

He walked around the edge, following what looked like a very poorly made trail. "Where do you think Hagrid got attacked at?" Albus asked them.

"No clue. Wherever you see centaur prints" he heard Scorpius say in a muffled voice; he was covering his face with his sleeves due to the cold.

Albus strayed away from the trail and into a large clump of bushes, seemingly more dense and dark than the other portions of the forest. He heard birds and rustling in the trees. Frantically, he turned on the spot and saw that Hagrid's cabin was still quite visible. Only twenty feet into the forest and he was terrified already.

"We're not going to find anything!" Morrison called out to him. "It's freezing, let's head back!"

Albus ignored him. He continued peering through the dense bushes. There seemed to be a large clearing on the other side. He walked through the bushes with a hassle; there were so many twigs it was a fight just to pass through. He made it onto the other side breathing with exhaustion.

He was definitely in the middle of a large forest clearing, broad enough for at least the entirety of Slytherin House to gather in it comfortably, though it didn't seem natural. There was wood laying right in the middle of it, as though a fire had been lit, and the surrounding trees were all taller than the ones that he had already passed-as though they had been grown by magic.

"There's nothing here!" he heard Scorpius mutter from beside him. He had apparently followed him into the clearing.

"Look at this place" Albus said.

"It's a forest."

"It's a clearing! People could have met here!"

Scorpius rolled his eyes. "You heard Hagrid, no one can get in or out of the castle grounds. This has probably been here for years. The centaurs may have made it to chant to planets and all that other ridiculous stuff they do."

But Albus ignored him. He scanned the clearing, peering at the disheveled bushes and what looked like burn marks in some of the trees. There was even a very irregular looking stick protruding from a thorn bush off in one of the corners.

"Hold on a sec" he told him. He walked towards the bush and carefully removed the stick.

"Yeah, go digging into a thorn bush" Scorpius called to him. "Real smart."

"It's a wand!" Albus called back.

It really was. It looked slightly longer than Albus', and based on the stringy substance poking from the top, it appeared to be made of dragon heartstring.

Scorpius strode over to him skeptically. "Really?" he asked.

"What are you guys looking at?" Morrison hollered to them, and he too joined them at the end of the clearing.

"A wand I found" Albus said triumphantly.

"A wand?" Morrison asked him. "That's random."

"Yeah and let's think" Albus said in a voice of mock contemplation. "What carries a wand? A bird?"

Scorpius scowled at him as he examined the wand.

Albus continued in glee. "No wait...maybe a unicorn? Wait! No, I know! A *wizard*. Hmm...but nobody came in the forest...but there's a wand. Interesting."

"It's probably from years ago" Scorpius said. "It could be anyone's."

"Oh come off it!" Morrison said. "There's a wand in here, wizards carry wands. The centaurs fought someone with wands last night! Just admit you were wrong!"

Scorpius scowled.

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Neither of them made any mention of the wand at dinner, or for the entire weekend for that matter, and by the time Monday morning had come the mysterious loud sound had long since vanished from the student's minds, replaced by the whimpers of those that were desperately copying each other's homework.

Albus had taken the wand with him, stowed it into his robes and later kept it in his trunk in the boy's dormitory. He wasn't quite sure why, but he had gotten a strange, eerie vibe from it. Who

could have been in the forest? And left their wand in there no less? Albus knew that a wand was like an additional arm to a wizard. Without it, they would be helpless.

"You should take it to Darvy" Morrison said while they sat in Herbology, waiting for Neville to show up.

"Why? I found it" Albus said.

"But it's not yours!" Scorpius snapped. He was evidently still upset at having been proven wrong. "Someone is missing their wand!"

"Who's missing their wand?" came a voice from beside them. It was Mirra. She and Rose had just arrived.

"No one-"

"Someone is" Scorpius said, cutting him off. "Al found a wand in the forest. He kept it."

"Al!" Rose said. "That's not cool, that's someone's wand -"

"-who shouldn't have been in the forest anyway!" he cut her off.

"You were" Rose spat back.

"I want to see it" Mirra said.

"Settle down class" Neville said as he entered the greenhouse. "Special treat today! We'll all be planting our own venomous tentaculas!"

The class groaned.

As Albus had no more classes with Rose or Mirra throughout the day, he managed to keep the conversation about the wand to a mere minimum. That being said, nothing at all would change how Scorpius felt.

It was as though being wrong had given him a sudden urge to mock Albus' victory, and for the remainder of the day he was bombarded with "Take the wand to Darvy" and "This makes you a thief, you know. He had even taken to stop talking for a brief period of time, only to suddenly and abruptly tell him to turn the wand in, as if hoping to catch him off guard.

"Not happening" Albus said for the millionth time as he poured gravy on his mashed potatoes. It was dinner time, and Scorpius still had not let up.

"Fine. Let some defenseless wizard wander the castle. Failing his classes. Unable to perform the simplest of magic. Be kicked out for being a squib."

"Okay" Albus replied casually as he cut through his chicken.

Scorpius banged his fist at the table just as Bartleby yelled down "Hey, my great uncle is a squib!"

"Why are you being so thick?" Scorpius continued.

"Because I just feel like whoever had it shouldn't have been in the forest in the first place. Whoever the centaurs went up against obviously tried attacking them!"

"But there's no proof of that!" Scorpius shouted, throwing his hand up in the air wildly.

Morrison swallowed his own potatoes, then cleared his throat loudly. "Okay, here's what I think should happen."

They both stared at him. The only time Morrison ever gave his opinion on the matter was during a Quidditch argument.

"Albus should go to Darvy-" he continued, while Scorpius raised a fist in triumph, "-but not tell him that he found a wand. He should just ask if anyone lost one."

Scorpius slowly put his hand down. "What would that accomplish?"

Morrison ripped off a large chunk of chicken, chewed quickly, then said "Well, anyone who's lost a wand obviously went to the staff members right? Even if it wasn't a Slytherin, Darvy would have heard about it. If Albus asks if anyone's missing one, and someone is, he should give it back. If Darvy says no, then well... just let him keep it I guess? No one's tried claiming it. This way he's not actually giving up the wand. Just making sure no one's tried to get it back."

Albus thought about it. "Okay...that's fair" he said.

"Yeah, I suppose" Scorpius agreed, though he did look slightly disappointed. Albus could tell that he was hoping that the wand belonged to a student; this way he wouldn't have been wrong about any wizards entering the castle grounds.

After dinner Albus hurried to the Slytherin common room to retrieve the wand. Digging through his trunk, he found it nestled within his robes, where he had placed it over the weekend. He unwrapped it and pocketed it, noticing that the wand was quite thicker and more uncomfortable to hold than his own.

"When you get back, we're all going to be in the library" he heard Scorpius say from the door.

"Who's 'we all '?" he asked as he stood up and closed his trunk.

"Me, Morrison, Rose and Mirra" he answered. "Tell us how it goes."

"Where's Darvy's office anyway?" he asked. "Just right through his classroom?"

"I think so" Scorpius said, turning.

Albus walked with him through the labyrinth of the dungeon. It was a small mark of their friendship how, even in the middle of a debate, they managed to talk about Albus' upcoming first Quidditch practice as they did so. Scorpius turned right and followed the stairs up to the Great Hall while Albus continued walking until he hit the Potions room. Hesitantly, he knocked.

No one answered. He knocked again, and this time, still with no answer, the door creaked open. Albus shrugged and entered his Potions classroom. It looked quite plain without bubbling cauldrons set up, or with the candles lit, and Albus noticed that it was quite chilly. He saw the storage cupboard, next to it Darvy's private stores, and just behind his desk near the chalkboard, his office.

Albus walked towards it and saw that the lights were on. He knocked on this door as well, but still no one answered. He was beginning to grow slightly uneasy. It didn't worry him that the professor wasn't there; he knew that Darvy was far too crazy to be in one place for too long, but what he was doing now was bordering on trespassing. Well actually, *it was trespassing*.

He turned the doorknob and saw that it wasn't locked. He would just take a quick peek inside, that was all. He had made the long trip from the common room, hadn't he? He had might as well make sure that his professor wasn't just sleeping. He entered the office and nearly laughed.

It was quite spacious, though it would be quite hard to tell with the mess on the floor. It looked very much like his own room; when he was five. There were papers and jars, and numerous odd and strange looking instruments sporadically placed on the floor. There were shelves up against the far corner of the wall, where books rested, unorganized completely. There appeared to be a smaller room in the back. He carefully stepped over the gadgets on the ground, nearly tripping over a cloak so dark that it blended in with the floor. He tip toed into the room and this time really did laugh.

This room was much smaller. There was a cot in the corner roughly three fourths the size of Albus' bed, and clothes were scattered all across the floor. He saw a closet that was slightly ajar, filled with nothing but hangers. Professor Darvy was officially the most untidy person that he knew. Still chuckling, he turned and left the office, leaving the lights on to show that no one had entered.

"Nope, he wasn't there" Albus was telling them five minutes later.

"Really?" Scorpius asked skeptically.

"Really!" Albus answered in all honesty.

"Then there's still no proof it's not a student's."

Albus rolled his eyes. "There's still no proof that no one else entered the castle grounds."



Rose let out an exasperated groan that caused the librarian to stare at them. "It's not about who's right or wrong!" she said, her voice just barely above a whisper, but intimidating nonetheless. "It's about a wizard or witch-regardless of who they are or what they were doing-losing the one thing that truly connects them to our world!"

Scorpius stared at her for a moment, then laughed. "No it's not, it's about Albus being wrong."

"You should take it to the Headmaster" Morrison said as he casually leaned back in his chair. His book was the only one not open.

Now it was Albus' turn to laugh at someone. "That's not going to happen" he said, shaking his head. "That guy hates me. And why him anyway?"

"Because if anyone gets complaints about missing stuff, it's him" Morrison replied. "It's his castle after all."

"Eh, I'm still not going" Albus said, pulling out a chair to take a seat.

"You really should though" Mirra said. Her head was inches from the paper she was writing, her hair dangling in front of her. Albus didn't even think she had been listening.

"Erm...what?" he asked.

"You should take it to the Headmaster" she said, eyes still on her paper.

Albus contemplated it a bit. "Yeah, I guess I should" he said.

Morrison stared right at him "What? You just-"

But Albus saw Scorpius kick him from under the table. He looked like he was going to explode with laughter. "Okay, you go do that mate" he said with a grin.

"Okay...I will" Albus said as he pushed the chair back in, not getting the joke.

He left the library and walked through the halls, dodging the groups of students who were spending their day hanging around the castle. He hoped that he remembered the way to the Headmaster's office. He thought it was on the seventh floor, and sure enough, after a bit of wandering around, found himself face to face with the stone gargoyle that he knew would lead him there.

"Erm...can I come in?" he asked the stone gargoyle. It didn't move. What had the password been? Was it mysteries? Had the Headmaster bothered to change it?

"... Mysteries?" he asked the gargoyle.

It sprang to life at once, moving out of the way and revealing a large circular staircase. Albus wiped sweat from his brow and chuckled a bit. The Headmaster evidently didn't care much for privacy. He stepped on the staircase and watched as it revolved around and round, taking him further and further up. He gripped the wand that he had found loosely in his pocket to check that it was still there.

He came face to face with the large oak door that he had seen twice before. He raised his hand to knock, but was stopped by booming laughter. Standing on the spot with curiosity, he leaned his ear against the door. Was that-dare he think it-laughter from the Headmaster?

"It isn't a laughing matter" came an oily voice from behind the door. The Headmaster was having a meeting with someone, someone who didn't sound quite as happy.

"It is to me" replied the Headmaster's gruff voice.

Albus took his head away from the door for a second. This was, he recollected, the second time that he had listened at the door to the Headmaster's conversation. The first time had provided him with information about EP's, which he later learned were dark wizards on the loose. Could the second time, perhaps, be as informative?

He placed his ear back up against the door and continued to listen intently.

"I've been trying to get in for two days now" the man with the oily voice said. He sounded old and withered, but there was no denying the agitation in his syllables. "Your enchantments are too strong."

"They're meant to keep outsiders out" the Headmaster replied. "You should have scheduled a meeting. Or sent a message."

"I don't have a wand!" the man fired back. Albus felt his heart skip a beat.

"Well that's not my fault, is it Augustus?"

"Oh yes it is! It was your damn centaurs who sprang an attack!"

Even through the door, Albus could tell that the Headmaster was rolling his eyes. "It's their forest" he replied calmly. His voice was still gruff, but it had lost its humored edge. "Be thankful they even let you in. Now, where did you drop your wand?"

"I didn't *drop* anything!" the man spat. "It was knocked from my hand! And you scaring everyone off just led to more confusion!"

"Have you searched the forest?"

"No, I haven't been able to get in! Make the oaf search!"

"His name is Hagrid" the Headmaster replied calmly. "And he is currently nursing an injury. I will not have him look for your wand. The fault is your own. You're welcome to go back tonight and search, but I cannot allow you to do so now, when you can interact with my students."

"I will not search an entire forest for a wand!" the man spat; and his voice hardly sounded oily anymore. "Make them find it! We're wizards!"

"I'm a wizard" Albus heard the Headmaster sneer. "You don't even have a wand. I suggest you find a temporary replacement until it turns up."

There was a long pause. For a moment, Albus thought that he had been detected-that they had heard his harsh breathing, or his heart pounding. But a few more moments passed, and the man known as Augustus said "Give me yours."

Another long pause. "Mine?" the Headmaster replied.

"Yes, yours. Your old one. You don't even need it anymore, you have the Dragonfang wa-"

"Rookwood!" the Headmaster shouted, cutting the man off. "You know full well it does not yet work for me! And think wisely before you speak! Colors on canvas' they may be, but these portraits have ears. I will do no such thing. Either come back later and find your own wand, or get a new one. Now leave. Now" he repeated firmly.

Albus removed his head from the door and took a few steps back. Right on cue, the man opened the door. His hair was a wispy white, but definitely oily, and his face was pockmarked, with his cheeks sagging from age. He took a glance at Albus and walked right by him, only to stop and turn around. Albus watched as his eyes slid up his face and to his forehead-as if he were expecting to see a scar. He sneered, looked back at the Headmaster, and stood on the revolving staircase, which lowered itself at once.

"Who's there?" the Headmaster called.

Albus swallowed and stepped into the office. Headmaster Ares eyed him with a great deal of suspicion. Albus instinctively looked down at the floor. In his pocket, he held the wand that he had found tightly.

"What is it? What do you want?" he asked. He sounded as though he were making an interrogation.

"I just- I just wanted to say hello, sir" Albus said, still staring at the ground.

There was a moment's pause where Albus mentally kicked himself. "Get out!" Ares barked.

Albus didn't need telling twice; he hardly needed it once. Still gripping the wand, he turned on the spot and ran to the revolving staircase, which had just made its way back up from dropping

off Rookwood. He stared into the Headmaster's office as the staircase brought him down as well; Ares had turned in his chair and was gazing at the sky through the window.

The second the gargoyle moved itself aside to let Albus free his mind began racing. What had he just heard? The wand - the sound - the centaurs - it was all connected. He walked as fast as he could back to the library, twice forgetting where he was going and being forced to turn around mid-step.

*Ares was in the forest.* And he wasn't alone either. How many other people had been there? He knew one thing for sure...he wasn't going to give the wand back now. And the wand! Ares had gotten a new wand! But from who? A wandmaker certainly. But perhaps...a murdered wandmaker?

He entered the library and saw that his friends were still chatting and working, or at least, one of them was. Rose appeared to be hard at work, while the other three had their books closed. Albus briskly walked up to them and, not knowing what to say, tossed the wand onto the table. The talking ceased at once.

"Ares wasn't there either?" Scorpius grinned.

"No he was" Albus said, and his dark tone made the smirk slide of Scorpius' face almost instantly. "I got something to tell you guys though." He pulled out a chair and sat down in it. "Okay, you guys know that there was a wandmaker murdered this summer right?"

"No" they all said in unison. Even Rose had lifted her head up from her paper to say it.

"Okay well...there was. And I think Headmaster Ares murdered him."

After a few moments of silence, they all exchanged looks, Rose especially, who raised her eyebrows at Mirra. "That's a pretty...bold accusation" Scorpius said quietly.

"I know it is! But hear me out. I was standing outside of his office when I heard -"

"-eavesdropped" Morrison chuckled.

"-whatever," Albus continued, "he was talking to some guy who lost his wand in the forest. And they mentioned the centaurs and everything! It sounded like they were both there the night the loud noise happened!"

"Okay, so you're right about that" Scorpius said begrudgingly. "Someone was in the forest. But how does that make Ares a murderer?"

"It doesn't!" Albus said, exasperated.

"Well he's got me convinced" Morrison said, while the others laughed.

"Shut up! I'm not done!" Albus added irritably. "The guy said he had lost his wand, but that he wanted Ares' *old* wand. Meaning that he got a new one!"

"But Al, there's no law against any wizard or witch owning more than one wand" Rose said.

"I know that" Albus said, which was a complete lie, for he had thought for sure that a wizard was limited to only one.

"You bond with your wand, but plenty of wizards keep a backup. Wands can break, you know" Rose continued.

"Yeah, but it's not like he was asking for a backup wand. It sounded like Ares had gotten a new one, but was still using his old one for some reason. And it really pissed him off. "

"It's still a pretty strong accusation, Al. There's no way they'd let a murderer teach here" Rose said, turning a page and resuming her work.

"Morrison?" Albus asked, but he merely shrugged.

"Probably not mate" he said guiltily.

Albus frowned. Would no one side with him?

"I agree with Al" Mirra said. "It makes a lot of sense. I mean, what were they doing meeting in the forest anyway?" she asked.

Albus felt his heart skip a beat, he looked up and smiled. "Thanks" he said, and she smiled at him. "That's a good point, why was he meeting with Rookson? Or Rookwood, whatever his name was."

"Wait, Rookwood?" Scorpius asked.

"Yeah. I think that was it. Why?"

"No reason" he said casually. "It's just- my grandad knows him. Or like they talk. Or something." He shrugged, then looked around at the rest of them. "Well anyway, I know that Ares is a weird lookin' bloke, but until you get solid proof that someone in this castle is trying to murder me, you should get to work" he said, pushing an enormous textbook towards Albus.

He pocketed Rookwood's wand and randomly turned the pages. Mirra believed him, but it was going to be a hard battle to convince the others. *I've been right before*, he told himself. *And I'm going to prove them wrong again.*

## Chapter 7 : Inspections At Hogwarts School Of Witchcraft And Wizardry

Of course, the term "wrong" could have multiple meanings, couldn't it? That's the thought that Albus clung to, anyway. They were now midway through October, and as far as Albus knew, Ares hadn't so much as left his office. As each day passed by without any new and startling evidence, he was forced to succumb to the idea that his Headmaster was not doing *anything* wrong, let alone murdering in his spare time.

And as far as spare time went, Albus felt that his was slowly thinning too. His studies still came first, but truth be told, Scorpius was doing roughly half of his homework. His time was instead spent on practicing.

He had had about five Quidditch practices now, and though both he and his team felt that they were in top shape, there was no denying a sense of unease. The last time a Slytherin seeker had made the team as only a second year, Slytherin went a decade without winning the cup. It didn't help that the Seeker in question was Scorpius' father, making it a rather touchy subject indeed.

And even less welcome than talking to Scorpius about his father's weak Quidditch skills was attempting to talk to his brother again. He had not spoken a word to him since he was wrongfully accused of orchestrating the prank on Eckley, and Albus didn't plan on being the one to break.

"I'm sure he's forgotten it by now" Morrison told him on a Friday during lunch. "You might as well go and talk to him. He probably thinks you're ignoring him for nothing."

Albus stared down at his plate. "He knows exactly why I'm not talking to him" he said menacingly. "He had no right to automatically assume that it was me."

"Well...you were kind of in on it" Morrison said.

Albus threw him a nasty look.

"He's right, you were" Scorpius said, his eyes scanning a textbook that he had propped up against his goblet. He had neglected to do his Potions essay until moments before the class was set to begin.

"What, are you both against me?" Albus asked just as the bell was ringing.

They gathered their things and walked down to the dungeons for Darvy's class. All the times that Albus had seen him, at meals or even in the halls, he looked quite gaunt and fatigued. He wondered if he would even be fit to teach, but sure enough, when they entered his classroom they saw him standing by his desk, which had several different cauldrons on it, all of them bubbling and different colors.

"Take your seats, take your seats" he said lazily. "Today we have a special assignment. Well, it's not really special, it's just an assignment. I don't know why I said that" he added with a shrug. "But anyway, today we're going to do something that borders closely on reverse engineering."

The class exchanged looks.

"I'm going to give you each a cauldron with a potion in it, as well as different vials and other various ways to measure certain aspects of it. It will be your job to discover what was used to make the potion by learning its attributes-its color, its smell, its temperature, its effects. By the end of the lesson, you should be able to turn in a rough list of the ingredients used in it, and possibly even take an accurate guess at what exactly the potion is. Sort into groups of four now."

Mirra drug Rose over to the table that had Albus and Scorpius at it, which wasn't very surprising at all. The previous year, Mirra had been something of an academic-over-achiever, good at everything, but apparently her knack for potions had wasted away over the summer. She was absolutely dreadful at it this year, and not a lesson had passed where she hadn't come to Albus for help with group work.

Morrison, who was sitting at a different table, inched his chair over to the one full of his friends.

"Nope, sorry Morrison" Professor Darvy said as he grabbed the back of the chair, preventing it from reaching them. "Four to a group, you heard me."

"Ahh, come off it Professor!" Morrison whined. "What's one more?"

"I believe that makes five. It's not my fault your friends automatically abandon you for group work" he said with a small laugh. "You can go work with Charles, Donovan, and Wendell."

Morrison threw a look of contempt over at the group of Gryffindor boys and made to argue, but the professor had already begun giving the groups their cauldrons. He skidded his chair towards the group and furiously slammed his things onto their table, knocking their things off.

Albus and the rest of the people at his table chuckled. "I almost feel bad" he said.

"I couldn't put up with Eckley for an entire period" Scorpius chimed in, fetching fresh ink out of his bag.

"He's really nice!" Rose said defensively. "Maybe if you would get to know him instead of judging him on his house, you would see that!"

Albus stifled a laugh at this; if anybody at their table treated people unfairly because of their house, it was Rose. He remembered all too well the cold shoulder he had gotten when he was sorted into Slytherin, and she hadn't exactly given Scorpius a warm welcome either. He turned his head to Mirra to see what her view was on Eckley, but she was busying herself with writing their names on the parchment they would be using.

"Okay so...Al? Care to work your magic?" Scorpius asked him.

He grinned at his friend. "I suppose so" he said as he took a whiff of their pink potion and smelled peppermint. "Okay, there's definitely a few nettles leaves in there" he told them.

The first hour of their lesson passed by with little more than Albus telling them what he thought was in the potion and Mirra recording it while Rose and Scorpius bickered. More than once they heard an angry retort come from a few tables away and knew that Morrison was not warming up to his partners. It wasn't until Albus began really trying to distinguish different smells and effects (and even the occasional tastes) of their potion that Mirra brought up a topic.

"So I put a lot of thought into your theory on Ares, Al" she said as she doodled on the paper.

For a brief second, Rose and Scorpius stopped bickering to unite and laugh, only to return to whatever it was they were arguing about.

"I'm serious" Mirra continued. "I thought about it, and I realized that whoever dropped that wand got in here without permission from Hagrid."

"Right" Albus said, unsure of what she was getting at.

"So that means that they were let in directly by the Headmaster. Meaning that he's letting people in and out at his leisure. But why would he only let one in? Couldn't he be letting loads of people in at once?"

"Yeah- I suppose" he said, still unsure. He actually hadn't given it a great deal of thought. The wand that he had found was at the bottom of his trunk, untouched.

"So he's probably got a great deal of people at his disposal. You mentioned he got a new wand, and a wandmaker was found dead. Maybe he didn't do it. But maybe he got someone to do it for him."

Scorpius and Rose stopped arguing and joined the conversation. "What do you reckon he's got an entire army behind him?" Scorpius asked, obviously trying not to laugh. "Yeah I can picture that. 'Go and do my bidding, I am an all powerful recluse former Hogwarts teacher'" he said, in a rather accurate impression of Ares' lazy, bored voice, which even made Albus smile slightly.

"I don't know- she could be on to something" he shrugged.

"Al, are you seriously still on this?" Rose asked.

"She brought it up!" he said.

"He's a Headmaster. How many Hogwarts Headmasters have been murderers, honestly?"

"I don't know..."



"None! They couldn't be!" she cut him off loudly; it was a good thing the rest of the class was talking as well. "I can see if he had a criminal record or something, but all-

"He does!" Albus shot out.

"Really?" they all asked him.

How could he have forgotten about it? Ares did have a criminal record! He had even asked him about it!

"Yeah, really, he was in Azkaban!" he said.

"No way" Scorpius said, awestruck. "For what?"

"I don't know, I heard it when he was talking to my dad, but he's definitely been in there!"

He instinctively turned to Mirra, to see if she cared about talking about Azkaban when her parents currently resided there. She didn't seem to mind however, and seemed just as much involved in the conversation as the rest of them.

"Did he mention for how long?" Rose asked.

Albus racked his memory for a concrete number. He remembered that Mirra's parents would be going there for a year at the time. Hadn't his father said that Ares was there for half that time?

"About...six months I think" he said, knowing full well that the relatively small number lessened the impact of his argument.

Rose almost laughed. "Six months?" she asked. "Al, maybe fifty years ago that would have been big, back when Dementors were in charge. But these days that's nothing! They just locked up my dad's friend for a year not too long ago! Dung, or whatever his name is, for impersonating a Ministry official!"

"Well we don't know when he was locked up was he?" Mirra said, coming to Albus' aid.

"Either way, it was probably in the last twenty years or so, if my uncle knew about it. You'd be more likely to find incriminating evidence in his school records than by his Azkaban records" Rose argued back.

"Well I bet there is!" Albus said. "Do you think he went here?"

"I'm pretty sure every wizard in Britain was educated at Hogwarts" Scorpius said, speaking up for the first time in the debate. "If he went to this school, there's a record of it."

"Okay, so tomorrow we can go to the trophy room; that's where all the records are kept" Rose said. "I'll check all the detentions in Slytherin house and see if his name pops up."

"Okay" Albus said, agreeing. "And I'm willing to bet- wait, what?"

"What?" Rose asked him back.

"What makes you think he was in Slytherin?"

She blushed deeply, making her face look like a giant red tomato. Mirra coughed loudly and went back to doodling, and Scorpius gave a low whistle and pretended to be interested in his fingernails.

"Well- I mean, I just guessed, you know?" she said hesitantly.

"Because he was in Azkaban?" Albus said, his face now equally red.

"Well, I didn't mean-"

"I'm in Slytherin, Rose" he cut her off

"I know but-"

"So I'm going to end up in an Azkaban cell in a few years?" he cut her off again.

"*Wizarding World Today* did an article and found that more than sixty percent of Hogwarts alumni who were incarcerated in Azkaban had been in Slytherin! I was just going statistically-"

"What's going on here?" came the voice of their Potions professor, who was peering at them curiously.

"Nothing" Albus said, his tone more bitter than he had expected.

"Well the bell is going to ring in a few seconds" Professor Darvy said. "So gather your things up. Everyone hand in your papers now and have a good weekend!" he called out to the class as the bell rang and students shuffled to the door.

Morrison approached them with a very annoyed look on his face. "If I have to hear Eckley complain about not being on the Gryffindor team one more time I'm going to do more than toss him off his broom" he said. "I'm gonna stick it up his -"

"We're going to the trophy room tomorrow morning" Albus heard Scorpius cut him off.

"Why?" Morrison asked.

"To see if Ares was a Slytherin or not, because apparently that will determine if he's a murderer as well" he said dryly.

Morrison looked from Scorpius to Albus as they walked to their common room. "I miss one class!" he said irritably.

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Albus woke up bright and early the next morning, though he supposed that as he had gotten very little sleep, it could hardly be called waking up. He pulled on his clothes and left for the Great Hall, hoping to catch an early breakfast. He entered the hall and looked at the Slytherin table; other than a few seventh years, it was completely empty.

He yawned and piled bacon onto his plate, and was just getting ready to sink his head into his hands from exhaustion when he heard his brother's voice.

"You okay?"

Albus looked up and saw that his brother was indeed standing near the Slytherin table, along with his girlfriend Denise, who, despite sharing a name with Albus' housemate, didn't look quite as welcoming or nice. She was standing with both of her hands on her hips, apparently annoyed that James was talking to his brother when he could be spending valuable time with her.

"Yeah I'm fine" Albus said, though he knew that this answer wouldn't suffice.

"Did I tell you I'm Seeker now?" James asked him.

"What?" Albus asked back, completely thrown off by this piece of information.

"Yeah, they swapped me with some kid named Arnold. Sixth year. They needed someone speedy as a Seeker for their first game. We're intimidated" he added with a sneaky smirk.

"By me?" Albus asked.

James shrugged. "You come from a family of good players" he said pompously.

"Yeah...I suppose" he said.

They continued talking for some time, Denise refusing to sit down and clicking her tongue impatiently every time James spoke. They discussed Neville's reworked lessons, how tired Darvy seemed to be looking, and numerous other things that Albus had wanted to catch up on since the beginning of school. Thankfully, they skipped over any mention of Eckley or the prank. It wasn't until a loud chorus of booing came that Albus even remembered that James was sitting at his table.

"Aww come on, it's a Saturday!" James shouted over them, but far too many Slytherins had joined the table for breakfast at this point, and eventually James reluctantly grabbed Denise's hand and steered her away.

"What's going on, why are we booing?" Scorpius asked, wiping his eyes and sitting at the table along with Morrison. They both looked as though they'd just woken up, but they also both looked reasonably more rested than Albus.

"Nothing, my brother came over. He's the Gryffindor Seeker" he told them.

"Sucks" Morrison said, drowning his sausages in ketchup so that they were swimming in a puddle of red. "Isn't he a Quidditch prodigy?"

"Yup" Albus said, shrugging. "Something like that. When are we going to the trophy room?"

"I don't know" Scorpius said. "Are we waiting for Rose and Mirra?"

Albus didn't even need to think about it. "No, we're not" he said.

And so, a few minutes (and in Morrison's case, several ketchup drenched sausages) later, they walked to the trophy room. Located on the third floor, Albus had never been in the room before, and wasn't entirely sure they were even allowed in it without permission. Nevertheless, the door wasn't unlocked.

"Whoa" Morrison whispered softly when they walked in.

Albus thought that Morrison's whisper accurately described the room. The only other room that he had been in that was as big was the Room of Requirement, which wasn't exactly a regular room. There were plaques and medals and shields hanging on the wall, along with numerous suits of armor placed in the corner, giving the room a very honorable feel. The floor was made of a deep brown wood which shined and clashed terribly with the drapes that were hanging on the walls all around them.

"Where do we look?" Scorpius asked.

Albus scanned the room and saw gigantic cabinets just across from a wall with the Hogwarts Coat of Arms painted on it. "Over there, maybe?" he said, walking towards them. He opened them and saw several leather bound books, far thicker than any textbook in the school.

"*List of Hogwarts Heads*" he read off the first enormous book.

Scorpius and Morrison joined him, pulling out books at their leisure. Some of them were incredibly dusty, as though they hadn't left the cabinet in a while. "Awesome, the Hogwarts record book!" Morrison exclaimed, pulling out a gigantic leather book roughly three times as large as an encyclopedia. It was so heavy that he couldn't lift it all, so he and Scorpius drug it across the ground and began skimming through it.

"C'mere and look at this A!" Scorpius said.

"In a bit" he replied irritably. He was still searching for a list of the house members. He rifled through more books, including *Quidditch Captains of Hogwarts History* and *Encyclopedia of Important Hogwarts Events*, before finally reaching the back, where he pulled out four large books, all of them a different color. "Aha!" he said, but the others weren't listening.

"Hey Al, your brother's in here" Morrison said.

"Really?"

"No wait, it must be a different relative, this was years ago. Check this out. *'Fastest recorded detention in Hogwarts History-Double Detention awarded to James Potter and Sirius Black. Lit firecrackers under the thestrals minutes after Hogwarts express arrived. Multiple minor injuries, one major.'*"

"Yup, that sounds like my grandad" Albus said, opening up an emerald color book entitled "*List of Hogwarts Slytherin Alumni*". He skimmed the first few pages, all of which had those who's last names began with an "A."

"Hey, he's on here again!" Morrison said. "*Most points lost in single day. Gryffindor-500. James Potter, Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew, and Sirius Black. Bewitched Sorting Hat to replace founders names with their own nicknames. Mass confusion amongst first years.*"

Both Scorpius and Morrison laughed, but Albus was only half listening. He had scanned from 'Ableton' to 'Avery' and the name Ares was nowhere to be found. "He wasn't in Slytherin, you guys" he told them, grinning from ear to ear.

"Nice" they said simultaneously, and they continued reading. "Haha. Archibald Beaker is the only Chaser in the history of Ravenclaw to never make a single shot, and he played for four years!" Morrison continued reading.

Albus stowed the emerald green book back in the cabinet, but subconsciously reached for the scarlet one next to it. Wouldn't Rose really be eating her words if Ares had been in Gryffindor? He ignored the random statistics that his friends were spitting out as he flipped through the first few pages. He scanned all entries under "A"...and Ares wasn't there.

He frowned and picked up the blue Ravenclaw book.

"Wow, this kid Tom M. Riddle holds the record for highest grade on his N.E.W.T's in eight subjects" Morrison read aloud.

"He was probably a nerd" Albus replied, only half listening. "Got bullied every day." He frowned. Ares was nowhere to be found in the list of Ravenclaw students. It would have to be Hufflepuff.

"Cool, Hagrid's in here too!" Scorpius read. "Tallest Hogwarts student in the history of the school. Blimey, they keep a record for everything don't they?"

Albus was too busy scanning the Hufflepuff list as well. Once more, Ares was nowhere to be found.

"Did you find him?" Scorpius asked.

"No, he didn't go to Hogwarts" Albus said, pushing the books back into the cabinet. "But at least he wasn't in Slytherin!"

Scorpius slammed the record book shut, and with Morrison's help, carried it over to the cabinet, where they roughly jammed it in, closing it just before all of the books could topple out. "Right, well then lets get out of here" he said.

They walked to their Common Room, Albus planning on getting another hour of sleep in before noon, as he had yet another Quidditch practice today. They had just entered the common room when someone called out to them.

"Hey you!" it was Melissa Zuerte, a member of their house that Albus rarely spoke to.

"Me?" he said, intrigued.

"No, him" she said, pointing at Scorpius. She approached him. "You got a letter today, but you weren't there for it."

"Erm...thanks" he said hesitantly, slowly taking it from her hands. She seemed very forceful. "It's from my dad!" he exclaimed as she walked away.

He opened it and read it quickly. His mouth split into a wide grin when he was finished.

"Good news?" Albus asked him.

"See for yourself" he said, handing the note over to him. Albus read to himself :

*Scorpius,*

*I'm sorry that we didn't get back to you sooner, I've been looking for work and have meant to write you for some time. Your mother is well, and grandad Lucius looks forward to seeing you for the Holidays. And on that subject, your mother and I have both agreed that there's no harm in letting your friend stay with us for a few days, provided of course he isn't here on Christmas day, and of course, that his parents allow it.*

*Furthermore, we are unable to disclose your birthday present to you this year, as we fear the Hogwarts postal service may not be too fond of it. We will, however, happily give it to you when we see you over yourbreak. Your mother wants to remind you not to lag behind in your studies- you have both a reputation to break, and a new one to create. We hope you enjoy your second year, and we look forward to seeing you.*

*Love and best wishes,*

*Your mother and father.*

*PS. Don't send anyone to their room.*

"Don't send anyone to their room?" Albus asked when he had finished reading the letter. He handed it to Morrison while Scorpius grinned.

"Bit of a joke between me and my dad" he said. "When I was way younger, I did something bad, I forget what it was. But anyway, he told me to go to my room, and I kicked him right where every guy doesn't want to be kicked."

Albus and Morrison both cringed.

"Yeah exactly. But it was a while ago, and he remembered it and brought it up when he was driving me to King's Cross this year. Guess he wanted to remind me of it. He doesn't laugh much, my dad. It's about the only thing we both grin at."

Albus couldn't help but feel a little sorry for him. He and his dad were always laughing. He had only met Scorpius' father once, but he had the strange idea that he was telling the truth. He didn't seem like the laughing type.

"I wonder what they're going to give you for your birthday" Morrison said when he too had finished reading.

Scorpius shrugged. "Something I'm not supposed to have at school I guess" he said, grinning.

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Days later, Albus was sure that he had never had a better week at Hogwarts. His Quidditch practices had increased tenfold in both frequency and intensity, but he was a better player for it, and for the first time in his life, he felt confident that he was on par with his brother at something. He had been delighted to inform his cousin that she was quite wrong about Ares being in Slytherin (he made sure that he had used the term "wrong" several times, in fact) and he was enjoying the company of his friends more and more as their classes became more interesting than they had ever been. But it wasn't until the week before Halloween that something truly remarkable occurred at the school.

It was a Thursday morning, and Albus was chewing on some bacon as he let Morrison copy his Charms homework (they had Professor Flitwick first in the morning). The hall was just as noisy as ever, students chattering over their favorite and least favorite professors, or who they were betting would win the first Quidditch game of the season. In fact, it took several loud coughs for Headmaster Ares to get everyone's attention.

"Excuse me" he said, his voice echoing as he stood up from the teacher's table.

The talking immediately ceased. Some people rubbed their eyes to make sure that they were seeing right, or desperately tried cleaning out their ears as if they heard the wrong voice. No one

could ever remember the Headmaster making an announcement that wasn't a start of term or end of term speech, and they certainly never counted on him making an impromptu one.

"I would like to introduce you all to two members of the Ministry of Magic" he said, his lazy voice still echoing through the halls. Two men stood up from beside him, one of whom Albus thought that he had vaguely recognized.

"What are Ministry people doing here?" Scorpius asked as several students began whispering.

"Both Mr. Wilde and Mr. Orvin are here to inspect-that is to say, *watch*-how our school is performing."

More whispers from the crowd. Inspections at Hogwarts?

"I know him!" Albus whispered loudly to Morrison and Scorpius. "That's Fango Wilde! He knows my dad!"

They all looked up at the staff table, where Ares was continuing his speech. "I have no way of knowing which classes they will be inspecting, nor do I have any idea how they plan on doing it. I advise you all to welcome our guests here today, and to treat them with kindness and courtesy if you encounter them. I believe classes are ready to begin."

More whispers came from the crowd of students. Albus saw Mirra and Rose discussing it with a few other Gryffindors, which included both Eckley and James. But the students weren't the only ones talking. The teachers were doing it as well, and Albus saw Neville in particular lean in and begin a conversation with Professor Darvy, who, despite appearing tired, seemed quite interested in what he had to say.

The discussion of the Ministry visitors was still going on when they entered their Charms class. It was quite usual for people to talk, as Charms was almost entirely practical, but this morning few people even bothered to attempt the spell that Professor Flitwick was trying to teach them.

"Now really!" he said, his tiny voice squeaking as he approached a group of Hufflepuffs who hadn't even bothered to pull out their wands. "I understand that you're all excited about having guests in the school, but they will be gone by tonight anyway. Cheering charms-though a bit advanced for your age-will last you much longer."

Bartleby raised his hand. "Sir, what *are* they doing here? What do they mean by inspections?"

There was muttering in the class; apparently now the students were willing to listen. Professor Flitwick heaved a tremendous sigh. "I don't know" he squeaked, his voice sounding the slightest bit agitated, a rarity for him. "I found out about it minutes before you did. I can only guess that the Ministry feels like our Headmaster isn't up to scratch."

"Do you think he is?" someone called out.



Professor Flitwick turned a very bright shade of red, making him appear to be a relatively large apple. "Cheering charms" he continued his previous topic, "can only be performed when one concentrates, not on a happy memory, but a happy feeling that they remember having, whether it be the taste of their favorite food or the relief of passing an exam."

But cheering charms didn't seem to interest them, and sure enough, the class had returned to talking about the Ministry representatives in seconds. Albus noticed that this particular pattern followed his next two classes as well, History of Magic (in which Professor Binns point blank refused to comment on anything that wasn't a boring goblin rebellion) and Transfiguration (in which Professor Bellinger pretended as though she had no idea what the students were talking about).

By the time they had reached lunch, however, it became quite apparent that there really wasn't much to talk about. No one seemed to have had an inspected class, regardless of their year, and for that matter, no one in Ravenclaw had either, as the conversation seemed to be the same at the table next to them.

"So do you reckon they already left?" Scorpius asked, speaking slightly louder than those around him so that Albus and Morrison could hear.

Albus looked up at the staff table. The teachers were chatting with one another, but one chair was noticeably absent. Headmaster Ares wasn't attending lunch with them. "No, I think that they're talking to Ares."

"About what?" Morrison asked

"Probably about him murdering famous wandmakers" Scorpius said, and they both laughed while Albus threw them a dirty look.

Their last class of the day was Defence Against the Dark Arts, in which they would finally be able to see Rose and Mirra. The Slytherins arrived first, and when Mirra and Rose walked in, all five of them said simultaneously "Did you get inspected?"

They all shook their heads. "No one in our house did" Rose said as they took seats near each other. "Not even the seventh years. Same with Hufflepuff."

"Same with us and Ravenclaw" Albus told them. "What do you guys think they're doing here?"

Rose shrugged, but Mirra spoke up "Probably talking to the Headmaster" she said. "He wasn't at lunch after all. And no one has even seen them in the hallways, so they must be in his office."

"That's what I said!" Albus exclaimed, raising his hand for a high five. She returned it, smiling broadly.

Scorpius rolled his eyes. "Guys, I doubt that they're giving him a good talking to about how he runs the school. He let them in didn't he? My guess is that they just came to discuss some improvements on the school."

"But how do you improve Hogwarts?" Albus asked him skeptically.

"Well they could fix one of the girl's bathrooms" Rose chipped in. "One of them's been out of order since I got here..."

But they were cut off from further talking by the arrival of Professor Handit, whose normally wavy brown hair looked oddly ruffled, as though he was annoyed. "Let me guess" he said when he entered "You want to know why they're here?"

There was a murmur of "yeah" throughout the students.

"Well I don't know!" he said "Now can you guys *please* be the first to cooperate today? I haven't had a single class that's bothered to try. Today we will be working on identifying some dark creatures. Who can tell me, for five points, what a hinkypunk is?"

The class groaned. They just weren't interested.

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The conversation about the inspections had died down during dinner, when it was revealed that the Ministry members had left but an hour before. By the time they had went to their Common Rooms for bed, the other students were much too disappointed with the lack of information to even talk about it. At around ten 'o clock, everyone in the common room had went to bed except for Albus, Scorpius, and Morrison, one of whom was quite deep in thought.

"Okay, so we have two Ministry officials that came to inspect a school but don't inspect it, and a Headmaster who duels centaurs in the forest. Well at least there isn't a dungeon" Albus said as he paced around the room.

Scorpius rolled his eyes as he flipped through his charms textbook. "True. And I think you're reading way too much into this mate. Okay, some strange stuff has happened. But it's Hogwarts! What do you expect?"

"You can't tell me none of this isn't suspicious!" Albus rebutted. Though in truth, he didn't know why it interested him more so than his friends. Maybe it was because he had discovered the wand in the forest, or maybe it was because he had had a small personal battle with Ares last year, but his confidants seemed much less enthusiastic about the idea of the mystery than he was.

Morrison looked up; his head had also been buried in a book, *The Five Hundred Greatest Plays in the History of Quidditch*. "It's not that we don't find it suspicious, it's just that we don't really care that much. You and Mirra can play around with your theories, but leave us out of it."

They both chuckled and high fived. Albus had no idea what they found so funny, but their lack of enthusiasm was starting to bother him. "What the hell why can't you guys be a little more helpful!"

"Watch your language young man!" came a loud serious voice from seemingly nowhere.

Albus spun around on the spot to see who had spoken, and almost laughed when he did. In the center of the lit fire was his Uncle Ron, who was grinning sheepishly. His orange hair blended in with the fire so well that he looked bald; or like his entire head was engulfed in flames. "Just kidding" Uncle Ron said.

Scorpius and Morrison had both gotten up from their chairs and were staring at the fire alongside Albus, apparently quite intrigued.

"What's up?" Ron asked them.

"Nothing, just talking. What are you doing here?" Albus asked him. "Oh, and this is Morrison and Scorpius by the way."

His Uncle nodded his head towards Morrison and gave the tiniest of head jerks towards Scorpius, to whom his eyes also lingered on just a few seconds longer. "Just thought I'd pop my head in for a visit. I heard you made Seeker" he grinned.

"Yeah I did" he replied. "How are you doing that? I thought that there was no flooing in and out of Hogwarts?"

"There isn't. But there's no law against only putting your head in. I recall your dad's godfather doing it a few times actually."

"Yeah, how is he?" Albus asked him. He wanted to bring up the topic of his father quickly-he wanted to share his theories on Ares with a Ministry member, and his dad was the best one to do it with.

His uncle merely tilted his head to the side for a second, implying that he was shrugging. "To be honest Al, he doesn't really have time for much. Overworked. Way overworked."

"Why?"

"Still no leads on the wandmaker murder, and like we mentioned before, it wouldn't be a big deal if everything hadn't been so secretive for a while. It's just unexpected. There's a murderer out there, and they might be or know someone in the ministry. Don't repeat that though" he added, and all three of them shook their heads to show that they understood.

"I think- I think it was Headmaster Ares" Albus said, before he even knew what he was saying. Scorpius slapped his hand to his forehead and Morrison looked away, as though trying to show

that he was in no way connected to the theory. To his surprise however, his uncle seemed to be interested.

"It's weird that you think that" he told them.

"Why?"

"Because that's exactly what your father thought too."

Albus felt his lips curl into a smile while Scorpius and Morrison both seemed to return to the conversation. "Why'd he think that?"

"Why did you?" his uncle asked him.

"I asked first."

Once more, his uncle seemed to be shrugging. "His record's against him. And him and your dad don't exactly get along. Theory's shot though. It couldn't have been him."

"What?" Albus exclaimed, and both Morrison and Scorpius rolled their eyes and went back to pretending they knew they were right all along. "Why not?"

"Because Red has been here all summer. Didn't leave. He had teachers confirm it for him, and trust me, not every teacher at this school has a reason to defend him. And he couldn't have had contact with anyone else either. I mean, no one really trusts him here at the Ministry."

"Why not?" all three of them said in unison.

His uncle blushed, making his face blend in as well. "Long story" he said. "But anyway, your dad abandoned the idea not too long ago. Said there wasn't enough evidence of any illicit activity, and he's glad for it. He got sick of trying to find something there."

"Well Albus found a wa-" Morrison started, but Albus stepped on his foot abruptly. He didn't want his father any more overworked than he already was. His uncle cast him a suspicious look but didn't ask.

"But wait, if they gave up on Ares, what were they doing here today?" Scorpius asked him.

"What was who doing where?"

"The Ministry people. They came to inspect us today" Scorpius continued.

"Really?" his uncle gave them the most inquisitive look that Albus had ever seen. "Today? Who?"

"Just two Ministry guys. One of them was Fango Wilde" Albus said.

For the first time in the conversation, Uncle Ron appeared to be lost for words. "I didn't have any say in that." He looked crushed. "Maybe they just announced it this morning or something and I didn't hear. As far as I know though, no Hogwarts inspection was mentioned. But look, I've got to go. Your aunt needs me to help clean" he rolled his eyes. "Damn I won't even have to time to visit Rosie."

"Are you going to pop your head in again?" Albus asked.

"Maybe. But you kids behave. Well nah, I can't even say that. Act like you're behaving or whatever. But listen," and at this, his voice got slightly lower and more serious, "don't read too much into this Ares thing and go all detective like. I know you guys want something to do, but it's not worth it and you can get in too much trouble from it. Whatever your father says Al, he doesn't want you focusing on things that are bigger than you can handle right now. Leave this to the big boys."

"Okay" Albus said, but his uncle rolled his eyes. He saw right through it.

"Okay, I've got to go now, it was nice meeting you both" he said to both Morrison and Scorpius, though Albus noticed that he gave a small frown to Scorpius.

"Okay, nice talking to you" Albus said. "Tell my parents to write."

His uncle nodded his head and turned to leave, his face was half way out of the fire before he turned back and grinned. "Oh, and good luck against Gryffindor, Al." And with that, his face dissolved back into the fire.

## Chapter 8 : The Halloween Duel

Albus had the strange feeling that his friends were starting to resent him. Not that he could blame them, however. Over the next couple of days he sporadically started up conversations of the potential crimes that their Headmaster may have committed, to the point where not only was he behind on his work from obsessing over it, but behind on his entire schedule period.

"Look, I said I'm sorry" he was telling Scorpius in Charms the day before Halloween.

Scorpius merely shrugged and levitated his newt off of his desk; they were having a review day. "It's fine" he said unconvincingly, still not meeting Albus' eyes.

Today was Scorpius' birthday, but Albus was so behind on the dates of each day, what with Quidditch practice and furious theorizing with Mirra, that he had completely forgotten. He hadn't wished him Happy Birthday or gotten him anything, something that was worsened by the fact that Morrison had went so far as to order a large variety of sweets from Honeydukes as a present.

"No, really, it's fine" Scorpius went on as Albus continued to apologize. "I get it. It's a lot to remember."

Albus scowled at him and turned to Morrison, who was rapidly prodding various items on his desk and switching their colors. He merely gave a guilty shrug. "It's the day before Halloween, Al. You know when Halloween is."

Albus groaned and put his head down at his desk. Perhaps he was spending too much time focusing on something that his uncle had told him not to. But it was, after all, his mystery to solve; it had been he who had found the stray wand, and he who had learned of Ares' incarceration.

Scorpius' bad attitude towards him remained for the rest of the day, but Albus was quite thankful to note that it had thinned out by the following. Hogwarts looked absolutely beautiful with the numerous Halloween decorations, even if it was hauntingly so, what with real bats hanging on the ceiling and gigantic carved pumpkins placed in random hallways.

"Did all the decoratin' me self" Hagrid said proudly as they caught him while they were leaving Herbology. He was carrying another gargantuan pumpkin on his shoulders-so massive it looked very much like it would have crushed Albus had it fallen on him.

"How come no one helps you?" Morrison asked him.

Hagrid beamed. "They've offered, but I've been decoratin' this school fer more than fifty years."

"How old *are you* Hagrid?" Albus asked him.

"Real ol' Al. Real ol'."

Even some of the teachers had started taking part in the Halloween festivities. A few of the teachers, like Neville and Professor Bellinger, had changed their outfits slightly so that they were wearing orange as well as black. Tiny Professor Flitwick also dressed in all orange, and even gave himself a green hat so that he looked like an extremely thin pumpkin.

Their final class on Halloween day was Defence Against the Dark Arts with the Gryffindors. Professor Handit had opted for a bit of a free lesson; he was allowing them to partner up and practice minor jinxes on each other. Albus sat with Morrison and Scorpius in a corner, discussing the upcoming Quidditch game instead; it was set to take place only a week later.

"I don't know, you know Erin Sykes, that girl in Ravenclaw?" Morrison asked them. "I overheard her saying that one of the Beaters for Gryffindor broke his leg. They're pretty much letting anyone who's up for it fill in for him. One less thing to worry about Al."

"It's not Bludgers I'm worried about" Albus told them-which was quite true, he felt he could dodge anything that a Beater threw at him pretty well. "It's just catching the Snitch in time. Atticus straight up told me last practice-we're going to get flattened in the scoring department. Even without my brother, have you seen their Chasers? He told me I needed to catch it before they're a hundred and fifty points up."

"That gives you about five minutes" Scorpius grinned. "Hey, watch it!" he shouted at a group of Gryffindors that included both Charles Eckley and Donovan Hornsbrook. They were both sniggering. A blue spell had whizzed right over Scorpius' head.

"Prats" Morrison muttered. "Always trying to start with someone."

Albus nodded his head in agreement. Only a year ago Albus had been kicked out of this very class because of them. He was pleased to see however, that this time Rose wasn't part of the group. She was in the middle of the room, fiercely concentrating on whatever spell she was attempting to utilize on her partner, Mirra.

Another spell whizzed by them, this one a canary yellow that narrowly missed Albus by inches. It hit Dante Haug square in the chest, and he doubled over laughing; he had been hit with the tickling spell. "I said watch it!" Scorpius yelled in Albus' defence, while they doubled over in laughter.

Professor Handit looked up from his desk and peered around the room. "Keep your jinxes to yourselves, we're supposed to be practicing, remember? Not fighting!" he yelled to no one in particular, before going back to reading a magazine.

"Does anyone have a quill I can borrow?" Morrison asked them both. He seemed to be hard at work doing homework that was due the day before.

"Yeah, there's one over in my bag" Scorpius said, pointing to it. They had not taken their things over into the corner with them.

Morrison got up and walked over to it, peered in the bag, and on his way back with the quill, yelled "AARGH!"

The class turned to look, and the majority of them starting laughing at once. He had been hit with such a good Jelly Legs Jinx that his legs had literally formed what looked like a spiral; they coiled themselves around each other as Morrison tried flailing close to the wall for support.

"Settle down, settle down" Professor Handit said as he got up and performed the counter curse. "Who did this?" he asked Morrison.

Morrison pointed over towards the group of Gryffindors that were desperately trying to stifle their laughter. "One of them" he said furiously.

Eckley looked shocked. He held up a textbook. "We've been reading sir. I can't- I can't imagine anyone over here doing something like that" he said with a look of mock concern. Just then however, the bell rang, and the class, most of them still chuckling, shuffled out the door.

Despite Eckley's disbelief that one of his friends had jinxed Morrison though, Albus saw Donovan mouth "One for three" as they were leaving.

"And you were ticked when we got him chucked off of his broom" Morrison said grumpily to Albus as they walked down a hallway. "I'm pissed he didn't get more hurt!"

Just then however, a spell flew over his shoulder and ricocheted off the wall-narrowly missing Scorpius. He spun around in less than a second and whipped out his wand.

Eckley, Hornsbrook, and a few other Gryffindors were at the other end of the hallway laughing. Albus saw Mirra whisper something to Eckley that made him stop and turn around. Scorpius, however, did not seem to be willing to let him throw in the towel. "Come back!" he shouted.

Eckley turned around and raised his eyebrows. Albus saw both Mirra and Rose tug at his robes.

"What's wrong, you can only jinx me when my back is turned?" Scorpius yelled. He began walking down the hallway. Several of the Gryffindors went "ohhh" and a few of them started chanting for a fight.

Eckley turned and looked at his friends, then began walking down the hallway as well. Mirra buried her face in her hands. Morrison went to join Scorpius, but Albus held out his arm to stop him. Eckley may be a foot taller than Scorpius, with a much better build as well, but Albus had little doubt that in a wizard's duel, Scorpius would win. Lazy though he was, he was easily the most talented of their year, and Albus had seen first hand how easily he learned some of the hardest spells that they had been taught.



"What if they jump in?" Morrison asked him.

"Then we'll jump in too. But Scorpius can take him by himself, you've seen the spell books he reads."

Eckley and Scorpius were now only a few feet away from each other. "Just let it go" Eckley said to him. "We were just messing around."

"Oh yeah, it's only messing around when I start to fight back" Scorpius shot. Even with the height difference, he didn't look intimidated at all. Albus thought that Scorpius was quite wrong however. He had the strange suspicion that Eckley backing off had more to do with Mirra asking him to, not so much because he was frightened.

Eckley twirled his wand between his fingers. "I'm gonna' feel real bad if I hurt you" he said. "So just let it go."

Scorpius snorted. "*Reducto!*" he shouted, and Albus watched as his spell blasted Eckley right in the chest, sending him flying back several feet, clutching his ribs.

Many of the Gryffindors stepped back against the wall to leave the hall cleared. Eckley staggered to his feet, still clutching his damaged ribs, and shouted something resulting in a fiery red spell.

"*Protego!*" Scorpius yelled, and the red spell flew into the ceiling. "*Fernunculus!*"

The spell hit Eckley square in the face. He clutched his hands to his cheeks, though through the cracks in his fingers several large boils had emerged. Many of the Gryffindors were shrieking. Scorpius, apparently deciding that the battle was done, slid his wand back into his pocket and turned around.

"Look out!" both Albus and Morrison yelled at the same time. Scorpius turned around just in time to get a hex thrown at him by Eckley, who has back on his feet, boils all over his face and seething in rage.

It was Scorpius' turn to clutch his face now, and Albus saw that a large red welt had appeared on his face-he had been hit with a moderately powerful stinging hex. Many of the Gryffindors were shouting now, especially Mirra and Rose. It seemed that many of them had never expected it to go so far.

Scorpius removed his hands from his face and whipped his wand back out. Just as he was about to fire a spell however, someone cried "*Expelliarmus*" and both Scorpius and Eckley had been disarmed.

Albus turned and saw Professor Bellinger hurrying towards them. "What's going on here?" she asked.

"Malfoy started it miss-"

"Scorpius threw the first spell-"

The Gryffindors were all attempting to tell her what had happened.

"That's ridiculous!" Morrison shouted up. "That prat's been firing spells at us all day!"

"Thank you Mr. Vincent" Professor Bellinger said coolly.

She examined both of their faces. She cringed when she saw the boils on Eckley's. "Hornsbrook" she said, and Donovan stepped out of the crowd. "Take him up to the Hospital Wing. Scorpius" she said, turning to him. "This doesn't look too bad. Do you think you need the hospital wing?"

Scorpius shook his head furiously, just as Albus knew he would. Going to the Hospital Wing as well would make it a tie.

"Twenty points from both houses" she said, and most of the Gryffindors groaned.

Albus and Morrison walked Scorpius back to the common room, and within minutes, he was fuming, kicking random things in their dormitory.

"I knew he could only hit me when my back was turned" he spat out as he paced around the room in anger. Albus and Morrison sat on their beds, exchanging hesitant glances.

"Well it's over now" Albus said.

"No it isn't" Scorpius shot, touching his hand to his face and feeling the welt. It had went down in size considerably, but was still quite red. "And what are Mirra and Rose playing at? Over there with him...probably egging him on."

"That's not fair, Mirra tried stopping him" Albus said.

Scorpius merely sneered. "Yeah okay. Whatever. But Eckley will get what's coming to him. I have a plan."

Albus exchanged yet another glance with Morrison and saw that he was thinking the same thing. Slytherin was about to lose more than just twenty points.

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Scorpius' bad temper had fluctuated for most of the day, and by the time they were being served delicious food at the Halloween feast, he had seemingly forgotten all about his threat. Indeed, he was rather enjoying himself. As only second years had been present during his duel with Eckley (Or, that 'Pompous ass second year kid' as he was referred to by a sixth year) many of the older students were tuning in to his conversation for details.

"So then he tried firing some spell at me-never found out what it was, I deflected it so fast-but either way it hit the ceiling-"

Albus was pleased to see that he talking about it easily, but when he stood up and looked over at the Gryffindor table he saw that the reception was quite different. For one thing, Eckley was buried in his food. He had thick bandages on his face-no doubt from having had the boils popped-and wasn't talking to anyone. James, who was sitting a few seats down from him, was talking very loudly, spraying those around him with his food.

"He hit you with your back turned?" a lanky fifth year asked Scorpius.

"Yeah...but that won't happen again. Lost us twenty points though" he said with a small frown.

A seventh year a few seats down from him leaned forward and said to him "Don't worry about it. We haven't won the house cup in like ten years anyway."

The rest of the Halloween meal passed by with Scorpius retelling his story for people who were just tuning in. Albus barely commented, or even spoke at all. The food was so delicious that he rarely had an empty mouth as it was.

The feast ended just a few minutes shy of when the second years had to go to bed. They shuffled out of the Great Hall after being dismissed by Neville; their Headmaster had neglected to even attend the feast. As they left the Hall, fighting their way through a crowd of people, Albus was stopped by Scorpius.

"Come with me real quick" he muttered to him.

Perplexed, Albus followed him as they fought through the crowd, near a group of Gryffindors that included Eckley.

"Hey Eckley!" Scorpius called out, causing him to turn around and stop talking to one of his friends.

"What are you doing?" Albus said under his breath, but Scorpius ignored him.

Eckley approached him cautiously, two of his friends joining him. "What do you want?" he asked.

Scorpius smirked. "We never really got a chance to finish" he said. "I know you want to settle things without teachers there."

Eckley plunged his hands into his robes, his two friends and Albus doing the same, but Scorpius merely held up his hands. "Stop this right here" he said. "I want things to be fair. How about a duel, just me and you, tonight."

Eckley kept his wand out, but relaxed his grip on it. "Where?" he asked.

"Dungeons?"

Eckley snorted. "That's hardly fair. You barely have to leave your Common Room."

"Hmm" Scorpius put his fingers to his chin and apparently gave the ordeal a great deal of thought. "You're right. How about the fourth floor corridor, right near the painting of those wizards playing cards? This way it's the same walk for both of us. And Peeves finishes his rounds at midnight, so around one 'o clock?"

Albus watched as Eckley considered it. He found it quite strange however, that Scorpius had negotiated so quickly. What was he playing at? Making it a fair deal for them both...

"Okay, that's fair" Eckley said after a moment. His eyes lingered on Albus for a second before saying "Come alone, no tag alongs."

"Deal" Scorpius said with a smirk.

And yet, twenty minutes later, he was laughing in the Common Room, pounding his fists on the floor.

"What's so funny?" Morrison asked, looking up from his Charms book.

Albus quickly told him the conversation that Scorpius had with a very bandaged Eckley, then added "But he's not going to the duel, are you?"

Scorpius wiped tears from his eyes. "No, I'm not" he said, and then began cracking up again.

"Why not?" Morrison asked. "You're not scared are you?"

But Albus had figured out his entire plan almost the second the duel had been scheduled. "What are you going to try and frame him for?" he asked Scorpius.

Scorpius shrugged and tried to calm himself down. Breathing slowly, he admitted "I'm going to tell Darvy that I overheard Eckley telling his friends he was going to vandalize the portrait of the wizards playing cards. I'll tell him the time, and Darvy will meet with him instead!"

"But what if you can't find Darvy?" Morrison asked.

Scorpius shrugged again. "I don't care, I'll just pick some random teacher. Either way, he'll get nailed with detention for at least a week. That's an attempt to destroy school property, that is."

Albus thought about it for a moment. "He's not going to show up" he said. "Seriously, you'd have to be really stupid to fall for something like that."

"Well since when has Eckley been the brightest? Smart move" Morrison said, giving Scorpius a thump on the shoulder.

Albus sighed. "It's...it's dishonest though."

"So?" both of his friends said in unison.

"So...I don't know, it's just messed up." He shuddered to think what would happen if someone like say, Mirra, found out that he was in on such a cowardly activity.

"So is jinxing someone with their back turned!" Scorpius defended himself.

"True, but still..."

And yet, there was no swaying Scorpius against the matter. For the next half of an hour he tried, until Scorpius finally went to the door to go and alert a teacher of Eckley's dastardly plan. He had just reached the stone wall that would lead him to the exit of the Common Room when Albus had shouted "Everyone's going to think you were afraid of him!"

Scorpius turned and looked back. "Afraid of who?" he asked.

"Eckley" Albus said. "He's going to tell everyone you didn't show. People aren't going to think you outsmarted him, they're going to think that you got lucky the first time and thought that you couldn't do it again."

Scorpius looked at Morrison, who was now sitting Indian style on his bed. He gave a shrug. "He makes a point. That's what the other three houses will think anyway. They hate us, remember?"

Scorpius narrowed his eyes. He looked as though he was in deep thought. "So what should I do?"

Albus thought fast. He didn't want Eckley spreading bad rumors, but at the same time, he didn't want Scorpius to get in trouble. "Look...why don't we just meet him at the scheduled time...and tell him you're calling it off?"

Scorpius looked outraged at the mere thought of it. "Call it off right to his face? That's hardly better!"

"Look, if he still wants to go through with it, go through with it, but try and talk him out of it. You guys don't want to be in detention for my game do you? I know you don't!"

Scorpius heaved a tremendous sigh. "If I get a bad rep for this, I'm putting the blame on you!"

"Fine, fine...this will all turn out okay though...trust me."

And so, the small groups of people in the Common Room slowly started to thin, finally disappearing completely around half past twelve, Morrison started getting ready for bed and told them that if they weren't back by one thirty, he would tell everyone that they had been caught doing something heroic.

"We're not going to get caught doing anything you prat" Albus told him as he rifled through his trunk, finally pulling out a silvery thin cloak; the Invisibility Cloak that he had received from his parents almost a year ago. "We'll be going in this."

"Think it can fit both of us?" Scorpius asked.

"It can probably fit all three of us, now that I think about it" Albus replied, unfolding it and taking in its monstrous size.

He threw the cloak over both he and Scorpius, then turned to Morrison. "Can you see us?"

"Nope" he replied, staring way too far to the left. "Neither of you."

"Ok, looks like we're ready to go."

They left the Common Room and began walking through the cold labyrinth dungeon-though it felt as though it took them an hour to get to the end of the first corridor. Albus was slightly taller than Scorpius, but his legs were much longer, and it showed. His strides covered so much more distance that the Cloak kept slipping off of his sneaking partner. Eventually, they had to devise a method for letting them walk in perfect synchronization.

"Okay look, for every two steps I take, you just take a regular step" Scorpius muttered.

Albus tried taking a long stride and felt himself lose balance-causing Scorpius to topple over into the wall.

"How clumsy are you?" he asked.

"Sorry...let's just keep going."

Walking up the stone steps was probably the hardest. Scorpius suggested that they take the Cloak off until they felt that they needed it, but Albus point blank refused. If he was caught, not only would he get in trouble for something that wasn't his fault, but the school would also know about his Cloak.

They fidgeted around for a while, trying to plan their steps, until they finally reached the staircase nearest the Great Hall, the main staircase. Slowly walking up it to reach their destination, neither of them even bothered looking where they were going. The next thing Albus knew however, both he and Scorpius had ran into what felt like a brick wall. There was a loud scream, a pain in his head, and then-quite suddenly-he and Scorpius were at the foot of the stairs.

"Who's there?" came a familiar voice.

Albus pulled Scorpius near him and tried concealing every part of them in the cloak. Slowly, he slid back against a wall. Scorpius started to say something but Albus covered his mouth. The

Headmaster was a few feet away from him, holding his side in pain and looking around frantically.

"I said who's there!" he repeated, this time pulling out his wand and aiming it a few feet away from where Albus and Scorpius sat silent and still. He continued scanning the room, his eyes rapidly shooting over every inch of seemingly nothing but air. Sweat was pouring down his forehead.

Albus tried to calm down and slow down his heartbeat; he new that Ares could probably hear it, it was beating so fast. But the Headmaster stood there for several more moments, until finally lowering his wand and continuing down the stairs. He walked right past them; Scorpius had to tuck in his legs to avoid more collision.

With one last suspicious look back to the stairs, the Headmaster entered the corridor that led to the grounds and disappeared.

"He's going to the forest!" Albus whispered.

"So let him go!" Scorpius whispered back. "Let's go to the Common Room! Forget Eckley, and forget sneaking around, we almost just got expelled!"

"But we could follow-"

"No!"

Albus sank back against the wall, knowing full well that this may very well be his best chance at seeing what Ares was up to. He sighed. "Okay, let's go back."

They walked back to the Common Room in silence, not talking, fidgeting, or tumbling at all.

## Chapter 9: The Nightly Wandering Of Headmaster Ares

Apart from telling Morrison the second that they had gotten back, Albus and Scorpius had told no one else about their unexpected run in with Ares. This had both its upsides and downsides. On one hand, it would be impossible for Ares to find out who it was he had bumped into. But on the other, Scorpius was now not nearly as popular as he had been when he had first dueled Eckley.

It turned out that the vast majority of both Slytherin and Gryffindor house had heard word that Scorpius was to meet Eckley for an epic rematch. Unfortunately, as Scorpius never went, the word quickly spread that he had chickened out. The older Slytherins were now paying him no mind, believing that he had disgraced their house, and the Gryffindors were now all claiming Eckley a hero; someone who sent Slytherins running with their tails between their legs.

"Well, I don't know what you want from me, he never showed" Albus heard Eckley brag during a Herbology lesson. Their work was extremely noisy-they were planting Screaming South Korean Shrubs-and he had to speak up to get every Gryffindor nearest him to pay attention. "I must have waited half an hour" he went on. "I even thought of going down to their Common Room and forcing him to duel, but that's not noble."

Scorpius furiously covered his shrub in dirt, drowning out most of the sound. "Stupid git" he muttered. "As if he could see if I was there anyway! Bandages over his eyes and all."

It certainly was true that even for days after their encounter in the hallway, Eckley was still forced to wear the bandages that hid the hideous marks of Scorpius' well placed Furnunculus jinx. Still, it was a small consolation when everyone in the school thought you were a coward; something that Slytherins hated being called most.

"Why don't you just challenge him to another one?" Morrison asked, as he too threw dirt over his shrub. "Tell him why you couldn't make it the first time."

"Can't" Scorpius said. "Me and Al would get in trouble for sure, he'd blab. And with my luck I wouldn't make the reschedule anyway. It's fine though...he'll get his. Eventually."

"Ouch!" Eckley said suddenly, and most of the Gryffindors turned to him in surprise. He touched his hand to his face. "Damn bandages. Keep sliding off my cheeks, pressing into the scars."

"Here, I'll help you" Mirra said, leaning forward and grabbing his face, carefully moving the bandages around. "Better?" she asked.

"Yeah" he said, giving her a wide smile.

Albus felt the tiniest pang of annoyance. They were just boil scars. Honestly, it wasn't like he had a damn lightning bolt on his forehead.



While Scorpius was getting evil stares from most of their housemates, Albus had actually found some sort of inspiration from the event. Second year Slytherins now had a bad name; a name that would have to be fixed. And he, Albus, was the one to do it. The first Quidditch match of the season was little more than a week away, and if he could win it for them, all badmouthing towards Scorpius would be drowned out by celebration.

And the inspiration was paying off. Albus was flying at least twice as better than he was over the summer, when James had been teaching him. His swerving and speed were fine, aided by his excellent broom. What he had needed to work on were certain tricks that all Seekers should have up their sleeve, like steep diving and letting go of the broom to swipe at the Snitch. Albus had learned both, and felt more prepared than ever.

"I agree" Atticus said after one memorable Quidditch practice, in which Al had dived from more than one hundred feet, dodged a Bludger while doing so, and caught the Snitch as it skimmed the grass. Albus had voiced his opinion to him. "You really have gotten better. When I first put you on the team, I thought you might end up playing reserve, you were good but not great. Now though, we've got more than a fighting chance."

Albus beamed as the Slytherins around him muttered in approval. Connie Orik, the fifth year Beater with a very prominent chin and sandy blonde hair, patted him on the shoulder. "I've got the feeling you might just steal the show from your brother" she said.

Albus felt his heart sink. Playing his brother, now that was going to be the real test.

Though he had improved in Quidditch exponentially, his studies had taken a turn for the worse. Perhaps it was the constant theorizing on Ares-or maybe the late night practices-or even a combination of both. But Albus felt as though he was now doing the bare minimum in class. He was almost as behind in his homework as Morrison, so much to the point where nearly all of it was copied from Scorpius the period before it was due, and his spellwork had become shoddy at best.

"You were doing fine a week ago!" Professor Handit explained when Albus failed to fire off a disarming spell capable of doing little more than loosen Morrison's grip on his wand.

Their lesson for the day was a practical one, based primarily on dodging and deflecting. Professor Handit had told them that though creating a shield spell is effective in most cases, some spells-like the Killing Curse-made it useless. Thus, their lessons were getting more and more focused on athleticism. The point today was to aim your spells well enough to deflect your opponents, or at the very least, duck and cover.

"Al, I'm not trying to single you out, but I know you can perform this spell" Professor Handit said with a small frown. He had been examining the pairs from afar. Thankfully, Albus wasn't very embarrassed, as everyone else was too busy to hear.

"I know I can" he practically moaned. "I'm just tired I think...I don't know what's up with me."

"Maybe you just need to concentrate a bit more. Take a break and clear your head if you need to."

Now clearing his head, that may very well have been problem. He always had things on his mind, though, he felt as though his other excuse had been more accurate; he was extremely tired. Exhausted though he was from Quidditch practice, he was still unable to sleep well at night, either from worry of the pile of homework he hadn't finished or falling off of his broom in the middle of the game. If he had to hazard a guess, he'd say that he was getting less than five hours of sleep a night.

"Not enough coffee this morning?" said a voice clearly in his ear. Albus picked up his head from the table and saw Professor Darvy staring at him. It was the Friday before the game, and Double Potions was their last class. "Awake sleepy head?"

Albus frowned. He hadn't been sleeping. He had just been burying his head in his arms, resting his eyes. People were talking all around him; they must be having group work. He saw Morrison and Scorpius stirring a cauldron giving off blue smoke next to him. "Sorry sir" he said.

Professor Darvy frowned at him. Albus noticed that he too looked tired. In fact, he would go as far as to say that Darvy was getting less sleep than even he was. His eyes were still a very light, almost electric blue, but the mad glint in them was gone. They were now sunken, with large bags under them. "We all need our sleep Al" he told him. "But you're the star of this class. Try and stay up please? You'll have the weekend to sleep."

Albus nodded his head as Darvy walked away. At least he had avoided any form of punishment. "Where's Mirra?" he asked Morrison and Scorpius, who were now cleaning up the blue potion that had spilled. It was the first time all year she hadn't partnered with him on their group potions work.

"She came over here to partner with us, but you were sleepin', so she just sat over there" Scorpius said, jerking his head behind him.

Albus looked and saw her sitting with Rose, Eckley, and Hornsbrook. He groaned. "I'm going back to bed" he said, burying his head in his hands and hoping that Darvy would let him sleep this time.

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Albus woke up much earlier than he had expected the morning of the match. It was hard to tell the exact time, as they were down in the dungeons, but no one was awake in the Common Room, and the fire looked as though it had just been put out; some of the older students had just gotten to bed.

Dressing quietly and leaving a note for Scorpius and Morrison, he left for the Great Hall, and was greeted with the sight of the emptiest it had ever been. There was a single Ravenclaw student eating breakfast, and none of the teachers had come down to eat yet.

He waited at the Slytherin table, tossing sausages on his plate, praying that he would eat and not throw up. His first Quidditch game. He was going to embarrass himself in front of the entire school. He would go from being Harry Potter's son to James Potter's less talented brother in just a few hours.

"Not hungry?" came a voice in his ear.

Albus jumped and almost whipped out his wand. "How do you do that?" he asked.

"Do what?" his brother said, taking a seat next to him. As no one else was at breakfast yet, he was not met with a shower of booing.

"That!" he replied. "Knowing where I am whenever. You did it last year too...before the Quidditch Final."

His brother smirked. "Tis' a secret. But I'll tell you what, you beat me today, and the secret is yours."

Albus grinned at him. It was weird, knowing that in a few hours time he would be playing against the person next to him, but Albus enjoyed talking to him all the same.

"So why didn't Scorpius show?" his brother asked him. "I doubt he really chickened out."

"Tis' a secret" Albus told him. "Let me win today and I'll tell you."

His brother laughed. "I don't think I'll have to let you do anything. You play good. And between you and me, some of the kids on my team are a little nervous. Rumor has it Atticus trained you up pretty good."

"Yeah...I suppose."

Their conversation strayed to random things just like it had last time. They speculated what the two ministry wizards had been doing at Hogwarts (though Albus was careful not to voice his actual suspicions) and laughed about how Eckley was still wearing his bandages. It wasn't until his brother was called over to his own table by the Gryffindor team that their conversation stopped. They wished each other good luck, and James left with his team to get changed.

Albus waited for about another half of an hour as more and more students finally poured in. He was starting to feel slightly uncomfortable. Where was the rest of the team?

"Al what are you doing here!" Scorpius said as he sat down across from him and starting buttering his toast.

"Eating breakfast!" he replied, though that was a bit of an exaggeration. He had taken a single bite from a sausage link in more than an hour of sitting there.

"Why aren't you in the changing rooms with everyone else?"

"Huh?"

Morrison took a seat next to Scorpius. "The team met in the Common Room this morning and went right to the changing room!"

Albus nearly slammed his head into the table. "I got to go!" he said, and he stormed off out of the Hall and made his way to the Pitch. He entered the Slytherin changing rooms panting, trying to catch his breath.

"Where were you?" Atticus asked him.

"I was-"

"It doesn't matter now, hurry up and get changed" he said. The other players were already dressed and prepared. They were sitting in metal chairs, no doubt preparing for a pre-game pep talk. Albus got changed as fast as he could, accidentally putting on his Quidditch robes backwards at first.

Atticus began walking up and down in a straight line, head to the floor. He did this for several seconds while his teammates watched. Once or twice, he opened his mouth as if to say something, before promptly shutting it. Finally, when the noise out on the pitch could be heard, he spoke.

"We're the underdogs" he said. "And, though I hate to admit it, with good reason. The closest that we've come to beating Gryffindor in the last few years-since I've been here in fact-is the final match last year. And that...well that didn't get the ending I had hoped for."

Albus watched as his teammates traded anxious glances with one another. He too was now feeling more nervous than he had all morning.

Atticus continued as if his team hadn't had a sudden moment of doubt. "But we're a different team this year. New players, new strategies. Granted, Gryffindor has switched it up too, but they have no way of knowing how we intend on playing."

"They're scared of us!" yelled Osmund Hall, the seventh year Beater with curly black hair. "Because of Albus!"

"And they should be!" piped up Patrick Parcher, the other Beater. And quite suddenly, all of the players were clapping. Albus buried his head in his hands.

"That's right, they should!" Atticus yelled, raising his fist in the air. More clapping and whooping. Albus was now close to fainting. "It's game time!" Atticus went on. "Chasers, don't always go for scoring, play with the Quaffle, make it go on long enough for Al to get a good look. Beaters, surround our new Seeker; we're counting on him."

They clapped more and muttered in agreement, and then a whistle was blown, signaling it was time for the Slytherin team to join the field. Albus started sweating, and breathing much faster. Still, he followed his team out onto the field.

Not a moment after they had begun walking down the pitch did Albus get his first taste of school wide hatred. It had been different hearing the vehement booing from the stands, where he had the clapping of his own house to help drown it out. Now however, three quarters of the stands were so loud that Albus actually had to glance at the Slytherin portion just to check to make sure that they were clapping. They were, but by the time he had looked to the Gryffindors to find Mirra and Rose, the crowd had erupted. The Gryffindor team was now entering the field.

Albus took his position on the field and watched as Mr. Wood had Atticus and Cooper Lanely, the Gryffindor Captain, shake hands. Albus smiled in spite of himself. His fondest memory of Lanely by far was knocking him into a suit of armor.

He heard the whistle, and in a heart beat, he was off. Soaring through the sky, he heard an annoying voice as commentary. He groaned. He had almost forgotten that Dimitrius Parks, a Hufflepuff seventh year, was commentating, and he was very biased.

"First game of the year!" his voice rang out through the stadium. "Gryffindors kept the same line up almost entirely, other than shifting around a few players, but Sanders has put together an almost entirely new team! Let's see if it pays off!"

Albus swerved a Bludger just in time to come face to face with another. He closed his eyes and prepared for impact, but the Beaters were doing as Atticus had said. A mighty swipe came from next to him, and Osmund Hall and knocked it away.

"Albus Potter- new Slytherin Seeker, brother of James Potter from Gryffindor- narrowly avoided a catastrophe there. Finnigan has the Quaffle - passes it to Rodners - who gets hit by a nasty Bludger there - Slytherin in possession and... Sanders scores!"

There was an onslaught of groans from three quarters of the field. Albus didn't have time to see Atticus do his victory lap. He was still keeping his eyes peeled for the snitch.

"Ten to nil Slytherin - awfully strong burst of speed there - didn't see that one coming. But Gryffindor is in possession, Finnigan has the Quaffle again - nice behind the back pass to Hale - and its stolen by Sanders! Sanders going for in a shot...and it's good! Right through the middle hoop!"

Albus pumped his fist in the air, but still kept his eyes open. He had yet to see his brother, but knew that when he did, a chase would commence.

And yet, after ten minutes, he had only seen his brother idly floating near the Gryffindor side, keeping his eyes peeled as well, but to no avail. Slytherin was up fifty to thirty, some truly astounding defensive moves being made.

"And Gryffindor is suffering without their star Chaser" Parks voice rang out. "Maybe they should have kept him as Chaser. Slytherin Beaters are doing their job, Pacher bats a Bludger away from their Seeker and towards Finnigan - and POTTER HAS GONE INTO A SPECTACULAR DIVE!"

Albus looked around; the commentator most certainly wasn't talking about him. Off in the distance, he saw his brother diving. Fast.

He accelerated. His broom was faster, but his brother was so close already. Just as he was gaining speed however, a glimmer of gold whizzed past him. He stopped abruptly and watched as the Snitch sank low to the grass. His brother was faking, trying to get him to give chase. He ignored the thundering crowd that was following his brother and dove for the Snitch. He was getting closer...

WHAM! He felt a sickening pain in his back and was almost tossed off of his broom.

"And a well aimed Bludger hits the Slytherin Seeker square in his back!" Parks voice echoed. "Potter was faking apparently... but the Snitch is gone."

Albus staggered, trying to maintain a grip on his broom. His back was killing him, but he could still fly. The Snitch couldn't have went far.

"All right Al?" came a voice from just above him. Albus looked up and saw his brother floating casually.

"You almost had me going there" he told his brother. "If I hadn't seen the Snitch I'd be tailing you."

His brother ducked a Bludger just as Gryffindor scored. "Well looks like you'll have to tail me this time!" he said, and he dove once more.

This time Albus saw that he wasn't faking. A glimmer of gold had indeed appeared in the grass, zooming around near the goal post on the Slytherin side. Albus dove after him. The commentator had begun shouting again, but the wind in his ears was making it impossible to tell what he was saying.

His faster broom made him level with his brother, they were side by side; neck and neck. Albus swiped for it but missed. His brother swiped too-

They collided in mid-air, both of them trying to grab the Snitch that was inches from their fingers. Thankfully, they hadn't been very far up, but they had both rolled off of their brooms and onto the ground. Albus was on his back next to his brother, who was on his stomach groaning. Struggling to keep his eyes open, he saw the Snitch hover right above his face. He raised his arm-it felt like lead-and in one quick swipe, grabbed the Snitch.

"Slytherin wins!" the commentator announced, sounding very disappointed indeed. "Two hundred to forty."

Groaning erupted from three fourths of the crowd, but Albus could hear the tumultuous cheers from the Slytherins as well. Still clutching the Snitch, he rolled over to look at his brother as his team swarmed around him. In between the legs of his teammates he saw his brother lift his head up from the dirt and mouth "I got you next time."

There was a party in the Slytherin Common Room that night. One of the older students had somehow brought food from the kitchens, and people that Albus had never so much as looked at were clapping him on the back. The pressure had been taken off of Scorpius, who was now welcomed as the Quidditch hero's friend.

"Good playing Al-"

"Knew Atticus was in the right state of mind-"

"Thanks" he was saying everywhere he turned. The noise from the Common Room was starting to give him a headache, but he brushed it outside as people tried giving him plates of food. After what felt like hours, there was finally silence. Atticus had banged his wand against a glass to call for quiet and order.

"Where's Al?" he said, and Albus felt himself being pushed through the crowd. In less than a second he was standing beside Atticus in the middle of the room. "Ahh there he is. Everyone on the team played well" he said, and there were claps for the entire team. "But if there was one person who pulled us out of this rut-one person who ended our losing streak against Gryffindor-it was this kid, this guy right here!"

It sounded like an explosion went off. Everyone in Slytherin house was now cheering. Albus could see Scorpius and Morrison in the back, trying to look over the shoulders of the older students. Both of them had wide grins on their faces.

"A toast to Albus!" Atticus yelled, and everyone with a cup in their hand raised it, with everyone in the room murmuring "To Albus."

Albus felt his face burn red. He was twelve years old-and a celebrity amongst his house. He hated being put in situations like this. The spotlight was his brother's place. *Had I known it were this big of a deal*, he thought to himself, *I would have lost on purpose.*

After another hour or so, Albus was let go of, though the party showed no signs of slowing down. He settled into a corner with Morrison and Scorpius, desperately trying to block out the sound around him.

"So did your brother say anything to you" Scorpius practically shouted. "About beating him?"

"He just told me he 'has me next time'" he said, shrugging.

"Well next time you'll have him too eh?" Morrison said. "I mean, it's not like today was luck."

"I know" Albus said, just as a loud explosion came from the middle of the room. A group of people had evidently started up a game of Exploding Snap. "Do you guys want to go up to our dormitory?" he asked his friend with his fingers practically in his ears.

"Actually, I was going to go and eat" Morrison said, indicating a table of food that had been brought out. Scorpius nodded his head, implying that he was doing the same.

"Okay well...I'm going to get some fresh air" he told them, and within minutes he was under his Invisibility Cloak, walking down the corridors of the dungeon, getting as far away from the noise as possible.

The castle was different at night, haunting but soothing. He had never wandered it for the sake of simply knowing more about it. The only times he had ever used the Invisibility Cloak he had been focusing on where he was going; or in Scorpius' case, whom he was tailing.

He walked up the stairs that led to the Great Hall, thinking that he might just go a few floors up and visit the Room of Requirement. He passed the bloodstained ghost of the Bloody Baron, walked past a portrait of a mad knight that usually shouted insults, and slumped himself against a wall in a random hallway. He had a pounding headache from the noise of the Common Room. He was quite happy to be all alone...under his Cloak.

"Dad gave you his cloak!" came an excited voice.

Albus stood up and spun around so fast that the Cloak actually slipped off of him. His brother was staring at him, jaw dropped.

"How do you do that?" Albus said, heart still pounding. "And how'd you see me!"

"I didn't" his brother said, pulling out a large sheet of paper that was folded over several times. "I used this."

Albus eyed the paper warily. He knew all too well that James owned at least one of every joke shop item that his uncle had ever created. Whatever that paper may be, it was probably not in his best interest to take it. "How'd a paper help you find me?" Albus asked him.



His brother gave him a wide grin. He pulled out his wand and tapped the paper, saying "I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good."

Albus watched as he unfolded the paper, which had rapidly begun drawing on itself. Squiggly lines were appearing all over it, connecting into rooms. On closer inspection, he saw tiny circles on the paper, all of them filled with names. He watched as James pointed to a hallway where, sure enough, two bubbles had their names inscribed inside of them.

"No way" Albus said, his jaw dropping. "This is...this is..."

"Hogwarts" his brother finished for him. "A map of Hogwarts actually. And better, it's got everyone in it. Even people wearing Invisibility Cloaks" he added with a smirk.

"Where did you get this?"

"Snuck it out of dad's drawer back in my first year. It was blank then. I don't know if he ever even used it or not. But I know it wasn't just paper. Words appeared on it when I first touched it. These four blokes," he said, pointing to the top of the map, where four names were listed, "helped me find it. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs."

"Who were they?" Albus asked, sidetracked from the tiny bubbles momentarily.

His brother merely shrugged. "No clue. But whoever they were, they knew more about this school than anyone else. And there's some powerful magic behind it too...to know who's in here and what they're doing."

"So that's how you've been catching up with me!" Albus exclaimed. "I knew that you weren't just popping up randomly!"

"Told you I'd tell you if you beat me" his brother said.

Albus took the Map from him. "How does it work?" he asked.

"Just tap it with your wand and say 'I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good'. Everything will appear, showing every part of the castle and everyone in it. Then to wipe it, just say 'Mischief managed'."

Albus looked down at the map in awe. A sudden idea popped in to his head. "Everyone in it?"

"Everyone" his brother told him, grinning widely.

"Could I borrow this?" Albus asked him.

His brother considered it. "Okay, but you've got to let me borrow the Cloak."

Albus frowned. That ruined his plan almost entirely. "How about," he started, trying to word his next few sentences carefully, "I keep both. Just for a bit. But then I give you both for a while. And then we split it back up?"

His brother eyed the Cloak in his hands with longing. Albus could tell that he waited a very long time to have the power of invisibility aid his many wrong doings at Hogwarts. "Okay, deal" he said. "But I have to hurry back-no map to tell if I got teachers around me."

Albus nodded as his brother turned and left, waving over his shoulder as he did so. He threw the Cloak back over himself and stared down at the map in his hands, grinning. He was going to put this map to very good use.

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Albus was not able to tell Scorpius and Morrison about the Map that night-they stayed partying along with their housemates well after Albus had went to bed. The next morning found Albus at Quidditch practice ("There's no point in slacking off now!" Atticus had said) and the remainder of the day was left to studying in the library with Mirra and Rose, a rarity as they both seemed to be hanging out with Eckley and his gang more. Thus, Albus had to keep his secret until Monday morning's Charms.

"So what are you grinning about?" Scorpius asked him as he made the apple on his desk grow at least three times its average size. Today they were practicing the Engorgement Charm.

Albus looked around to make sure that no one was watching. He needn't have done so however, everyone was too busy trying to shrink the objects that they had been given back down to regular size. "I'm grinning about this" he said, pulling out the map, which was blank.

"It's...just paper" Morrison said from behind his enormous grapefruit.

But Scorpius had already snatched it from out of Albus' hands. "It's not just *any paper!*" he said with mock excitement. "It's *withered, unusable* paper! Al, where did you get this?"

Morrison chuckled as Albus grabbed the paper back. "This unusable paper has more uses than you think" he said. He tapped the paper with his wand and said what his brother had told him to say. Within seconds, the map of Hogwarts was at their disposal.

Both Scorpius and Morrison gave loud yelps of excitement. Albus turned frantically to make sure that no one was listening, and found that the loud yelps had not attracted any attention. He turned back to them. "It's got the entire castle on it" he said smugly. "And even better; everyone in it, and where they are."

"The Marauder's Map" Morrison read aloud. "Who were the Marauders?"

"Some kids who went to Hogwarts apparently" Scorpius said, still looking at the map in wonder. "Blimey they must've been smart to make this thing though. It has rooms on here I didn't even think were here! That one there looks like it leads into Hogsmeade!"

"Where did you get this?" Morrison asked him.

"Not important" Albus told him. "But I don't have it for long, and I want to put it to good use."

"Al...are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Scorpius said with a smirk. "We could definitely corner Eckley when he's alone! Give him some payback!"

"Don't be stupid!" Morrison said. "First thing he's going to do is find the kitchens."

"You guys have some serious issues" Albus told them both, rolling up the Map. "This map has *everyone on it*. So next time Ares goes out for a little late night stroll...I'm going to follow him."

Morrison and Scorpius both exchanged a look of skepticism. "My idea's better" they both said at the same time.

---

Though he was certainly determined in his endeavor to catch Ares in the act, Albus found that he had next to no opportunities to do so. He would stay up well into the night-sometimes even up until two in the morning-and got nothing from it. The Map was fascinating, showing all the passageways throughout the school, doors that he had always thought were merely solid walls, and even when the staircases moved. But the tiny bubble with Reginald Ares in it stayed put in the Head's office. Sometimes the bubble would pace around, as if he were merely stretching his legs or trying to keep himself awake, but he never once left the room.

"Give it a rest!" Scorpius said to him irritably as they sat in the Common Room more than a week later. Both Scorpius and Morrison were doing homework; the homework that Albus was currently neglecting to do in favor of eyeing the map.

"I don't see why it bothers you" he said coolly, not even looking up from the floor.

"It bothers me because you're going to end up falling asleep, and I'll be stuck doing your work for you! If you spent half as much time looking up the Thestral Protection Convention of 1512, you wouldn't have gotten a "P" on your last paper!"

Morrison looked at both of them before nonchalantly returning to his work, keen to avoid joining in on the argument. Albus wanted to retaliate but knew that it was no good. Scorpius was right; he was spending too much time on things that shouldn't concern him.

Nevertheless, both of his friends went up to bed at midnight, leaving Albus to watch the Map carefully. The Map was so large that he had to be careful not to lose sight of Ares' office. If he

did leave and Albus lost track of him, it would all be a waste. But once more, it seemed as though there was no point to it anyway. Ares was quite still in his office. Albus let a sigh of annoyance escape him as he began scanning the rest of the map. His eyes were just inexplicably wandering towards the Gryffindor common room when fast movement caught his eye. Ares was no longer in his office.

He felt excitement rush through him. He ran upstairs and grabbed the Invisibility Cloak from his trunk, still with one eye on the map. Ares was certainly in a hurry, but the Map made things fair. According to the Map, there was a passageway between two walls that would lead him straight to a fourth floor hallway; he would be able to cut Ares off and follow him.

He ran through the halls and up the stairs, still watching the Map intently and not bothering to keep the noise to a minimum. He found the wall that was supposed to be a passageway at once. He looked at the Map uncertainly. It looked very much like a wall. As if the map sensed his confusion, the tiny bubble with his name in it bumped into the wall. Albus pushed his hands against the wall, and to his very pleasant surprise, watched as it slid open.

"Thank you Marauders" he whispered to himself as he entered the passageway. There were stone steps, almost completely hidden in darkness. The wall closed behind him as he began climbing the steps. A second later, he had pushed another wall open and was now in the middle of a fourth floor corridor. A trip that would have taken ten minutes had been reduced to two.

"Mischief managed" he said confidently, tapping the Map with his wand.

He waited a few more seconds and finally saw Ares turn a corner. He walked right past Albus, which was lucky, because this particular corridor was so thin that he had to press himself up against the wall to avoid being bumped into. He began following the Headmaster, but didn't get very far. As soon as Ares had reached the end of the corridor he spun around and, staring directly at Albus, said "Why are you following me?"

Albus froze on the spot, right in the middle of the corridor. The Invisibility Cloak was still on him. Had he made too much noise? Could Ares see through invisibility cloaks? He opened his mouth to frantically give an excuse, but before he could speak another voice had echoed through the hall.

"I'm not following you."

Albus spun around and saw Neville at the other end of the corridor. Ares had been speaking to him.

"I am not a fool" Ares said. "I know when someone is tailing me. You follow me quite frequently."

"As a professor at this school, I feel obliged to make sure that my students are safe. I am patrolling the halls" Neville responded coolly. Albus noticed that his normally wide grin had been replaced with a very strict stare.

"You needn't patrol tonight" Ares responded with equal confidence. "I have seen to it that no student is out of bed. You may return to your office."

Had it not been for the fact that Albus was very close to losing his house an astronomically large amount of points, he would have laughed. Ares and Neville were now at opposite sides of the corridor, completely unaware that Albus was literally in the middle of their conversation. Neville took a step forward...causing Albus to take a step back.

"I don't know what you're up to" he said. "But I know that you're leaving the castle again. And I know that whatever it is you're up to, it's not for the benefit of these students! So you can stop that charade right now!"

Ares lips curled into an unpleasant smile. "It is my castle, and I am at perfect liberty to leave it and return to it as I wish. I strongly suggest you get to bed. Don't you have a lesson you need to plan for tomorrow? Plants to tend to?"

Neville turned a very bright red. "I've planned all of my lessons for the remainder of the month, thank you. I'm twice the teacher you ever were, I don't need to rush."

Ares didn't seem to be bothered by the insult at all. He merely gave a bark of laughter. "Return to your office Longbottom" he said. His normally bored voice now had a very taunting ring to it. "I'm sure your precious Mumbling Pimpletons need to be watered."

"*Mimulus Mibletonia*" Neville corrected him icily. "And if you had attended school when you were younger you would know I don't need to. Those particular plants can suck the moisture from the air, giving it plenty of water. What it really needs is a large amount of sunlight-"

"Absolutely fascinating" Ares cut him off. "You can tell that to the reduced paycheck I'll be giving you for this semester. You have kept me here much too long" he added, and he turned to leave.

"I know you belong back in Azkaban!" Neville said loudly, and at this, Ares turned around once more to face him. "And I'll be the one to put you back there!"

Ares took a step forward, making Albus return to Neville's side of the corridor. "Is that a challenge?" Ares said menacingly.

Neville did not back off, but rather straightened up a little, as if preparing to exert himself. Albus got ready to duck. The silence in the corridor carried on what for what felt like several long minutes.

Ares seemed to think that he had lost his temper after a while however, as he took a step back. "You are the only teacher at this school that cares about what I do on my time. Why is that?"

"It's the students time that you're wasting. This school's time! And you're wrong! I'm not the only teacher tailing you."

Ares raised his eyebrows at this piece of information. "Oh really?" he said. "Who else is playing detective?"

Neville narrowed his eyes, but smiled at knowing something that Ares didn't. "The Potions professor that you were so willing to hire is just as suspicious of you as I am" he said. "He follows you sometimes, and he must be good too, because he has yet to be caught. Not so smart now, are you?"

Ares' expression was blank; completely unreadable. He turned once more and this time walked out of sight. Albus heard him say "If you follow me, I will remove you from your post."

"Is that a threat!" Neville called out.

"A promise" Ares called back.

Neville stood still on the spot for an entire minute before turning around and leaving the other way. There was no point in following Ares now; he would be on the look out. Instead, Albus stood in the center of the corridor, completely invisible, and very confused indeed.

## Chapter 10: Welcome To Malfoy Manor

Almost a week had passed since Albus had tracked Ares through the halls of Hogwarts, and December had entered with cold winds and flurries of snow. As the teachers began piling up their homework in anticipation for the holidays, students were left with hardly any time at all to enjoy the fresh snow. But of course, none of this seemed to matter. As Morrison had so eloquently put it, they'd have "the entire day before it's due!" to do their homework.

And so, on a particularly chilly Thursday afternoon, the Hogwarts grounds were filled with fast and furious snowball fights, the fastest and furious of which had Albus face down in the snow.

Rose had point blank refused to play such childish games when there was work to be done, but James had made Albus a challenge that was not to be rejected. Albus, Scorpius, Morrison, and Bartleby had formed Team Slytherin, and they were cowering behind their snow fort as James, two of his fourth year friends, and Mirra pelted snowballs at lightning fast speed.

"Why did you agree to this again?" Scorpius said as his blue lips quivered, desperately trying to add more snow to their fort as chunks of it fell off.

"Br-br-br-bragging rights?" Albus managed to stammer out.

"Oh yeah" Bartleby said as he emptied his jacked of snow. James had dumped at least a pound of it down his back before declaring Team Gryffindor to be the victor of round one. "Yeah, we'll have bragging rights after this for sure."

"Okay okay!" Albus screamed at the top of his lungs, standing up so his head went over the fort. "We surrender!"

But the snowballs just kept coming.

"Well that was fun" Scorpius was saying half of an hour later as he ferociously dried his hair with a towel. "Hopefully we'll be dry by the time we hit my house" he added with the tiniest bit of a smile.

Albus had written to his father telling him that Scorpius' parents were going to allow him to stay for a few days over the holidays, and he had received a letter back assuring him that they were okay with it. Scorpius had been nothing short of ecstatic, despite clearly trying to hide it. Though Albus mentioned it to no one, he had the strange suspicion that Scorpius rarely had company over his house that he enjoyed. Anyone who knew Scorpius knew that he was just fine, even if he was a little sarcastic. But the Malfoy family had a very bad name behind it.

Of course, he had recieved more than one letter regarding his visiting to the Malfoys. His Uncle Ron had sent a letter the next day warning him against a variety of dangers. Though he approved of Scorpius, as both his daughter and nephew were his friend, it would take several miracles to get him to trust Scorpius' father. He had even went as far to make ridiculous statements like "Just

wait for them to lock you in the cellar" and "Don't come running to me when you end up burping slugs."

Still, Albus stayed in a good mood for the first week in December, and was quite ready for Friday afternoon Potions, knowing that he would have the entire weekend to relax and play in the snow.

They lined up outside of Professor Darvy's class at the usual time, and he was, predictably, late. This particular trend had become even more common recently, and once or twice he seemed to have forgotten that he had an afternoon class at all.

The door opened and a hoarse "come in" welcomed them into the classroom. Albus took his seat at the front of the class and nearly gasped when he saw his Potions Professor.

His normally straight blonde hair was more ruffled than it had ever been, and it appeared as though he had ripped chunks out of it. The large bags under his eyes had now stretched to his entire face, and he had a greyish tinge to his complexion that was quite unsettling.

The class muttered about his disheveled appearance, but took their seats nonetheless. As Albus had now become accustomed to, Morrison and Scorpius were settled on either side of him, with Mirra and Rose at the table directly behind him.

"Settle down" their professor said with a yawn. "I know that I look rather...*atrocious* today, and I apologize. I have not been getting much sleep recently."

The muttering in the classroom died down as he spoke, but many students were still looking worried.

"We will be working on a Shrinking Solution today" he said, waving his wand towards the ingredient cupboard. "The directions should be in your books, page thirty-four. There will be no twist to today's lesson" he finished in his new hoarse voice.

At this, the muttering broke out again. No one could remember a lesson that had been this straightforward in their Potions class before. Darvy stared around the room with his bloodshot, droopy eyes. "When you are finished," he continued, "fill a vial of your potion and place it on my tray to the right. Feel free to talk or work together."

And with that, he put his head down at his desk and appeared to fall into a very deep sleep. Mirra pulled a chair up to the table and sat across from Albus, who already had his cauldron out.

"Look hard?" Scorpius said, pushing his textbook up to Albus, who quickly scanned the directions.

"Not really" he answered back. "But we're going to need a lot of skinned shrivelfig."



Morrison went to the cupboard to get the shrivelfig as Mirra leaned in close enough to whisper. "What's up with Darvy?" she asked him. "Why do you think he's so tired?"

Albus shrugged. "No idea" he said. But that was far from the truth. He now knew exactly why Darvy was tired. Their Potions professor was spending his nights tailing Ares, ensuring that the students were safe. His respect for his professor had doubled over the last week; it was hard not to respect someone who sacrificed their health and job for the sake of their students.

Sadly, however, that seemed like it was the last bit of information he was going to get for a long time. True to his deal with James, he had handed over the Cloak and the Map, and wasn't set to get it back until after the holiday break. And what's more, Scorpius and Morrison had "voted" that Albus was not to speak about Ares, or murder, or late night wandering to anyone, as they were getting quite bored with it.

Morrison returned with the shrivelfig and began skinning it in random quantities. "Darvy looks dead" he said.

"Yeah we were just talking about that" Scorpius said as he prodded the flame under his cauldron. He then peered up at their professor's desk, grinned, and said "Think we could make anything and just label it right?"

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Worried though he was for his favorite teacher's health, Albus had a hard time concentrating on anything that wasn't Quidditch related these days. He had thought that several inches of snow on the ground would reduce, or possibly even cancel the remaining scheduled practices before the holidays. He was quite wrong though.

"Look, to be blunt, the snow isn't going anywhere" Atticus said fiercely in the locker room a few days later. "There's a pretty solid chance there'll be just as much snow when we play Hufflepuff, so there's no point complaining about it. We need this practice."

"Well the Hufflepuffs aren't practicing!" Damian Peesley said through chattering teeth.

"Well the Hufflepuffs are dumb, and so are you if you think that the holiday break won't effect your game!" Atticus snarled back.

And so, twenty minutes and several more outbursts later, Albus was zooming around on his Lightning's Edge, trying to catch the Snitch with his frozen fingers. He had just seen the tiny glimmer of gold shining amidst a snow covered middle hoop when he noticed that there were people on the ground.

Scorpius and Morrison were walking on the field, talking very fast. In Scorpius' hands appeared to be an issue of the *Daily Prophet*.

As if on cue, Atticus blew his whistle. Albus flew down to the center of the field where his team was. He noticed that he was not the only one with chattering teeth and blue lips, and Atticus clearly noticed it too.

"We'll practice this Thursday" he said. "It's a tad bit cold tonight."

His teammates attempted to mutter under their breaths, but it seemed as though none of them could muster more than a sigh of relief. Albus shouldered his broom and walked his near frost bitten feet over to his friends.

"What's up?" he asked them.

They exchanged one of their all too frequent glances at each other, until Scorpius held up the paper and waved. "It's freezing, come inside. I want you to read this."

Not needing to be told twice, they walked back to the castle, and even down to the Common Room before talking again. Albus sat in one of the comfortable chairs by the fire, allowing himself to dry off. Scorpius and Morrison settled themselves on the floor, and Scorpius handed him the paper.

Albus flattened it out and saw that he had been slightly incorrect earlier. It was the *Evening Prophet*. He raised his eyebrows at it.

"Page four" Morrison said.

Albus turned to page four and saw a long article that, upon seeing the title, knew precisely why they thought it would interest him.

### **Chekov Murderer Caught?**

*Last August, the Ministry of Magic was under heavy pressure after Vladimir Chekov, formerly a famed wandmaker, was found dead in the muggle village in which he resided. Originally downplayed as nothing more than a typical murder by the Ministry, even the subject of jokes by some (for a full list of Auror Ronald Weasley's sarcastic remarks about the murder, see pages 12-15), the murder case has recently resurfaced.*

*Though many Ministry members refuse to comment on why, Arvin Macklehaster, aged 35, was taken in for the murder of Mr. Chekov. Minister of Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt claims that a startling amount of evidence has been stacked up against Macklehaster, including his lack of an alibi and reputation (Macklehaster previously served two years in Azkaban for admitting to illicit activity following the death of Lord Voldemort).*

*However, there has been some debate over the arrest. Some Aurors, including Head Auror Harry "The Boy Who Lived" Potter, admit that the suspect continued to swear himself innocent even under the influence of veritaserum, a powerful truth potion with few ways of having its*

*effects negated. Also, Macklehaster had no motive for the murder, as even skilled Ministry Legilimens were unable to tell if he knew the wandmaker at all. Regardless of these arguments however, The Minister of Magic, as well as a vast majority of interrogators, feel that the evidence that they have is more than worthy of putting Macklehaster away.*

*The arrest as a whole is considered surprising, considering that the only other development on the Chekov case is the Ministry's admittance that something was taken from the murder scene, more than two months ago.*

*Macklehaster is unmarried, with two children, both of whom are campaigning for a fair trial.*

Albus looked up from the paper and saw that both of his friends were grinning at him.

"Ready to put it to rest?" Morrison asked him.

"Put what to rest?" Albus asked, then catching on, continued "Why?"

"Because it's done" Scorpius said, snatching the paper away and attempting to uncrease it.

"They caught him. Ares wasn't even mentioned in the article. Some Mackleblaster bloke is getting locked up. It's done."

"What are you talking about?" Albus said incredulously, snatching the paper back. "There's no conclusive evidence anywhere! Look, my dad told me all about *The Prophet*. Three quarters of what they say is false, or grossly exaggerated. And the Ministry tries to make itself look better all the time, even he admits to it. They just picked some random scapegoat to take the fall!"

Morrison's mouth fell open. "I can't believe what I'm hearing. They *have the murderer*. He has no alibi. He's done. It's done."

"Then explain this!" Albus said, smoothing out the paper and pointing at the second to last paragraph. "Something went missing. My guess is a wand. And this guy obviously didn't have it on him."

"He probably pawned it!" Scorpius said. "Gave it to Borgin & Burkes! They'll pay up to six hundred and fifty galleons for anything with enough history behind it!"

Morrison raised his eyebrows and turned to Scorpius. "You know an awful lot about that" he said, and Albus saw Scorpius' ears turn pink. "Anyway," Morrison continued, "there's no proof it was a wand or anything like that. So don't even pull that one. Just let it go mate."

"Then what's Darvy following Ares into the Forest for?" he asked.

"I don't know, maybe because he's *insane!*" Scorpius said.

"Fine!" Albus shot back. "Then why is Neville following him?"

"He's obsessed with catching dark wizards and showing off, he'll do anything to catch anyone doing anything" Morrison fired back with a smug expression.

Albus gripped the paper tightly. "Fine! Then what's Ares doing in the Forest anyway? Picking flowers?"

"Probably" both of his friends said at the same time.

But Albus wasn't having any of that. Nothing made sense. Ares had been in Azkaban, he was up to something, and the Ministry was sending people to inspect his school. He didn't know how it all connected, but he knew it did.

"So are you done with this?" Scorpius asked.

"Yeah" Albus lied. "I'm done."

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Determined to keep Scorpius in a good mood the weeks leading up to the Holidays, Albus carried the charade of believing Ares to be innocent for the remaining weeks. It was easier than expected, as everyone in the castle was seemingly much more talkative with the thought of more than a week off from school. Everywhere he went, people were excitedly talking about their plans.

"I'm visiting my sister and her new boyfriend" Bartleby said gloomily over dinner one day. His sister had left from Hogwarts at the end of the previous year. "They're always giggling and stuff, and since his house is small I'm going to end up sleeping in the attic."

"Better than me" Morrison said. "Surrounded by muggles for ten days. I don't know how I survived without magic when I was younger."

There was one person who seemed far more cheerful than anyone else however, and that was including Scorpius. Mirra, as one could assume, had never exactly had a good Christmas. In fact, Albus wasn't entirely sure that they had acknowledged any holiday at all. Now with her parents locked away in Azkaban, she was free to spend Christmas with her grandparents.

"Oh nothing much for me" she said, positively beaming. "Just going to relax with my grandparents, maybe read a few good books, get away from school."

She looked absolutely ecstatic at the idea of doing nothing special.

The professors had done almost exactly what they had done last year. Some of them had allowed them to play games in class or simply talk amongst themselves, whereas others continued to keep them working. One thing that they all had in common, however, was that they all seemed to

think assigning work over the break was going to prevent them from being lazy when they came back.

And so, on the Friday before they would leave for home (Albus was going home at first, he would be dropped off at Malfoy Manor following Christmas) Albus found himself in the library, trying to reduce the holiday workload.

The group was smaller this time. Morrison had opted to take a "nap" instead, though Albus knew for sure that he wouldn't be up for hours, and Rose had decided to stay in the Common Room and take a break from studying, which in itself seemed like the first holiday miracle.

It was only Albus, Scorpius and Mirra sitting at a round table in the library this time, and truth be told, they had stopped doing work a while ago. They were mostly just talking about random things now. Scorpius had triumphantly announced that Albus had been completely wrong about Ares, and though they both tried to explain their thoughts on the matter, Mirra seemed more inclined to agree with Scorpius.

"Well...if they have enough evidence to lock him up...then maybe he did it" she said hesitantly.

"Of course, Ares could still be a mass murderer Al" Scorpius said with a grin. "He's a pretty grumpy guy. But not this time."

They all chuckled a bit, and Scorpius looked at his watch. "It's almost nine" he said. "They're going to close the library soon. I'll go and return these books."

He picked up the pile of books that they had abandoned more than an hour ago and started carrying them off. Before he went however, Albus could of sworn he saw him wink in Mirra's direction.

Albus was now sitting across from Mirra in silence, and quite suddenly, like a monster that had been lying dormant, the urge to vomit returned. In all of the time he had been with her this school year, there had always been other people there to drown out the uncomfortable feelings. Now though, the ignominious feeling of what had happened was washing over Albus like a fresh coat of the snow outside.

He desperately looked away in an attempt to make the silence more bearable, and saw Scorpius randomly withdrawing books and putting them back in. He was clearly biding time; he and Mirra had orchestrated this, and Albus knew that there was probably a signal for him to come back. A signal Mirra wasn't going to give until he broke the silence.

"So...yeah" he said slowly, looking back at her. He felt that was sufficient. He had broken the silence, hadn't he?

She opened her mouth to speak, and Albus braced himself. All chances of her having forgotten their argument were now gone. She was going to bring up everything, him spying on her and

reading her note, throwing hateful glances at her, refusing to talk to her, and every other stupid thing that he wished he could take back.

"So I...I wanted to talk to you real quick" she said, brushing her jet black bangs off of her forehead. "About...about me and you arguing last year."

He heaved a sigh. He knew that he had two options. He could either be a man, stand firm, and admit that something bad had happened, or he could be a little wuss and play dumb.

"What are you talking about?" he asked in what he hoped was a calm, clueless voice.

She raised her eyebrows at him skeptically. "Erm...last year?" she asked. "After I tumbled down the steps..."

"Oh! Oh *right*, that!" he said, and he felt his heart rise to his throat. He really did not want to have to talk about this. Couldn't she tell that he was sorry enough? "What...what about it?" he asked.

"I wanted to apologize" she said, turning the tiniest bit red.

His heart returned to his chest and his breathing slowed. He almost laughed. "What?"

"I wanted to apologize to you...for yelling at you and calling you a coward and all that. I know that you were only trying to look out for me. I was just...my parents..." she broke off there.

"No, no, it's fine!" he said quickly, flapping his hands around like an eight year old girl. "Really it's all fine. I'm sorry I ignored you and stuff" he added. "Everything was just a mess last year."

"I know, I know" she said, and he saw her glance sideways over at Scorpius, who was leaning against a bookshelf casually. "That entire argument was stupid. But everything's okay now, right?" she asked.

"Yeah of course!" he said, breathing out yet another sigh of relief. "I mean, I shouldn't have acted so weird around you. I was...I was young" he finished stupidly, as he was only a few months older now than he had been.

She let out a nervous laugh. "And...and one more thing" she said.

"Yeah?"

"I wanted to thank you for saving my life. For saving everyone's life, really. You must have been really brave."

*So this is what it feels like to be on fire*, he said to himself, as his face burned up. He knew that he now closely resembled a very rotten tomato. "Yeah well...what was I going to do? Let you die?" he finished with a nervous laugh of his own.

She laughed very hard, causing many others in the library to turn and look at her, but she didn't seem to care. Albus felt elated, and slightly stupid. He had been dreading that?

He watched as she yawned, and saw that she carefully raised the thumbs up sign on her right hand as she did so. By the time her arms were back down, Scorpius had returned.

"Man, we took out a lot of books" he said with a grin.

"Obviously" Albus replied dryly.

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The train ride back to King's Cross was just as hectic as it had been last time. Albus, Scorpius, and Morrison had managed to find a compartment near the back of the train, whereas Mirra and Rose were sitting with members of their own house. When Scorpius fiercely inquired as to who, they both seemed to have forgotten before leaving.

"Eckley" he muttered as he closed the compartment door behind him.

"You still on that mate?" Morrison asked him as he pulled out a pack of Exploding Snap.

"Wasn't that like...Halloween?"

"Not just Halloween!" he snapped back. "My reputation took a serious blow. He'll get his after the break though."

Albus was quite close to mentioning that at this time last year Scorpius had a reputation for being a shy know-it-all, but decided against it. Instead he decided to ask him about something that would keep him cheery for the ride.

"So what's Malfoy Manor like?" he asked; he figured if he would be staying there in a few days he had might as well know something about it.

"Well, it's just me, my parents, and my grandparents" he said. "It's pretty big, there's this real nice field outside of our house to practice Quidditch; no muggles anywhere. And we've got a lot of rooms, but I've convinced my parents to just let us both stay in the basement. A lot more room down there."

"What are your grandparents like?" he asked him, slightly anxious. The vast majority of his family seemed to dislike Scorpius' grandparents even more than his father, though Albus felt that it would have been quite rude to mention this.

"Well my grandmom is...weird" he answered with a shrug. "And kind of creepy. My grandad is real quiet. Always just reads the newspaper and sighs. My mum doesn't like me talking to them much. And my dad had to practically beg her to let them stay when I was born-that's when the next Malfoy becomes in control of the manor."

The rest of the train ride comprised entirely of swapping chocolate frog cards and playing Gobstones, as well as the occasional batch of pumpkin pasties that they got from the elderly lady who pushed around the cart. By the time it had hit midday, the grassy fields had disappeared to welcome busy pedestrians, and before nightfall the train had stopped completely.

They exited the train and scanned the crowd for their families, though it was quite hard to see or hear with students sobbing uncontrollably over not being to see their friends for an entire week. Albus steered himself through a crowd of giggly sixth year girls, Morrison and Scorpius following him.

"Hey, wait up!" shouted a loud voice. Rose was following after them. "Mirra says goodbye and she hopes you all have a good holiday" she said when she was walking alongside them. "Her grandparents are already here."

"Oh I'm sure she's in a hurry to show off 'Charlie and Donnie' to them" Scorpius said with his typical sneer. Albus privately agreed, though he didn't mention it in fear of a scolding from Rose.

"Well that's probably because those are her only presentable friends" she snapped. "Apart from me of course. Oh look, there's my dad!" she yelled out as Scorpius muttered under his breath.

Uncle Ron was indeed standing against the barrier leading back to the muggle world. For the second year in a row it seemed, he would be taking them back to the Potter Mansion. He grinned when he saw his daughter and nephew. "All right?" he asked as Rose ran to him and hugged him.

"Fine" Albus and his friends chorused.

"Right, well I've got to get you guys back. Have a good holiday you two" he said to Morrison and Scorpius.

"You too" they both said, before patting Albus on the back and wishing him a Merry Christmas. They then walked away, Scorpius calling out "See you in a few days!"

They walked back through the barrier, Rose with her arms still practically wrapped around her father's middle.

They entered the Potter Mansion a few hours later, greeted by the sight of the numerous decorations that now filled the house. Albus, just as he had done the previous year, entered the kitchen expecting to see a group of people, but was somewhat disappointed. Only his mother was there, looking very tired as she peeled potato skins. She always started cooking Christmas dinner the night before.

"Mum?" he said as he entered.

She spun around and gave a wide grin. "Al!" she yelled, hugging him around the middle, accidentally getting bits of potato all over his shoulders.



"Hi" he said, wiping the bits off.

"How are you? You look cold" she said as she bustled around the kitchen.

"No...not really...I'm- I'm fine" he said, but it was too late, she had already pulled a sweater out of thin air and crammed it over his shoulders. Albus grinned in spite of himself. It felt good to be back home.

Christmas Day carried with it one of the most remarkable feasts that his mother had ever created. Bowls of thick chocolate pudding were littered throughout the table, in between the entrees that included a handsomely carved turkey and a delicious fat ham. Albus helped himself to iced tea as he listened to the conversation around him, which had quickly turned to his defeat over James.

"Regret buying him that broom now, huh Jamie?" his Uncle Ron teased his brother, who was scowling into his bowl of corn.

"Now really!" Percy said from across the table. "Must you bring that up Ron? It's embarrassing enough, losing to your younger brother!"

"I didn't lose" James mumbled. "My *team* lost."

A few seats down, his father was in deep conversation with his godson, Teddy. They both stopped speaking at once when they saw Albus eyeing them. "Have you had any of the mashed potatoes Al?" his father said cheerfully, as he pulled a bowl of them nearest him. "They're delicious."

Albus turned to Teddy, who gave him a wink that clearly said that they would talk later. "They really are Al" he added.

Albus turned back to the rest of the table and listened to his Grandmother Weasley fret over his mother.

"There are bags under your eyes dear" she was saying. "You're working yourself much too hard. Why don't you let me do the dishes after dinner? You can go and take a nice nap..."

"I'm fine mum" his mother said, rolling her eyes. "I don't mind doing a few dishes."

Dinner carried on for more than an hour; stuffed though they all were, they couldn't help but keep eating. Uncle Ron was leaning back casually in his chair, looking half asleep and holding his full stomach. After rising from their seats, Grandmother Weasley opted for a nightcap, and put her favorite holiday songs on the radio. Albus carried his Christmas presents up to his room; there were so many of them that he had to cram several items (like various joke shop items) into his pockets.

As they sat around sipping eggnog and chatting, Albus approached Teddy, who was stretched out on an armchair in front of the fire. He grinned when he saw him.

Teddy Lupin had always been somewhat of an idol for James, as they were both pranksters at Hogwarts. Albus respected him too, but for different reasons. He was generally quite wise on dealing with childhood things-it had been he that had stood up for Albus when being bullied by his brother. He also happened to be a metamorphmagus, someone who could change their appearance at will. Today, his hair was jet black, much like Albus', and his eyes very brown.

"What's up Al?" he asked.

Albus sat down on the ground next to him. "You were talking to my dad about me, weren't you?"

Teddy rubbed his chin, deep in thought. "Your dad...your dad. He's the one with glasses, right?" he smirked.

Albus gave him a playful frown. "C'mon I'm serious...I wanna' know."

"Yeah you might've been mentioned" Teddy said. "Mostly he was just talkin' about work though. He always keeps me on the inside going on's of the Ministry. My grandma never keeps up."

Andromeda, Teddy's grandmother, was very old. Albus had no problem at all believing that she stayed out of anything that involved too much thought or stress. "Was he telling you about the Chekov murder?" Albus asked him, hoping he wasn't pushing his luck.

Teddy raised his eyebrows. "Might've mentioned it" he said slyly. "But anyway, he was telling me he was proud of you."

"Proud of me? For what? Getting Seeker?"

"No not getting seeker you prat!" Teddy scolded him. "For visiting that Malfoy boy tomorrow, and staying there for the rest of the holidays. You're not letting anyone else's personal problems interfere with your friendship. That takes serious bludgers mate."

Albus grinned at Teddy's comments, but hours later, as he lay in bed, his mind wandered off to what he had said. Rolling over on his side to drown out the sound of Teddy chasing James around the living room, he thought about being friends with Scorpius. Did it really bother people? Scorpius was one of his best friends...did it matter that their parents didn't get along?

And hours before he was set to go to Malfoy Manor, Albus felt worried for the first time about going there. He could only hope that Scorpius' parents were just as welcoming as his own, and more welcoming than Uncle Ron.

---

Albus woke up early the next morning, worrisome thoughts still in his head. He walked downstairs and entered the kitchen to find his father reading the newspaper and drinking coffee. Uncle Ron was also reading, though his newspaper had been cast aside in favor of a magazine called *The Quibbler*.

"What are you guys doing up so early?" he asked as he entered.

They both looked up. "Going to work in a few" Uncle Ron said.

"You guys have to go in *this early*?" Albus asked in awe. The sun was barely up.

"Well I'm going to go in a bit late" his father said. "I'm going to take you to the Malfoy's."

Albus poured himself a glass of orange juice and took a seat at the table. "Floo powder?" he asked.

His father gave a small cringe. "We're actually almost out. I'm going to Apparate you there."

Albus shuddered. He had never Apparated before, though the idea of it had always amazed him. Traveling somewhere else, almost instantaneously, was fascinating. He had heard that it was highly unpleasant however.

He waited for his father to finish reading the newspaper. He stared around the room for a little while, suddenly realizing how little he recognized his own kitchen. Hogwarts had taken a toll on him. It was more of a different home now, rather than a second one.

His father rolled up the newspaper and checked his watch. "It's pretty early" he said. "But the earlier the better I suppose. Why don't you get your clothes on and pack your things. We'll leave in a bit."

"Shouldn't I say goodbye to everyone?" Albus asked. "Is James awake?"

"Doubtful" his father said. "He was wrestling around with Teddy all night. He stole the locket he got from his girlfriend. Denise, I think her name is."

Albus grinned. "James got a locket for Christmas? Are you serious?"

Uncle Ron snorted. "It's shaped like a heart and everything. It's the stupidest thing I've ever seen. It might be worth it to wake him up just to see it."

Albus laughed, but his father had given his uncle a shifty grin. "I don't know" he said. "I've seen dumber, Won-Won."

"Who's Won-Won?" Albus asked, but his uncle batted *The Quibbler* over his head. "Don't ask questions!" he said, his face red. "Go pack your things!"

Albus hurried off to his room as his uncle muttered under his breath. The sounds of his father roaring with laughter were drowned out as he closed his door and gathered his things. He grabbed his schoolbag, which had been emptied the second he had gotten home, and filled it with clothes that he hadn't bothered to fold. He slipped in his toothbrush and took a long look around his disheveled room. Now that he thought about it, he didn't have that many treasured belongings. James still had the Cloak and the Map, leaving Albus confused as to what else he should bring.

"Got all of your things?" his father hollered up.

"Just need to get dressed!" he called back down. He slipped on the jeans that he had been wearing the previous night, and felt his wand, among numerous joke shop items, in his pocket. He didn't have time to clear anything out, and within seconds he had slung his bag over his shoulder and met with his father downstairs.

"All ready?" his father asked him in the living room.

"Yup"

"Wand?"

"Yup"

"Clothes?"

"Yup"

"Okay then" his father said, approvingly, clapping his hands together. "Are you going to need your broom?"

"Scorpius has it" Albus said. "I let him borrow it before the holidays, he wanted to try it out."

"Well then let's go" he said, leading Albus out the door.

"Bye Uncle Ron!" Albus called through the living room. His uncle grunted to show that he had heard. They exited out of the mansion and walked through the garden, finally exiting the yard. The sun was just coming up now, and Albus was forced to shield his eyes from it.

"Everyone knows I'm leaving today?" he asked his father.

He merely nodded. He looked very serious all of a sudden. "Grab onto me" he said. "Apparation can be a little...uncomfortable at first."

Albus did as he was told. One hand still firmly around his schoolbag, he gripped his fathers arm. "Have you ever been to Malfoy Manor, dad?" he asked.

"Once" his father replied dryly. "Keep your arm gripped like that, and whatever you do, do not let go. This will only take a second."

Albus swallowed, nervous. The next second, he felt as though he was hurtling through space-though he wasn't even whole anymore. It was like his entire body had been compressed; there was no air, no room, no nothing. He felt like he was going to explode at any second-

He breathed fresh air a moment later, and almost fell to the floor. Apparition was officially worse than the Ministry phone booths. Still gasping, he looked up at his father, who looked down and gave him a grin. "Weird, right?"

Albus nodded his head, then looked around. They were still in a garden, though they were facing a very handsome manor instead of the usual Potter Mansion. There was a large gate that looked as though it had been broken. A pathway led straight to the front door, and there were several peacocks wandering aimlessly around it. Albus swallowed again; he was more nervous than ever. Off in the corner of the broken fence stood a wooden sign that looked as though it had just been put up minutes ago.

*Welcome to Malfoy Manor*

Albus made to walk to the front door, but his father grabbed his shoulder and held him back. Albus turned and saw that he was staring at him with a very serious expression. "Before you go Al, I want to talk to you."

Albus stared right back at him, and noticed at once that something was wrong. There was a grayish tinge to his father's skin-he was more than overworked; he was stressed. The large bags under his eyes that hadn't been visible until they had reached sunlight were making him look remarkably like Professor Darvy.

"Dad, are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine Albus" he said. "There is a lot going on at work, I admit, but it's nothing that I can't handle. But I want to talk to you before I leave, and I want you to listen very carefully."

"Are you sure you're okay-"

"Albus are you going to listen to me carefully?" his father repeated, cutting him off.

Albus nodded.

"Good. Al, there's no doubt in my mind that Scorpius is a nice young man, and I've heard that his mother is quite nice as well. His father... well I don't think he'll be too much trouble. But Scorpius lives with his grandparents."

"Uncle Ron doesn't like them" Albus said.

"That's right, he doesn't, a lot of our family don't, and with good reason. I don't want you to be paranoid, but be on the lookout. Do not be so trusting of his grandparents, stay away from them if you can. And if one of them steps out of line...I want you to tell me."

"Steps out of line?"

"You'll know what it means if it happens" his father assured him. "I'm sure Scorpius will let you use his owl, just write to me if you need me. Have fun-but be safe. Okay?"

"...Okay" Albus said. His father continued staring at him for a moment before steering him to the door.

They walked through the pathway and up to the front door, where they traded looks once more. Albus couldn't tell who was more nervous-he or his father. He watched as his father took a deep breath, wiped sweat from his forehead, and knocked twice on the door.

## Chapter 11 : The Visitor

There was no answer. Albus exhaled deeply. His father's speech had shaken him; for some reason, he was now nervous at spending the remainder of the week with one of his best friends. His father waited a few more seconds before knocking once more. This time however, they heard noise coming from behind the door.

"Mum get the damn door!" someone shouted.

"You watch your mouth!" someone snapped back, before they heard the locks being removed. The door swung open.

Albus' first thought when the woman came to the door was that she one of the most beautiful people that he had ever seen. Her hair was a very dark brown, and it fell in delicate curls around her shoulders. Her chocolate brown eyes were narrowed when she first came to the door, but upon seeing her guests they reverted to an almost almond-like shape. Mrs. Malfoy looked nothing like her husband or son.

"Hello!" she said cheerily, though she was panting heavily. Her voice now sounded welcoming. "You must be Albus!" she beamed at him before looking up. "And you're...and you're his father" she added. "Come in, come in!"

Albus traded the tiniest of looks with his father before they both walked into the Manor. However handsome it looked on the outside, it was nothing, *nothing*, compared to the interior. The hardwood floors were highly polished, and the gigantic oak doors in front of them looked as though they had been built with nothing but the highest of quality craftsmanship.

Mrs. Malfoy led them to these doors, and upon opening them Albus saw that they were in a magnificent drawing room, complete with a large table that looked as though it was held for meetings. Strangely however, there were very few chairs there to match it.

"Scorpius, your friend is here!" she shouted.

The doors on the opposite side of the door opened at once, and a beaming Scorpius Malfoy entered. He looked as though he had just woken up, his blonde hair disheveled and his narrow eyes watery, but he looked happy all the same.

His mother clapped her hands together and looked at Albus once more. Albus once again had the strange suspicion that they rarely received company. "May I offer you anything to drink?" she asked politely, looking between him and his father.

Albus had just opened his mouth to answer before his father began speaking.

"I'm afraid not, I'm on my way to work right now, I just wanted to go over a few things real quick" he said with a smile. "Albus has his things in his bag, I just wanted to make sure I didn't need to bring over a sleeping bag or something...not sure where he'll be staying."

"Oh don't worry, we have an extra bed, Scorpius has a large room" she smiled at him.

"Erm...right. And you'll be taking him to King's Cross when the break is over?"

She nodded. Albus watched as his father glanced around the room a few more times before shrugging. "Well... my job here is done" he said, clapping Albus on his shoulder. "Take care yourself Al, have fun, and just remember what I said, okay?"

Albus nodded before waving good-bye to his father, who grinned and turned on his heel, then left.

"Scorpius, why don't you go and get Albus' room ready for him" Mrs. Malfoy said as Albus removed his backpack.

"No, really it's fine-" he began, but Scorpius had already started carrying it out of the room.

Mrs. Malfoy smiled at him before saying "I'm going to go tidy up upstairs. Feel free to make yourself at home. That room over there," she indicated the door that Scorpius had come in through, "is our dining room. It's a big place to get used to, but that would be a good room to start with."

Albus was half a second away from saying that he didn't mind big homes, that the Potter Mansion was bigger, but felt that it would be too rude. Instead, he merely smiled back at her as she left the room.

Only when the door had slammed shut did he realize that he was officially trapped. If something went wrong, he would have to deal with it on his own. He quickly went through the same door that Scorpius had departed to, desperate to catch up with him and feel some sort of comfort, but when he entered the dining room he noticed that someone else was in there. There were several more doors in this room, one of which Scorpius had obviously went through, and right in the middle, at a table smaller than the one in the room before, sat a very old looking man.

He was reading the newspaper, his narrow gray eyes a blur as he scanned it. His hair was a ghastly white, with streaks of blonde all throughout. He gave off the appearance of an old man desperately trying to retain the looks of his youth. He did not seem to have noticed Albus enter the room.

Albus quietly crept past the table, and had just reached the door that was ajar when he heard a drawling voice that sounded uncannily like that of his best friend.

"So you're Potter?"



Albus spun around to face Scorpius' grandfather. His eyes had not left the paper.

"Y- yeah" he said. He was not scared, though he had to admit that the man's calm demeanor somewhat disturbed him.

Lucius Malfoy continuing to stare at his paper, then without looking up, spoke once more. "Small world" he said lazily before turning the page.

Albus continued staring for another moment before he realized that their conversation had come to an end. He proceeded to walk through the door and found himself in a hallway with a staircase. To his immense relief, Scorpius was descending down it. They grinned at each other.

"Nice place right?" Scorpius asked him.

"Seems cheery enough" Albus responded, tone heavy with sarcasm.

"Don't worry, you'll fit right in" Scorpius responded, clapping him on the back.

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Albus quickly learned that living with the Malfoys wasn't nearly as different from living at his own home than he thought it would be. True, there were certainly less people popping in and out of the house, and the noise level recieved a large decrease, but for the most part, Albus only really noticed a change in scenery. He shared a bedroom with Scorpius in the basement. It was sizable enough to hold both beds, and, despite an unnatural chill, was reasonably comfortable.

"Ya' know, this place used to be a dungeon" Scorpius told him as he made his bed during Albus' first night at the Manor.

"Really?" Albus asked. "It seemed kind of gloomy at first. No one was ever like...held here though right?"

Scorpius scoffed at him. "Of course not you idiot! Who would be kept in here? Seriously, you act like my family are all tyrants..."

And if there was one other thing that Albus had learned, it was that his father had been worried for nothing. He rarely saw Scorpius' grandparents, let alone talked to them. His grandfather seemed to prefer the upstairs, only coming down in the morning, and he had only seen his grandmother once. Both of them seemed like they had no idea Albus was even there.

The same could not be said, however, for Scorpius' parents. Mrs. Malfoy was absolutely in love with him after only three days of being there. The dinner conversations that they had generally involved her laughing until she nearly choked on her food; she loved hearing about things like his brother's various pranks and Neville's disastrous lessons, and would constantly offer him

seconds and thirds in an attempt to keep him at the table. Mr. Malfoy seemed generally entertained as well, though he also seemed to try very hard to avoid showing it.

Albus thoroughly enjoyed the time spent with Scorpius and Mr. Malfoy in the grassy field behind the Manor. They were both avid Quidditch fans, and Albus thought that he had spent at least half of his time flying with them and discussing Quidditch.

"You know, I was Slytherin's Seeker too, back when I was your age" Mr. Malfoy told him as they took a break from flying out on the field; they had been racing around it all day.

"Scorpius told me" Albus admitted. "What did you fly?"

"A Nimbus 2001"

Albus burst out laughing. "They let you on the team with a Nimbus? Are you serious? You might as well have flown a Beater's bat!"

Scorpius laughed as Mr. Malfoy gave him a steely glance. "I'll have you know that back then, a Nimbus was a big deal, no matter what model. And back when I was playing, your broom didn't matter. It was all about skill. I would have rather died than have won cheap by flying a broom that gave me an unfair advantage, like say, a Firebolt."

Albus narrowed his eyes and looked at his own fantastic broom. "It's not *cheating* if you have a good broom" he said.

"Keep telling yourself that" Mr. Malfoy said with a smirk.

Though pleasant, Albus had the strange feeling that Scorpius hadn't exaggerated one single bit when saying that his father didn't laugh much. It seemed that that the only private joke he knew was the one he shared with his son-the one that involving sending him to his room and receiving a swift kick in the groin for it.

"I'm kind of surprised" Scorpius said as he shouldered his broom and walked back to the Manor with Albus minutes later.

"Why?" Albus asked, glancing back over his shoulder and watching Mr. Malfoy clean grass stains off of his robes with his wand.

"He never talks this much" Scorpius answered with a grin.

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As the days passed by and Albus got more and more used to the Manor, he felt as though he wouldn't have minded a single bit if his vacation extended at least another week. He was having a fantastic time trading stories and flying, getting quality nap time in (it was hard to sleep well into the afternoon with his brother and sister always waking him up) and most importantly,

spending time with at least one of his best friends. Scorpius had received a single note from Morrison over their break, and he'd seemed as though he wasn't having nearly as much fun.

The final day before they would be going back to Hogwarts was a Sunday, and Mrs. Malfoy had created a magnificent dinner for their last day there. They all took their seats at the large dining table, and to Albus' very great surprise, saw that Scorpius' grandparents were sitting there, something that they hadn't done once since Albus had come to the Manor.

Mrs. Malfoy set plates and utensils up, and the second she went to get napkins, Albus felt as though he could have cut the tension in the room with something as dull as a balloon. He was sitting next to Scorpius and across from his father. The grandparents were sitting on either side of the big table, staring blankly and not talking, eyes occasionally flickering in his direction.

Grandmother Malfoy was very similar looking to her husband, with wispy hair that was white and flecked with blonde, as well as the sneer to match. She did not, however, have the calm demeanor that he did-she looked ready to snap at any moment.

"Dinner is served" Mrs. Malfoy said triumphantly, returning with a pile of napkins and a platter with a gigantic turkey on it.

Albus watched Scorpius lick his lips and he readied his fork. Mr. Malfoy began spooning out mashed potatoes onto their plates. "So Albus, when's your next Quidditch game?" he asked.

"Huh? Oh right" he said quickly; he had been distracted by the grandmother, who had been staring at him intently. "Just a few weeks after we get back. I start practicing again this Wednesday."

"Well I certainly hope it's worth it" Mr. Malfoy said. "Slytherin hasn't won the Quidditch cup for a few years now."

"We'll get it this year dad" Scorpius assured. "You've seen Al fly, and we've got some awesome Beaters too. The only problem is that two of our Chasers couldn't score if the hoops were planet sized."

"Well I suppose you could change that, if you got on the team" Mr. Malfoy said icily, giving a glance in a random direction.

Albus saw Scorpius blush. "Why didn't you try out?" he asked him. "You're pretty good..." which was completely true,; from what Albus had seen in the past week, Scorpius was quite adept at flying.

"Because he needs to keep up with his studies" Mrs. Malfoy said, leaving the table to refill the drinks. "And we've talked about that before, Draco" she added.

Albus watched as they eyed each other. He was forcefully reminded of the nonverbal battles he had seen his Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione have.

"How's the turkey, Lucius?" Mrs. Malfoy asked him when she sat down again.

"Dry" he replied in a tone that matched his answer. It was the first time he had spoken the entire night. Mrs. Malfoy seemed ready for this answer.

"Would you like some gravy?" she asked politely.

"Is it dry?" he responded.

"No, it's gravy" she shot out. Albus could tell that she was trying to desperately keep her calm in front of company. Albus looked over at Scorpius and saw him eating as though nothing was going on; he was used to this.

"No thank you" Lucius said icily.

She poured gravy over his turkey anyway. Then turned to Albus. "Does your mother cook often, Al?" she asked politely, in an attempt to steer the conversation away.

"Not often, but when she does, she makes it great" he said. "But this is wonderful!" he added, feeling that his answer had somehow been rude. It was quite true though, the turkey was excellent.

"Does she get you and your siblings to help with the cooking? It's a great skill for when you're grown up, my mother taught me when I was younger."

"Erm...no, not really" he answered her truthfully. "Our house elf helps sometimes though."

"We used to have a house elf" came a sudden, sharp voice from the corner. Grandmom Malfoy was speaking for the first time since he had entered the Manor. "Until my sister killed it. Chucked a knife right at him."

Albus choked on his drink from laughing. He had not expected her to say anything at all, let alone a joke as ridiculous as that one. When he looked around to see if everyone else was laughing however, he felt oddly alone. They had all began looking in different directions, avoiding commenting on it.

A few moments went by while Albus stared from person to person. Finally, Mr. Malfoy struck up a conversation again.

"So Al, first in your family to be in Slytherin, huh?"

Albus nodded, relieved that the conversation was continuing. "Yup. As far as I know, everyone in my family's been in Gryffindor."

"They weren't disappointed were they?" he asked.

Albus gave a half shrug. "Not much they can do it about now is there?"

Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy laughed. "Were they that surprised? Normally you can tell where someone is going" Mr. Malfoy continued.

"Surprised yeah, and maybe disappointed too, a bit. But no one was angry. Well, except maybe my cousin Rose. She didn't like it at all."

"Rose... Rose... she's in your year, right?" Mr. Malfoy asked.

"Yeah" he answered. "How did you know?"

"I've just heard of her once or twice, that's all" he replied calmly.

"Anyway" Scorpius cut in, ending that conversation. He had an unusual expression on his face, and his cheeks were red. "Hear about those Wimbourne Wasps? They dropped Tyler Konry and picked up a reserve player..."

The rest of their dinner went by quickly and quietly, Albus and Scorpius being the first to finish their plates and be excused. Joining Scorpius in their bedroom to resume packing their things, Albus started up a hasty conversation with his friend.

"Does that happen all the time?" he asked.

"Nah" Scorpius replied, folding up his socks and tossing them into his trunk. "She only put so much effort in because you were here. Normally we just have something easy like spaghetti."

"No...I mean them arguing" Albus replied nonchalantly.

Scorpius stopped sorting his textbooks and picked his head up from his trunk. "What arguing?"

Albus frowned. "Never mind" he said, randomly tossing clothes into his bag. They would be meeting his parents at King's Cross tomorrow, where he would also get his trunk.

After Scorpius finished packing they entered the living room to sit by the fire and play chess- Scorpius had yet to beat him since his arrival and was keen on winning at least once before they returned to Hogwarts.

They had just set up the board to have their match when there was a loud, sudden knock on the door. Scorpius sat upright and stared at it blankly. It was almost midnight, and as far as Albus knew, Scorpius' parents had already went to bed.

"Were you expecting someone?" Albus asked him.

Scorpius merely shook his head, not taking his eyes off of the door. There was another equally loud knock. Scorpius rose from his feet and went to answer it. He pulled it open, and Albus stifled his gasp.

It was Rookwood, the man who's conversation with Ares Albus had been eavesdropping on months ago. He stepped forward, one foot through the door, looking very much as he did the last time Albus had seen him-oily, pockmarked, and suspicious.

"Good evening" Rookwood said, smiling slightly.

"Erm...hi" Scorpius responded.

"I'm so sorry to drop in unexpectedly"- he tried opening the door further, but Scorpius stopped him-"but I had urgent business to attend to here. Is your grandfather still awake, by any chance?" he inquired.

Scorpius gave a half nod, half shrug. He glanced back at Albus, who said nothing.

"Let him in" came a calm voice.

Albus spun around and saw that Lucius Malfoy had just entered the room. "You'll have to be quiet, most of us are already sleeping" he said. He turned to Scorpius and added "What are you still doing up anyway?"

Before Scorpius could stammer out an answer, the man gave a strong push and entered the room. Scorpius was moved back, but not knocked off of his feet. He retreated to the fire with Albus.

"I was hoping that we could speak somewhere privately-" Rookwood began

"The dining room" Lucius responded, and they immediately walked through the door.

"That's him!" Albus exclaimed the second the door had been closed. "That's the guy who was talking to Ares, that's the guy whose wand I've got!"

"Will you keep it down!" Scorpius shot out. "I know who he is, he's been here before."

"Is he bad news?"

"Well- my dad doesn't really like him."

Albus turned to the door and pondered. "They're talking about whatever's going on in the Forbidden Forest, I know it!"

"Well whatever it is, it isn't really our business, is it?" Scorpius answered.

Albus' mouth fell open. "You mean you don't want to know what Ares is up to?"

Scorpius smacked his hand against his face. "We've. Been. Over. This!" he said quietly. "Ares isn't a murderer, and he's not planning on murdering anybody. Whatever was taken from that guy was pawned, whether it be a wand or a watch, and Ares is just...I don't know playing poker with his buddies or something."

Albus stared blankly. "Well I'm not that gullible."

He stood up and made his way over to the door. Using one of his most effective tactics in spying yet, he carefully placed his head against the door, expecting to hear secrets spill at any moment-

"Why can't I hear anything?"

Scorpius snorted. "It's a charm my grandad probably put on it. To cancel out sound. Good luck eavesdropping now."

Albus frowned. How was he going to hear what was going on...

"I've got it!" he exclaimed. He ran down to the room that he and Scorpius shared and began rifling through his pants pockets. Arriving back in the room with Scorpius, he pulled out two pairs of long flesh colored string. "Extendable ears! My uncle gave them to me for Christmas, I never took them out of my pocket!"

Scorpius scowled, but held out his hand nonetheless. He heaved a sigh as Albus gave him the string, having put his own in his ear already. "I suppose that there's no point in missing out."

Albus smirked as both strings snaked their way towards the door and, eventually, under it. Suddenly, they heard voices as loudly and as clearly as if they were in the room.

"-an absolute idiot if you're willing to take that risk" Lucius was saying. "Honestly Augustus, after all these years?"

Rookwood made an annoyed noise, as though he were fidgeting around. "There is nothing foolish about what is going on. If anything you are the fool for not joining. Or are you frightened Lucius? Being a granddaddy made you soft? Going to spend your last few years changing diapers?"

"I'd rather spend them with my family than in Azkaban with you" Lucius replied curtly. "That is where you will end up. If this 'war' ever takes off anyway."

"It is not a war that we are seeking" Rookwood replied. "As I have explained numerous times, everything that we do is in the name of the arts that we have proudly supported. They have us running. Hiding. Speaking in whispers. Potter's new Ministry has turned us into rats and snakes."

"We were always rats and snakes" Lucius said stiffly. He sounded as though he were pacing.

"Were we really?" Rookwood said, and he sounded quite angry now. "Feel as though you wasted your life away, do you Lucius?"

There was a moment's silence. Albus could hear heavy breathing.

"I regret nothing" Lucius said after a moment. "But I will not risk everything. Me and my wife and son have avoided Azkaban by technicality only. I will not risk that small protection by joining your...cult"

"It is not a cult!"

"Why, because you have a leader? So you're a gang then? Who's wishes are you following? Your own, or Red Ares'?"

"Ares is an exceptional wizard" Rookwood said through gritted teeth. "And you know as well as I do that he is in a position to strike."

"So that's what these rallies are about then? Gathering in groups to initiate your new leader? Disgusting, you haven't changed a bit. Have you not learned your lesson?"

"But Ares is different than the Dark Lord. He does not command service, and he tolerates mistakes. He is not our leader, he is our stand out. And we follow him because it is his plan, not because we are forced to."

"The same plan that he had when you approached me a year ago? How's that coming along?" Lucius acidly.

"Better than you think. Ares has the Dragonfang Wand."

There was more silence. This time, Albus traded a glance with Scorpius and saw that he was looking very pale. They turned back to the door right as the conversation resumed. Rookwood was still talking.

"Speechless? It isn't much now...not without its full power, but Ares is barely skimming the surface. He will soon begin testing his power. There will be two sides. Those who wish to experience the same greatness, and those who stand in its way. I am doing you a favor. I know where my side lies Lucius. Do you?"

A third silence occurred, only this time, it was Lucius who broke it. "Leave. Leave this Manor and never attempt to contact me again."

Albus heard footsteps and hastily pulled the string back. Scorpius did the same and they hastily began moving random pieces out of turn on the chessboard. The door had opened and both men had emerged, Rookwood looking very defeated indeed.



They went to the door and Lucius opened it. Rookwood stepped outside and turned to face him. "Lucius, I beg you. How long have we been friends?"

"Much too long" he replied grimly, and he gently closed the door in Rookwood's face. He turned and looked at Albus and Scorpius, both who had abandoned their chess charade. "I suggest you two go to bed now, you'll be waking up early tomorrow."

And without so much as bidding them a goodnight, he exited through the same door that he had just entered. They turned to face each other, and Albus knew that both of their minds were racing.

"Well?" Albus asked.

"Well what?"

"What do you think?"

Scorpius hung his head and spoke in to his knees. "I think that someone at the Ministry owes that Mackerblaster bloke an apology."

## Chapter 12 : Advice From A Mad Man

Both Albus and Scorpius made no mention of Rookwood's visit the next morning. For one thing, they were not entirely sure that his parents knew about it, and for another, Lucius Malfoy could be very intimidating.

Sitting themselves down for a good breakfast before they were to leave, they were met face to face with him. He did not have his usual newspaper in hand, but was merely staring at them, as though daring them to say something out loud.

"You boys all ready for your new term?" Mrs. Malfoy asked them, putting a large plate of pancakes down at the kitchen table.

Albus jumped in surprise. "What? Oh right...yeah I've got everything." He helped himself to pancakes, all the while not taking his eyes off of the old man sitting across from him.

"Scorpius you look tired" Mrs. Malfoy continued, pouring him a glass of orange juice. "You weren't up all night, were you?"

"Nope" he said, cheeks pale. "Wasn't up. Didn't see anything."

Mrs. Malfoy eyed them both suspiciously before giving a shrug. "You boys are acting weird today..."

The morning went by much smoother than it would have went had Albus been at his own home. As they had packed all of their things the previous night, there was no hurry to be anywhere especially fast. He spent most of the morning lounging around the Manor and thinking to himself. Finally, at quarter to nine, Mrs. Malfoy called for them to go out to the car.

Mr. Malfoy had left early that morning-to where, Albus did not know. Thus, it was only he, Scorpius, and Mrs. Malfoy in the car on the way to King's Cross. It was an hour and a half drive to the station, and it went by slower than Albus thought that it would. As much as he had enjoyed his break, he was eager to get back to Hogwarts.

They wheeled Scorpius' trunk out of the car with thirty minutes to spare and entered the busy station. Leaning casually up against the barrier, Albus and Scorpius slid through it simultaneously and were met with the familiar sight of the Hogwarts Express. Not a moment after he saw it did he hear his own name.

"Al!"

Albus turned and saw Morrison running towards them. He gave him an enormous clap on the back and did the same with Scorpius. "How was your break?" he grinned.

"Good" they both said in unison. "Yours?" Scorpius asked.

"Lame. Didn't do anything. Stayed with stupid family. Sister's getting married."

Albus gave him a shocked look. Morrison rarely mentioned his sister. "Get out! When?"

They continued the conversation as they began walking around the platform. "This summer. July I think. Her boyfriend's not a bad guy, he's just an idiot. Stupid bloke proposed to her and he doesn't even have his own place. He's moving in with us."

"Ouch" Scorpius cringed. "That's got to be awkward. At least you're never there."

"Hey, did you see my family?" Albus asked Morrison as they passed by a few familiar faces, including Eckley and Donovan Hornsbrook, both of whom pointed as they passed.

"Nah, but I only got here five minutes before you did" Morrison replied, ignoring them.

They waited a few more minutes, waving to people as they boarded the train. At around quarter to eleven they finally showed up. Albus watched as his Uncle Ron brought his trunk towards them.

"We'll catch up with you on the train" Scorpius said, and they both left.

"All right Al? Thought we weren't going to show, didn't you?" his uncle said when they were in speaking distance.

"I never lost faith" Albus grinned at him. "What took you guys so long?"

"We were about half way here when I realized I had forgotten your trunk" he said with an apologetic grin. "But I think we made good time".

"Where's my dad?" Albus asked as a whistle sounded around them. He had five minutes to get on the train with his things.

"Work. He's been really busy Al" Uncle Ron replied with a frown. "But that reminds me, he did want me to ask you how your stay went. All in one piece, I see."

"Barely...they almost fed me to the dragon" Albus smirked back.

"Har har" his uncle gave him a sarcastic look. "It's nothing to joke about, I was really worried..."

"Oh come off it" Albus said, grabbing his trunk. "It wasn't half as bad as either of you guys said it would be. I actually had fun. But I got to go, we're boarding."

He wheeled his trunk around and began walking towards the train. "Bye!" he called back to his uncle.

Uncle Ron gave him a lazy wave and yelled "Have a good term" before walking back to the barrier to King's Cross.

Albus boarded the train with seconds to go, a muscular seventh year bringing his trunk up for him. He looked around and saw that the hall was quite empty. He pushed his trunk through the train and peered into windows, finally finding his friends in a compartment near the back.

"Scoot over" he said when he entered. Mirra and Rose had joined them.

"We were just talking about our Christmas breaks. Me and Al took on a fully grown Blast Ended Skrewt, didn't we Al?" Scorpius said with a grin.

"Oh yeah" Albus nodded as he settled himself between Morrison and Scorpius. "Almost ate your wand too. Had to fight it off with our bare hands, remember?"

Mirra and Morrison laughed, but Rose merely made a soft "hmp" from behind the book she was reading. "You two are clearly lying" she said. "Blast Ended Skrewts have been outlawed in Britain since the late 1990's. The person who created them even almost got sent to Azkaban. I heard he got out of it through his ties to the Ministry. That's why his name was never revealed."

Scorpius rolled his eyes. "Well that's us caught isn't it Al? And here I thought no one would see through our lie..."

Everyone except Rose laughed once more. Scorpius, who was apparently in a very chatty mood this train ride, now turned to Mirra. "What about you, Mirra? Fight off any Skrewts?"

Mirra chuckled. "No, no Skrewts for me. I just relaxed with my grandparents. We went out to dinner once or twice. Nothing special. Just a nice, quiet holiday."

She didn't sound in the least bit disappointed. Morrison took this opportunity to interrupt with his holiday story as well, most of which Albus had already heard.

"Did you see my brother by any chance?" he asked Scorpius quietly, just as Mirra was asking Morrison if they would be allowed at his sister's wedding.

"No, but we got on the train pretty quickly, I wouldn't have seen him. Why? Did you need to talk to him?"

"Kind of. He borrowed something from me, that's all."

He didn't want to go into specifics in front of Mirra and Rose-as far as he knew, they had no knowledge of his Invisibility Cloak. Scorpius merely nodded his head to show that he had caught on.

Though he had no reason to use it, Albus missed his Cloak badly. He figured that it was one of those things that you didn't really appreciate having until you went a while without using it. Now that James had hopefully gotten his fix of being invisible, Albus hoped he would get it back when they reached Hogwarts.

"So did you do anything over break?" Mirra asked him, forcing him to snap out of his thoughts. "Other than fighting ferocious creatures, of course."

Albus thought deeply. "Hmm...nope, nothing comes to mind. Unless you count me being right about everything!" he added with a grin.

"Right about what?" Morrison asked him.

"Ares" he said simply. This time Rose put down her book to let them all see that she was rolling her eyes.

"Now *really*. Are you still on about that? Scorpius told me about you thinking he had something to do with that wandmaker being murdered by the way. And guess what? They caught the guy not too long ago."

"Ha! Well we've got concrete proof against that, don't we Scorpius?" Albus exclaimed triumphantly.

Scorpius nodded his head reluctantly. "He's right. Something happened yesterday-"

"I don't want to hear it!" Rose snapped, snatching her book back up. "Honestly, everything's a conspiracy with you guys."

"You'll tell me later, right?" Mirra whispered once Rose starting arguing with Scorpius over something trivial.

"Of course" he whispered back with a smile. She returned it and Albus grinned to himself. He had almost forgotten their conversation before the holiday break. He could tell that not having to worry about things being awkward with her anymore was going to make the next part of term much easier.

The rest of the train ride went by uneventfully, unless one counted Rose accusing Scorpius of stealing her chocolate frog cards an event, and by the time that they had hopped in the carriages taking them back to the castle, Albus was more than ready for bed. One fantastic feast and a few hours later, he was pulling his bed hangings back and wishing his friends goodnight. As he lay in bed staring up at the ceiling, warmed by a magnificent fire and letting the emerald colored walls hypnotize him into sleep, he thought about how good it felt to be back at Hogwarts.

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Thoughts of how wonderful Hogwarts was slowly disappeared over the span of the next week. As much as he missed the castle, he and his fellow classmates found themselves in the same predicament that they had been in after their winter break the previous year; homework was back.

Most teachers wasted no time in assigning grueling essays and classwork to match. Truth be told, Albus was keeping up with classes much better than he had the previous year, what with Scorpius holding his hand through most of the work, but Albus still didn't have half as much free time as he used. So little, in fact, that he didn't get his Invisibility Cloak back until the Thursday after they had returned to the castle.

"What took you so long?" Albus asked his brother as they met in a dark corridor well past midnight.

His brother pulled the Cloak out from his bag and grinned. "I wanted to explore a bit. The Map is good, but this thing is ingenious. I planted dungbombs all over the restricted section of the library right in front of Madam Pince! Granted, I think she's blind anyway, but this thing is still amazing!"

"Yeah it is" Albus said as he grabbed the Cloak from his brother. "And that's why I need it. I nearly got caught by Peeves on the way here. Later, James."

And he pulled the Cloak over his head and returned to his dormitory.

With both homework and classwork doubling in size, Albus felt like he was becoming more and more exhausted every day. He frequently skipped meals to finish last minute assignments and was up well past midnight at least three times a week. But even this was bearable in comparison to the workout that he was now getting almost every other day.

Atticus had booked the Quidditch field for practice so much that Albus doubted very much if the other teams would ever get a chance to use it. Within the second week back from school, Albus had blisters on his fingers from clinging to his broom in the chilly wind. Even without the snow, January was just as cold as December had been.

"Can we take a break?" he yelled to Atticus over the hollering of the wind.

Atticus looked up at him from thirty feet below. "Something broke?" he yelled.

"No, a *break*" he yelled back.

And five minutes later they were in the locker room, rubbing their arms underneath their robes, some, like Albus, nursing their blisters. Osmund Hall, their seventh year Beater, had even conjured up a small fire and placed it in a jar to warm his hands.

"Well, like I've said before, we'll be playing Hufflepuff in this weather" Atticus said as he paced back and forth in front of them, trying to hide that his hands were buried deep within his robes as well. "Our best bet is to hurry and adapt to it. As far as I know, Hufflepuff hasn't gotten a practice in since November. We can catch them off guard."

In between juggling Quidditch practices with his homework, Albus rarely got to speak to his cousin or Mirra. Indeed, he had almost forgotten that he was supposed to tell her what had happened over Christmas break, about his suspicions of Ares being correct. It wasn't until she reminded him during Potions that he got to explain it.

"So what was it you were telling me about?" she asked him as they dropped their own fingernail clippings into their potion. Darvy, rejuvenated from Christmas break and just as strange as ever, was now back to his thought-provoking lessons. Today's involved partners of two making a potion that was to have no less than four things from their body as ingredients.

As spit did nothing, the students were forced to get creative. Thankfully for Albus, he had read enough of his potions book to know that many ingredients found in things like skinned shrivelfig were equally as abundant in things like your own hair and nail clippings. Mirra had predictably partnered with Albus, as he was the best in the class, leaving Scorpius and Morrison and Rose and Eckley to be paired as well. Thankfully, they were in the back this lesson, so no one could hear them.

"Telling you what?" he asked her.

"On the train" she said. She leaned closer. "About the Headmaster" she whispered.

"Oh right!" he said. "Remember when I found that wand in the middle of the Forest? And remember I told you about the guy who was in Ares' office trying to find it? He came over Scorpius' house during break."

She looked more than intrigued. "Well did you give him his wand back?" she asked, her voice heavy with sarcasm.

Albus grinned. "No, there wasn't really any time for that. He was in and out. But me and Scorpius heard him talking to his grandad." His voice dropped to a whisper, and Mirra had to lean close to him to hear. "Apparently he's been meeting with Ares."

"In the Forest?" she asked him, her voice just as low as his own.

"I guess that has to be where they meet" he answered her with a shrug. "Still no clue what they're doing though. But here's what got me thinking it's no good. The guy mentioned a wand."

"And a wandmaker was killed" she finished for him. She suddenly looked very nervous. "You think Ares did it? But didn't they catch the guy?"

"They say they did, but my dad always told me to read every other line in *The Prophet*. They really didn't have a lot of evidence against the guy, just that he had no alibi and that he was in Azkaban before. It definitely wasn't Ares though" he added when he saw the shocked look on her face.

"How do you know?" she asked.

"Because my uncle said that they ruled him out a while ago. He was here at the castle all summer, and that's when it happened. My guess is that it was someone in the Ministry."

She gave him a very uneasy look, and he felt his stomach flop. "Al," she started., "this is really serious. This isn't really a speculation game anymore. You should go to your dad."

He frowned at her. "I wanted to, but he's overworked. You should see him. He looks like he hasn't slept in weeks. And I know he's got more on his mind than this. I don't want him worrying about me too."

"Yeah, but this is probably what's on his mind! He would want to know."

"My uncle told me to stay out of it" Albus told her, which was completely true. "I'm not supposed to know any of this, and I'm sure my dad's figured this all out by now anyway. He's an Auror, isn't he?"

"Yeah..." she said. "I guess. But If Ares does have something to do with this all...I mean, you said it yourself. The guy mentioned that he had a wand. A wandmaker was killed. Did he say if it was a special kind of wand?"

Albus thought deeply. He knew that the wand had had a name. "I don't remember what it was called" he said in all honesty. "But it did have a name. But that doesn't mean we're like...in danger or anything" he said. He was starting to regret having this conversation at all; he did not think that it would upset her.

She bit her lip and stared hastily down at their potion. "Well...well okay. I guess nothing bad has happened so far."

"Right" he said, grinning. "We're still all in once piece, aren't we?"

She opened her mouth to respond, but was cut off. The bell had rang, and she closed her mouth abruptly as it did.

"Put a portion of your potion into your flask, and mark your names on them" Darvy called out lazily through the noise that had erupted from the students packing their things. "Also place the list of ingredients that you used on my desk as you're leaving, remember, there should be no less than *four* body parts-or fluids-on your list."

The class made disgusted noises, but waved good-bye to their professor as they were leaving. "See you later, Al" Mirra said, before hurrying ahead of the crowd to walk with Rose and Eckley.



"Toenails and hair!" Morrison said, a grotesque look on his face as they walked back to their common room. "He's got us making potions out of toenails and hair!"

"I heard Dante Haug used a bit of dead skin" Scorpius said. "Disgusting. What did you and Mirra put in Al? Al?"

But he wasn't listening, he was simply letting his feet follow the other members of his house. She had seemed really worried.

"What's eating you?" Morrison asked him, tapping him on the shoulder to snap him out of his thoughts.

"Huh?" he responded.

"You look like an Inferius" Scorpius said. "You okay?"

Albus didn't tell them what he had discussed with Mirra until they were back in their dormitory, safe from eavesdropping ears. The other two members of the boys dormitory, Bartleby and Dante, were not there, giving Albus room to speak freely. He briefly explained what had happened. Morrison answered back first.

"Oh come on, you've got to be kidding me? She's worried that we're in danger? Seriously? Didn't this girl try and kill us all last year?"

"That's not fair" Albus said. "That was all her parents. But yeah, she seemed really worried. I mean... now that I think on it, she has good reason to be. A murder, a stolen wand. This is bigger than I thought."

They traded their all too familiar knowing glance at each other before Morrison spoke once more. "But it's January. That happened last summer. So what if Ares is meeting his pals in the Forest? Nothing bad's went down. And I doubt they meet everyday. Hagrid would have noticed."

"I know" Albus said. "I don't think they meet everyday either. It probably doesn't even happen often. It's just...why? And with who? The guy, Rookwood, he made it sound like there was a bunch of them."

"Probably bluffing for dramatic effect" Morrison answered; he seemed intent on shooting down everything that Albus threw at him.

"You weren't there" Albus said. "You didn't hear him. He was dead serious when he was talking about people meeting. He even tried getting Scorpius' grandad to tag along!"

"He's right" Scorpius said, speaking up for the first time. He had been lazily levitating things with his wand the whole conversation. "He did. And it was no bluff."

Morrison frowned. "Well, if it really bothers you-and Mirra-you could always write to your dad" he suggested with a shrug.

Albus returned the frown and sat on his bed. He had already decided on that matter. "I can't do that" he said. "I'm not going to put anymore pressure on him. He's got a lot going on without having to worry about me."

"Well you could tell your Uncle Ron" Scorpius said. "He's an Auror too."

"No, it would just get back to my dad, you know that." He placed his hands behind his head and layed down fully. "I'll figure this all out later. Let's just keep it between us for now."

As Albus could have expected, it took less than a week for this plan to fail completely. He had no contact with Mirra at all over the weekend, and thus had no chance to tell her to keep things a secret. He had hoped that her belief in the severity of the situation would get her to keep things to herself, but he was quite mistaken.

The only class that they shared with Gryffindors on Monday was their last period, Defence Against the Dark Arts. Professor Handit was ending the class with a speech that many of Albus' teachers (with the exception of Professor Darvy) seemed intent on giving.; the one about exams.

"As we are now more than half way through term, we have to increase our workload" he told him all. "Second year exams are much more difficult than first year exams. You will be expected to not only have knowledge of what you've learned this year, but a bit of last year too, which is why it is imperative that we review more than ever."

"Sir, we did fine last year!" said a boy from Gryffindor with straw colored hair.

"Yeah, I got like ninety five percent on my exam in this class" Donovan Hornsbrook added smugly.

"Well that's very good for you, Mr. Hornsbrook, but not everyone in this class was so lucky as to do perfectly on the writing portions of their exams. Some barely scrapped by."

Albus saw Morrison grin sheepishly and sink a bit in his chair.

"These tests will not be taken as lightly this year. There's no charity now that you are second year students" Professor Handit continued. "I expect you all to study every night, and we will be having quite a few quizzes coming up..."

The bell rang, and Albus was one of the first to leave. He was not that worried about his exams. Not only were they months away, but he had done fine last year, and he had been quite worried then. He walked alongside Scorpius and Morrison, who were discussing the ridiculous amount of homework that Professor Bellinger had assigned them, but was stopped when he heard three words that always made the hair on his neck jump when said it succession.

"Albus Severus Potter!"

He spun around and looked at the crowd of students wildly, expecting to see his mother. He was sure that was her voice. And who else knew his middle name? But the sight of Rose approaching him told him all that he needed to know. She was moving her way through the crowd of students, a nervous looking Mirra behind her. She was biting her fingernails. Albus never noticed how much she did that.

"Albus Potter I cannot believe you!" Rose said when she reached him.

She was so loud that two or three students who were passing looked back. "Good thing she's not making a scene" Albus heard Morrison mutter to Scorpius, who chuckled.

"We could be in *danger*, and you're not going to tell anyone!" Rose continued, just as loud.

"Would you keep it down?" he said through gritted teeth, and he dragged her off to the end of the corridor. Their friends followed them. "I thought you didn't believe any of that huh? Ares is just having tea and crumpets with his pals, remember?" he said triumphantly. Mad though he was that she was being loud, he at least had the satisfaction of letting her know she was wrong.

"I don't believe any of it" she said, and Albus was thankful that her voice had returned to normal. "In fact, I'm one hundred percent sure that you're wrong."

"Well then I don't see what the big deal-"

"But *if* you were right," she cut him off, "then there is a *murderer* in our school!"

"I never said that!" he said, glancing up at Mirra, who was now tugging on Rose's robes.

"He never said that" she told her friend. "He said he thought it was someone else. And you said you weren't going to tell anyone I told you!"

Rose ignored her. "If what Mirra told me is true, you have evidence that someone who lives in this castle-our Headmaster no less-is responsible for the murder of a very famous wandmaker. And there's an innocent man in Azkaban because of it!"

Albus frowned. He had forgotten all about Arvin Macklethaster. Though he did not know him, he was almost positive that he was innocent, and he had the proof to get him out too. "Look, we don't know anything for sure" he told her. "Back me up guys" he muttered to his friends, but Scorpius was staring up at the ceiling whispering, while Morrison stared at the ground picking at his fingernails.

"We know that whoever you heard talking knows that Ares is up to something. Now I'm not sure what else he said, but if he made any mention of a wand-a wand that could have been stolen from a very famous wandmaker after his *murder*-then we need to report that. Especially if someone

associated with said murder is four floors above us!" Rose said, pointing at the ceiling of the hallway. Her face was a deep scarlet, matching her hair.

Albus wiped sweat from his forehead. Mirra gave him a very apologetic look. He knew that it was not her fault; he had pried. He should have stayed out of it like his uncle suggested, but now that he was on to something, it was only natural that Rose, of all people, was going to make a big deal about it.

"This isn't some mystery for you to solve" Rose continued, taking advantage of his silence. "This is big. I'm going to write to your dad and tell him what you heard-"

"No!" he shouted, and he held out his hands as though to physically stop her. The hallway had long since cleared; it was only the five of them now at the end of it. "You can't. I can't have my dad worrying about this, he's so busy already."

"Well then I'm writing my dad" she said defiantly.

"No, you can't do that either. You know it will get back to my dad. I'll think of something."

"Well then I'm telling Neville" she said.

"No!" he shouted once more. Neville was close friends with his father. That would be just as worse as telling his uncle.

"Someone has to know Albus!" she said, and she placed her hands on her hips and blew her long red hair out of face, looking more like his mother than ever. "Neville's Head of Gryffindor House, he'll know what to do."

"Look I'll...I'll tell Darvy!" Albus spat out.

"Darvy?" Rose said, and Albus thought he heard Morrison ask the same thing.

"Darvy will know what to do" he continued. "He knows all about what's going on with Ares already. He follows him into the Forest!"

She narrowed her eyes at him, deep in thought. He stared back at her for a moment before continuing. "And Neville follows him too, so it's no different. Only Darvy will be more secretive. Look, I'll go to him after dinner and tell him what I know. He'll have plenty of answers, and if he thinks something's up, he'll do something about it."

She continued staring at him for a moment before finally saying "Fine. But you had better do it today."

"I will!" he said. "After dinner..."

What followed was easily one of the worst dinners that Albus had ever had at Hogwarts. The food was still delicious, he was simply too annoyed to eat it.

"Are you really going to go and tell Darvy?" Morrison asked him through a mouth full of hot beef stew.

Albus nodded. "I guess I have to. Otherwise she's going to tell Neville. And I know that'll just get back to my dad."

"But...you can't tell Darvy. He's a mad man! The guy is clinically insane!" Morrison said, after swallowing another spoon full.

"He's not a 'mad man'" Albus said. "He's smart enough to tail Ares isn't he? He caught onto this a while ago. I suppose I probably would've ended up going to him anyway. I really do want answers."

"You shouldn't have told Mirra" Scorpius said. "You knew she would blab to Rose, and you knew Rose would make a big deal about it."

Albus frowned. "I thought she didn't even believe in any of this. And now that she's as good as admitted that I was right, she's *mad* at me over it! What the heck is that?"

Scorpius merely shrugged. "Women" he said.

They finished their dinner (Albus having only managed to help himself to a single slice of buttered bread) before departing for the dungeons. "You guys going with me?" he asked his friends.

"I don't see why not" Morrison answered, and Scorpius nodded his head in approval.

They made a detour in the dungeons and worked their way to the potions classroom. "Think Darvy will even be back from dinner?" Morrison asked as they came to the door.

"I didn't even see him there" Albus said. He gave the door a loud knock. There was no answer. He frowned and knocked again. "But I guess he's not here either" he said.

"Something tells me Rose isn't going to be satisfied with that answer" Morrison said.

Albus heaved a heavy sigh. "You're right" he said. "He's probably back in his office and can't hear us." He opened the door and entered the dark classroom.

"Isn't this breaking and entering?" Scorpius asked, though he seemed unconcerned.

"I don't recall breaking anything" Albus replied as he walked through the classroom. It looked just as plain as it had the last time that he had entered it without permission; the time that he had

found the wand in the Forest. With no cauldrons set up, it looked horribly boring. He walked to the door behind the professor's desk and knocked on it. Within seconds, it was answered.

Professor Darvy had opened the door so abruptly that Albus was knocked off of his feet. Darvy reached out and grabbed him before he hit the ground. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine" Albus said. He saw Darvy close his office door behind him.

"What are you boys doing here?" he asked them all. "You're not in trouble, are you?"

They shook their heads.

"Certainly you don't need tutoring- well one of you might" he said, and Albus saw Morrison give another sheepish grin. "Did you need to see me about something?"

"Erm...yeah we did" Albus said, backing up to the tables where they normally worked, giving Darvy room to leave from behind his desk. He didn't, and instead he took a seat at it, looking very teacher-like as he did so. "We didn't bother you did we?" Albus asked him, suddenly feeling guilty.

"No, no, not at all, not at all" the professor said. His blonde hair was just as ruffled and disorderly as usual, and the mad glint in his blue eyes just as noticeable. Despite his psychotic appearance however, he look concerned. "Is everything all right?" he asked.

Albus sat down on the table behind him; Morrison and Scorpius remained standing, but moved closer. "I..erm... I actually wanted to ask you something. Well tell you something too" he said. He had decided that he was going to start small and work his way up. "I was- we were- a bit worried about the Headmaster" he finished.

Professor Darvy gave all three of them a look of surprise. "Headmaster Ares? Why are you worried about him?"

"Well we're not...we're not worried about him, we're just worried about like-" he broke off. He knew he would have to word it better.

"The Headmaster sneaks into the Forest a lot and we think he's up to no good" Morrison said.

"Thanks" Albus said, half sarcastically. "But yeah, he's right."

Albus watched as the potions professor surveyed them with interest. "What do you think he's up to?" he asked them after a moment.

Albus shrugged, he had not been expecting to be asked a question in return. "We don't know...we think he's meeting with people."

Darvy continued to survey them. After a moment, he closed his eyes, apparently in deep thought. Albus had the strange feeling that he had fallen asleep. But a few seconds later, his eyes were open. "Well I must say, I'm very impressed. You three kids figure this out all on your own?" he asked.

Albus nodded, trying not to show that he had enjoyed the compliment. Morrison and Scorpius nodded too.

"Well you're certainly on to something. The Headmaster is meeting people in the Forbidden Forest, though as to why, I cannot be exactly sure. Hence why I've been following him."

"You've been following him?" Albus asked, trying to sound convincing. "Did you get anything from it?"

"Only that he's meeting with a group of some shady people. But they never leave the Forest. I can only assume that the Headmaster has personal business to attend to, and being as he has to stay within the castle, is forced to conduct it here. Spy though I have, I have not gathered much; too many enchantments. But you are in no danger, I assure you."

Albus grinned-that was exactly what he needed to be able to tell Rose. Now that he had a satisfactory answer for her, he could press his Potions professor for more details. The curiosity that he had acquired over the past few months was now back. "Do you think that they're dark wizards?" he asked.

Scorpius looked over at him. Albus knew what he was thinking. They had their answer; they were in no danger. They should take it and leave. But Albus wasn't going to waste this opportunity, not when Darvy was so willing to give him answers.

"Dark wizards?" Darvy asked him with interest. "Well I don't think that anyone can be sure of that. I mean, how would you know? They certainly have not performed any dark magic, I would have seen it. I don't think you can really judge a wizard on that, regardless of how much you think you know about them. I mean, you could trust someone, befriend them, and never know that they are anything of the sort, even if they are. Their activities however, seem to be far from illicit. And like I said, you are in no danger."

Albus stared down at the ground for a few seconds. He had more questions to ask, but wasn't sure how. He figured that being blunt was already working, he might as well continue doing so. "My dad said that the Headmaster was in Azkaban? Do you think...do you think that maybe he's meeting in secret so that he doesn't go back? Maybe if they're not dark wizards, they're still up to no good?"

He stopped there to catch his breath. Professor Darvy continued to survey him with interest. "Yes" he said after a moment. "The Headmaster has been in Azkaban, and his secrecy may be

due to not wanting to go back." He looked extremely nervous, as though he were trying to choose his next words carefully.

Albus looked over at Morrison and Scorpius, both of whom had slowly inched themselves closer.

"I see no point in lying to you, Albus" Darvy said. "You are very bright. You catch on very quickly. But I believe that you may have the wrong gist of things. I have not followed the Headmaster in every time he has went to the Forest, but during the times I have, I have noticed a very peculiar crowd. Some of them-at least three that I have seen-have been suspected of using dark magic in the past."

"So if Ares is meeting with them-" but Darvy held up a hand to stop him.

"Let me finish" he said. "Headmaster Ares used to be an Auror, if you did not know. He does not miss Azkaban. But sometimes, I get the strange feeling that he misses being an Auror. It would not surprise me in the least if he was still after dark wizards."

Albus frowned. "I don't understand" he said.

"What I'm trying to say" Darvy began, and he leaned forward a bit as he continued. "Is that the Headmaster may be attending these 'meetings' to do exactly what I am doing; spy."

Albus continued to think about it.

"You are bright, as you have already proven" Darvy said. "You can figure it out..."

But it was Scorpius who spoke up. "You think that the Headmaster is undercover? Meeting with these wizards to get information?"

"Precisely" Professor Darvy said with a grin. "It dawned on me quite some time ago that if he planned on doing anything bad, he would have already done it. The Headmaster-as you said Albus-was in Azkaban. He is in the perfect position to gain these wizard's trusts. Whether they are 'dark ' or not I am unsure, but by entering the castle grounds at night, they have already proven that they hold the law in little regard."

"Do you think that the Ministry put him up to it?" Albus asked quickly.

Professor Darvy merely shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. Either way, his intentions seem good. Of course, I could be completely wrong, and he's plotting to kill us all. "

He gave a short, loud cackle that sounded quite maniacal. Albus even saw Morrison move a few inches back.

Darvy continued. "But I think that I am right. It makes more sense; he would not risk another stint in Azkaban."



"Why was he in there in the first place?" Albus asked.

Darvy shrugged once more. "I cannot say. But boys I must make something quite clear to you. If I am right in assuming that the Headmaster has good intentions-and I believe that I am-it is imperative that you tell no one about this, especially not your father or anyone at the Ministry."

Albus gave him a shocked look. "Why not?"

"The Ministry does not seem to be focused on this, what with so much more going on. The Headmaster, if he is playing vigilante, has managed to gain these people's trust. They do not meet often, but when they do they seem comfortable, I have seen them. Getting the Ministry involved would blow his cover. Just take my advice on this one."

Albus nodded his head. He understood. "Okay" he said. "We won't tell."

"Good" Professor Darvy said. "But thank you for coming to me with this; I did not expect it, but I am glad all the same."

"Professor, do you think that this has anything to do with that wandmaker being murdered last summer?" Albus asked him. He had not forgotten that Rookwood, the man who had visited the Malfoy Manor, had mentioned a certain type of wand.

At this, Professor Darvy gave them a very stern glance. Once more he seemed deep in thought. "I can certainly see why you would make the connection, but no I don't. To be quite honest, I don't believe that the Ministry has the culprit. Whoever did murder that poor wandmaker got away, and whoever they are, if they were smart enough to avoid the Ministry, they are certainly smart enough to avoid secret meetings at a very well known school. No, I think that the Ministry simply lost track of a murderer. Unless, of course, you boys know something to the contrary?"

"Well, we heard someone mention-" Scorpius started, but Albus cut him off.

"Nope, we were just curious" he said. Professor Darvy continued staring at them intently, as though pressing them for information wordlessly. But Albus stayed silent. Darvy looked just as tired as his father. He seemed content with what he knew about Ares, and Albus was not going to take that away and give him stress, not when they were almost certain that it was unrelated. Whatever wand that Ares possessed, it had nothing to do with the famous wandmaker.

"I do have something else to ask you though, Professor" Albus said.

"Ask away" Darvy replied.

"You said that the Headmaster has no intention of going back to Azkaban...but he *is* meeting with dark wizards. Or at least, wizards who might be doing dark magic. How do you know he's not doing it too? How do you know he's not just doing it secretly to avoid Azkaban?"

He knew that he had already asked a similar question, but he had not received a straight answer, and his dislike for Ares made hearing one a top priority.

Professor Darvy pondered it for a second. "I do not know Headmaster Ares well" he said. "But I know that he hates dark magic."

"But just because he hates it doesn't mean anything" Albus said.

At this, Professor Darvy leaned in closer to him, so much that Morrison moved back to where he was to hear. "Doesn't it Albus?" he asked, his voice barely more than a whisper. The mad glint in his eye now more prominent than ever. "It is what we hate that shows what we truly are."

Albus barely had a moment to think about it before the Potions professor rose from behind his desk. "But you must really be getting back now" he said, running his hand through his disheveled blonde hair.

"Right, it's late" Albus said. "Thanks for...telling us all of this."

"You're not as worried, are you?" the professor asked.

All three of them shook their heads.

"Good" Darvy said, clapping his hands together. "Now you three be off. Just remember-tell no one what we spoke of, not even your father."

"I won't" Albus said. "None of us will."

They left the Potions classroom in silence, and didn't begin talking again until they were halfway back to their dormitory.

"Well that was interesting" Scorpius said. "He is a bit crazy. But I'm glad we have some solid answers to give Rose. We're in no danger."

"Yeah, and I guess Ares having no connection to the wandmaker is kind of a bummer. But it makes sense. Your uncle said it wasn't him" Morrison said to Albus.

"Yeah you're right. Flew off the handle there. I guess murder is kind of big. Whatever Ares is up to is smaller. Think he's really out to catch some dark wizards?" he asked both of them.

They both shrugged. "Probably. Makes more sense than if he's trying to help them. The way Rookwood made it sound, it didn't seem that way though" Scorpius said. "But I guess Ares is just good at acting. Darvy must be pretty smart to spy on them without getting caught though, even if he is a tad insane."

"Now what makes you guys say that?" Albus asked as they neared the stone wall that led to their dormitory. "I know he looks it, but he doesn't seem crazy or anything."

Morrison rolled his eyes. "Please, did you hear what he said? About hating things making you who you are? What kind of crap is that?"

"I kind of agree with it" Albus said. He had thought about it as they were walking back. He hated Eckley, a Gryffindor. And he was a Slytherin, wasn't he? "I think Darvy just has a weird way of looking at things, but when it comes down to it, he sees the same thing."

"Are you really not going to tell your dad any of this?" Scorpius asked just as they reached the wall.

"Not going to say a word" Albus said. He had always respected Darvy-especially since he found out that he was tailing Ares. The knowledge that he was willing to share his information with Albus upon request only increased his respect for him. He was being treated as an adult, someone who had valuable thoughts that could be shared. "I'm going to keep quiet. We owe it to him" he said.

Morrison shrugged. "It's up to you." He stared at the wall. "Parselmouth" he said, and the door slid open, revealing their comfortable common room.

Albus did not speak again until they reached their actual dormitory. "But I still want to know what's up with Ares' wand" he said with a grin.

Scorpius buried his head in his hands and layed on his bed. Morrison just gave a sigh.

"Of course" he said.

## Chapter 13 : The Dragonfang Wand

When Albus was younger, he remembered his father once coming home from work and using the term "swamped". He remembered wondering, if only vaguely, what the difference was between being "swamped" and simply working a lot. As January inched closer to February, Albus thought that he had found his answer.

Free time was once a very precious gift at Hogwarts-especially during the latter half of the year. But now Albus found it to be completely non-existent. When he wasn't working his way through countless homework assignments in preparation for his exams, he was doing one of two things-flying, or sleeping.

Atticus had booked the Quidditch Pitch every other day in anticipation for the match against Hufflepuff, which would occur on the third of February. Their training had intensified since Gryffindor had demolished Ravenclaw the week before. They had won by a margin of three hundred points.

"Three hundred points!" Atticus called out to him during a particularly windy training session. "Remember that Al, three hundred points. You've got to catch that Snitch at precisely the right moment!"

"I know how much they won by!" Albus snapped back as he zoomed across the field, the harsh wind smacking him against the face as he barely dodged a Bludger.

Truth be told, Albus was twice as nervous for the upcoming match than he was against his brother and Gryffindor. He now had a reputation to keep. Unlike James, who had burst through the doors of Hogwarts proudly exclaiming that he was the son of a famous hero, Albus had slipped through the cracks of popularity, even amongst most in his own house. Whereas James was known for playing pranks and dueling in corridors, Albus had the uncomfortable feeling that he had been written off as the "bad apple" of the Potter family since the day he was sorted. Winning two Quidditch games in a row would give him a boost; a name for himself. He was determined to prove that beating his brother before had been no fluke.

While Quidditch was taking top priority, second year students were met with a new form of stress. It was time for them to choose which classes they would be taking the next year, in addition to the ones that they already had.

"What the hell is Arithmancy?" Bartleby Bing, a fellow Slytherin in Albus' year was saying the morning that they got the sign up sheet. "Is that like cooking? They teach cooking here?"

"It's the study of mathematics and its magical properties" Scorpius said from next to Albus; his paper was propped up against his glass of orange juice. "Heard it's pretty tough."

"I'm thinking of taking Divination" Morrison said, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "I mean really? Seeing the future? What could possibly be more useful than that?"

"Ahh don't take it" Albus said as he scanned his own paper. "My dad told me it's a waste of a subject."

"Do you already know what you're taking?" Morrison asked him.

"One of them" Albus responded. He had decided on Care For Magical Creatures the second that he had seen the paper, as he knew Hagrid taught it. With a pang of guilt, he realized that he hadn't talked to Hagrid in weeks, and made a mental note to visit him.

Though Albus had his thoughts on his classes for the next year, it was nothing compared to the stress that his current classes had been bringing him recently. Maybe it was his inability to juggle Quidditch with classwork, but Scorpius was now "helping" him with nearly all of his homework, and he frequently found himself skipping entire questions on tests. In fact, the only class he even felt comfortable with was Potions.

The Friday before the Quidditch match against Hufflepuff had Albus doing one of his most challenging lessons yet in Darvy's class. The students were asked to make an antidote for ashwinder poison-blindfolded.

"It is important that you learn the texture and other characteristics of your ingredients!" Darvy called out from somewhere in the room. "Many items that you use are much too similar in appearance; you must learn to correctly identify everything that you use by even the most subtle of hints!"

"Is this frog spleen?" Mirra asked him; they were partnered again. Albus could hear Morrison and Scorpius bickering just a few feet away, though the blindfolds that had been placed around them made it quite impossible to see.

Albus felt around and took what she was holding. He juggled it in his hands. "Way too rubbery to be frog spleen" he told her. "And it isn't slimy enough either." He weighed it in his hands. "I have no idea what this is" he told her in all honesty. "Where did you get this?"

"Off the floor" he heard her giggle.

He grinned. "Well that explains it. Do you even know what I'm holding?"

She laughed. "Nope. By the way, what classes are you signed up for, for next year?"

He dropped the rubbery item on what he thought was the table-only to hear a large splash in his cauldron. "Care for Magical Creatures, definitely" he said. "Haven't decided on the other one yet. You?"

Though he couldn't see her, he knew that she had given a shrug. "Still no idea, looking over the classes later today. Probably going to take whatever Rose is taking."

Albus cringed. He had had little contact with his cousin since he and his friends had explained to her that Darvy had assured them that there was nothing to worry about. True, this was mostly because of his hectic schedule, but Albus also had the strange suspicion that Rose had felt weak in letting him know that she was worried; she was probably not very keen on spending as much time with him.

"Excellent, well done you two" Darvy's voice came from what sounded like centimeters away. Albus could hear him sniffing the potion.

"Thank you Professor" Albus said, unsure of which direction to say it in.

The bell rang soon after, and Albus removed his blindfold and packed up his things as the class bustled by him.

"No homework tonight!" Professor Darvy called out. "Enjoy the game tomorrow! Good luck Albus!" he called as Albus walked by his desk.

Morrison and Scorpius caught up with him in the hall leading back to the Slytherin common room.

"Darvy seem a bit nicer to you?" Scorpius asked him as they approached the stone wall.

Albus shrugged. "Not really, but he's certainly acting like we never talked to him though. Which is probably for the better really. We're supposed to be good little kids about it, aren't we?"

"Baron" Morrison said to the blank wall, and within seconds they were in their dormitory, Scorpius spread out on his bed bouncing a ball off of the ceiling.

"I do want to know what's going on with Ares and that wand though" Albus said as he sat on his bed, face supported by his hands. "Darvy never told us to let that one go..."

Morrison rolled his eyes, and Albus understood why-he had not let the subject go since they had left Darvy's office that day. Even with his full schedule, Albus had spent many an hour in the Room of Requirement, attempting to unravel the mystery of Ares and the wand that he possessed.

The Room of Requirement was a room that he and Scorpius had discovered (or more accurately, heard about from their parents) the year before. Though normally a room of great use, Albus' inability to be specific had made it near useless. As he could not remember the name of the wand, the most that he could do was ask the room to give him books full of powerful wands from across the centuries. Albus had skimmed through maybe five of the millions of books that the

room had given him before realizing that he would have to know more about it before getting any information on it.

"Well, chances are the wand is more dangerous than it is famous" Scorpius said as the ball bounced off of his head.

"How so?" Albus asked him.

"Well my grandad got real serious when it was mentioned. But if I can't remember what it was called, it probably isn't well known. I've read a lot of books on wandlore. I'm almost positive it began with a 'D' though."

"Yeah but Ares is supposed to be a pretty powerful guy anyway, isn't he? Ex-Auror and all. What's he doing with an extra dangerous wand? Why bother?" Albus asked him.

Morrison sighed, while Scorpius merely gave a shrug. "Maybe it makes Unforgivable curses easier?" he said thoughtfully.

"Unforgivable what?" both Albus and Morrison asked at the same time.

"The Unforgiva- wait, you guys are kidding right?"

They both shook their heads, and Scorpius sat up from his bed, grinning. "I can see why you wouldn't know" he said, indicating Morrison. "But Al- really? You're serious?"

Albus narrowed his eyes. Though Scorpius was one of his best friends, he hated it when Scorpius knew something about the magical world that he didn't. History of Magic dates and the names of certain spells were fine, but he could tell from the smirk on Scorpius' face that he was missing out on something big.

"Yes I'm serious!" he snapped. "So what are they then?"

Scorpius held up three fingers. "Well there's three of them, but wow- I figured you'd know. Didn't you wonder where your dad got his scar?" He looked genuinely shocked.

"From a curse" Albus responded, searching his memory for if his father had ever used the term 'Unforgivable'.

"Spit it out already!" Morrison said. "I'm interested too!".

"Right, anyway" Scorpius continued, "there's three Unforgivable Curses. The first one is the Imperius Curse. It lets you like- take over someone's mind. Like make them do stuff. You can fight it though. Kind of hard to explain. Second one is the Cruciatus Curse. Hit someone with that, and it's pure pain. Will keep you up for weeks afterwards. Like getting stabbed with a thousand knives."

Albus saw Morrison shuffle slightly from next to him. "And the third?" Albus asked, his curiosity now at its peak.

Scorpius gave him an uncomfortable look. "*Avada Kedavra*" he said quietly.

"Avada Kawhat?" Morrison asked.

"*Avada Kedavra*" Scorpius repeated. "Instant death. Just a flash of green light, and you're a goner. That's what gave your dad that scar Al."

"How? If it kills you?" Albus asked.

"No one knows" Scorpius said. "You think your dad got famous for beating Voldemort? He was famous years before that-got that scar when he was one, somehow made it rebound and hit Voldemort instead. That's why he was so famous. You really didn't know that?"

Albus didn't answer. He remembered asking about the scar when he was younger. His father had said he was hit with a terrible curse. He remembered asking why he only had one set of grandparents. He had received the same answer. Albus had been encouraged to ask questions when he was younger, but he always had the strange idea that his father had omitted something, as though his father was trying to block the really bad stuff out. So was that how his grandparents had died? Is that why his father was so famous? A terrible flash of green light?"

"I don't believe that" he said after a moment. "A spell that kills you one hit? Impossible. Why would anyone ever use anything else in a duel? Kind of makes other spells a bit pointless, doesn't it?"

"Doesn't mean it's not real" Scorpius argued. "And besides, I hear you have to be like a really accomplished wizard to use it. Takes a lot of raw power; a lot of real skill. I'm sure most wizards couldn't use it if they tried."

"You know an awful lot about this" Morrison said, and Scorpius went pink.

"Just some stuff I picked up from around my house" he mumbled. "But now that I think on it, if Ares is an ex-Auror, and used to be a teacher, he probably doesn't need an extra special wand for that. It must be unique. Do something other wands can't do. Right Al?"

Albus was still staring blankly at the wall. He did not know why, but he suddenly felt scared. Was it that easy to die?

"Look, let's just forget about this" Morrison said, seeing the look on Albus' face. "You've got bigger stuff to worry about than some wand that Ares may or may not have."

Albus turned to him. "Like what?" he said, distracted.

"You've got a Quidditch game to win tomorrow" he said.



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Albus awoke the next day sweating. His nerves about the upcoming game were in some ways worse, and in some ways better than those of his first. The feelings of discomfort were gone; he knew that he was talented enough to play. But he was now a minor celebrity in his house, and losing would make him the one true "Potter fluke."

Still early in the morning, he made his way down to breakfast without his friends. The sun was only just coming up, and as he entered the Great Hall for breakfast he found himself at peace with the dim light. He was the only Slytherin up. The Hufflepuff Quidditch team was already there in its entirety. None of them were eating, though they all gave him a disdainful look. Albus was used to this; he knew it had nothing to do with being on a rival team. Every Slytherin got those looks from time to time.

He helped himself to pancakes and orange juice and waited for the rest of his team to arrive. After fifteen minutes, only Atticus had showed up.

"You're up early" Atticus said with a grin as he took his seat next to him.

"Just a bit nervous" Albus replied. "You look tired" he added, indicating the bags under Atticus' eyes.

He shrugged. "Prefect duty last night. Up until one, maybe two in the morning. Had the Headmaster not let me off I'd probably still be patrolling" he said. He stifled a yawn. "I don't expect the rest of the team to be here for a bit. Want to go over some strategies?"

"Yeah- wait, what? Ares was up? You saw him?"

Atticus nodded. "Down on the first floor. I guess he was patrolling. I bumped into him and he told me I could go to bed, that he had it from there. Lucky me too, I needed my rest."

"Yeah...yeah lucky you" Albus said under his breath, not sure of what he was saying. Ares had been out again last night. Did Darvy tail him? Was he joined in the Forest once more?

"You okay mate?" Atticus said from what seemed like very far away. "You're out of it."

Albus' eyes snapped up from the ground. He shook it off. "Yeah" he said. "Just nervous about the game."

"Well not eating won't help!" Atticus said, apparently ignoring the pile of pancakes on Albus' plate. He quickly tossed bacon onto a separate plate and pushed it towards him. "I can't have my star going hungry before a game!"

An hour and several strips of bacon later, Albus sat in the locker room with his team, half listening as Atticus rambled about playing strategies.

"Hufflepuff's Beaters are small, but speedy. They can get to a Bludger twice as fast as we can, and that D'Von Deneve has some of the best aim I've seen on a third year. Don't stay on one side of the field, move around..."

Albus tuned it out. He had missed it! He knew that Darvy had told him to stay out of it, knew that he shouldn't be involved at all, but he knew-somehow-that finding out what Ares did in the Forest would lead him to the mysterious wand that he had acquired, the wand that even Scorpius' grandfather feared. If only he knew when Ares was going out to the Forest. If only he could get the map from James...

"Now Gryffindor blew Ravenclaw out, so if we want to be far enough ahead in the standings that we get an automatic final match, we have to win by about two hundred points here. So Al, stay on the outskirts until we're fifty points up, *then* catch the snitch, okay?"

"Got it, get the map from James" he said, lost in his thoughts. His team stared at him. "I- I mean, catch the Snitch when we're fifty points up" he said quickly. He could see Osmund Hall, one of the Beaters, surveying him with interest from across the room.

"What map? What are you talking about Potter?" Atticus demanded, sounding much more captain like than he had at breakfast.

"Nothing- never mind it" Albus stammered.

Atticus continued to stare at him for another moment before continuing his rant. "Anyway, Hufflepuff's Keeper sprained his wrist not too long ago. He's probably all patched up, but Beaters, you know where to aim..."

Within minutes, they were down on the Quidditch Pitch, taking their positions amidst hundreds of cheering fans. As Albus took his place on the Pitch, he shook all thoughts of Ares and any wand he might have from his head. He couldn't be distracted. He had a reputation.

The whistle sounded, and he kicked off. He flew through the air, wind nearly knocking him off course as he did so. He had shot up so quickly that he couldn't hear anything else, but he knew that the sounds of the commentators slander would soon reach his ears.

Dimitrius Parks was a seventh year Hufflepuff Prefect who made it a point to accuse every single Slytherin move as a cheat. Albus was normally forced to sit on the side lines as his team was verbally bashed, but now he would have the opportunity to experience it first hand. In fact, as he was playing Hufflepuff, he had the strange feeling it would only intensify.

"And Hufflepuff takes the Quaffle!" Parks voice rang out through the wind. "That's Fischer who's got it now, drops it to Loderin, aiming for the Keeper- but he's blocked- nice Bludger from Hall, possibly tampered with-"

Albus heaved a sigh as three fourths of the crowd murmured with agreement at Parks' words. Slytherin was always "cheating."

He flew around in circles for the first several minutes of the game, pleased to note that Atticus' constant blabbering about poor weather conditions had been for nothing; the skies were the clearest that they had been in weeks.

"Thirty to nil Slytherin" Parks said after a few minutes. The majority of the crowd groaned. Albus grinned at his team's lead, then saw it- the Snitch, hovering right near the Hufflepuff Seeker.

Albus slowly flew near him. The Hufflepuff Seeker had not noticed the Snitch hovering inches above his head. He knew that he could not catch it though, Albus had been told not to do that until they were fifty points up. Instead, he aimed to separate the opposition from his goal.

Albus shot forward like a bullet, his broom taking him across the sky so fast he knew that he was little more than an emerald blur. The Hufflepuff Seeker saw him and gave a yell before diving at least twenty feet. Albus came to a stop and watched as the Snitch disappeared from view.

"The Slytherin Seeker rushes into the Hufflepuff Seeker" Parks was commenting. "Not entirely sure that's legal, he could have really injured him, but either way an effective tactic in separating him from the Snitch..."

Albus rolled his eyes. "Just ignore him" Damian Peesley said as he passed, before grabbing the Quaffle from Connie Orik and speeding towards the goal post.

But twenty minutes later, Albus was still ignoring him. Slytherin was still only up by thirty, it was now one hundred and twenty to ninety. He was growing restless and sick of Parks' jabs. Twice he had been forced to try and knock the Hufflepuff Seeker off of his broom to prevent him from catching the Snitch.

"Time out" Albus called. The whistle sounded, and Albus was on the ground within seconds, surrounded by his team.

"There's been way too many close calls" he said. It was weird speaking as though he were the captain; he was still the shortest and youngest on the team.

"Their Keeper is too good" Atticus admitted. "He's blocked half of what we've thrown at him."

"Look, next time I see the snitch, I'm catching it" Albus said, and the team began talking amongst themselves. "I don't care if we're up by more than fifty or not, I'd rather we win a close game than fumble near the end and lose."

Atticus nodded. "Give us five minutes to get up by fifty. Beaters, aim right for their Chasers, get us possession of the Quaffle. Al, after five minutes, do what you have to do, regardless."

Albus nodded. The whistle sounded and he flew back into the air. He circled the Pitch as the game continued around him.

"We're ready to resume the game after a Slytherin time out" Parks' voice echoed around the stadium. The crowd was still cheering fiercely. "Sanders takes the Quaffle..."

Moments later Atticus had scored, and they were now up by forty. Albus continued to tail the Hufflepuff Seeker, who was growing increasingly agitated at how quickly Albus was able to cut him off.

Booing came from around the stadium a few seconds later, and Albus knew that this meant Slytherin had scored again. They were fifty points up. It was time to act.

Ignoring the shouts of the crowd and Parks' accusations of Slytherin cheating, Albus rose high above the rest of the players to scan the field. He let his eyes wander around, searching for the glimmer of gold that he was now allowed to catch. He glanced past the Gryffindor stands, then the Ravenclaw, and saw the stands in which some members of the staff sat. He saw Ares sitting in the back row, talking very fast to someone who looked familiar...

He froze in mid air. Rookwood, the man whom Albus had now met twice, was back at Hogwarts. He was much too far away to even imagine what they were saying, but he could tell from how closely they were leaning into each other that their conversation was hushed. As if on cue, they both stood up and began walking down the stairs back to the grounds. He watched, hovering in silence, and realized that they were going into the Forest.

"ALBUS GET MOVING!"

He spun around, snapped from his concentration. Atticus was hovering a few feet under him, frantically pointing at the other side of the field, where the Hufflepuff Seeker had gone into a spectacular dive. He saw the Snitch so low that it may have been touching the ground.

He accelerated, pushing his broom forward and silently cursing himself for having stopped paying attention to the game. The Hufflepuff Seeker was closer, but he was faster. He zoomed across the field, slowly descending as he did so, weaving his way through players so quickly that a Hufflepuff nearly fell off of his broom.

"Come on, come on" he muttered as he pushed further on his broom. He ducked his head low to avoid a Bludger that may have decapitated him at the speed he was going. He closed in, he was now the same distance from the Snitch as his rival. He stretched out his hand-

They collided. Albus felt his head bang against what could have been an elbow or a knee. He had been going so fast that when they made contact they both spun around. He flailed his arms wildly and heard the Hufflepuff Seeker yell, though it was barely audible over the noise of the crowd.

He slid across the ground and felt his broomstick roll beside him. He could see stars. He kept his fist closed, the beating of the Snitch's wings irritating his lifeless fingers.

"Slytherin wins!" he heard Parks say, and unlike last time, he did not sound disappointed, but rather infuriated.

Albus grinned at the bitterness in his voice just as his team swarmed around him. Atticus and Osmund Hall hoisted him up. He could see the Hufflepuff players marching off the field, heads hung low. The applause of his own house was doing little to drown out the booing of the other three houses, but it was there, he could hear it.

He released the Snitch and looked into the Gryffindor stands. Most of them had left, but he could see someone standing quite still in the front row. His brother, complete with a cocky smirk and ruffled hair, was giving him the thumbs up.

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Albus was the hero of Slytherin house for the next few days. The Quidditch final was set. Gryffindor against Slytherin in a rematch from the previous the year, in which there had been no victor. It was hard to see who was getting more attention, Albus or his brother. James was still more popular overall, but Albus was no longer a one trick pony. He was two and zero in Quidditch, something that James couldn't claim this year.

As if the party afterwards wasn't enough, Slytherins were patting him on the back everywhere he went.

"Way to go, Potter" a large seventh year said to him one day in the hall, shaking his hand.

"You'll win us the cup for sure" a pretty fourth year girl exclaimed as he was leaving the bathroom a few days later.

Albus couldn't shake the feeling that his house weren't the only ones giving him special treatment however. Gryffindors were particularly nasty to his teammates, and as far away as the final match was, there had been some scuffles in the hallway. None with Albus though, and he knew that he had his brother to thank for that.

Strangely enough, Albus was the only one who wasn't particularly happy. Though satisfied with his victory, and certainly pleased at his new popularity as well, he had much more pressing issues on his mind.

"This close!" he exclaimed, pounding his fist on his bed a few days after the match.

Scorpius, whose head was buried in a book titled *Advanced Charms: Spells to Hurt and Heal* looked up and rolled his eyes. Morrison did the same. "Not this again" he muttered.

"I was *there*. I saw them leaving" Albus said furiously. The thought of Ares entering the Forest while the rest of the school was at the game was all that he could think about in his spare time. "I can't believe I saw them leaving and didn't go after them."

"Oh come on Al" Scorpius said, marking his page and putting the book down. "What were you supposed to do, fly off the Pitch and let Hufflepuff win?"

"No, but I could've- I don't- I could have done something else. Other than stand there gawking. I want to know what he's up to! Whatever Darvy says, he's not just meeting with wizards. Whatever that wand is, he shouldn't have it."

"Well that's it, we don't know what that wand can do, let alone what it's even called. So drop it" Morrison said irritably.

Albus called it quits soon after. His friends didn't understand. They hadn't heard the way Neville had argued with Ares in the hall, nor the way that Ares had acted when his father had brought up his stay in Azkaban the previous year.

"Want to go to Hagrid's?" he said suddenly after a few moments, remembering that he had been meaning to visit him for quite some time.

Morrison checked his watch. "Yeah, we still have time before dinner."

They bundled themselves up in their cloaks and made their way down to Hagrid's hut, Slytherins patting Albus on the back as they went.

"I could get used to that" Morrison said, as he received a smile from an attractive seventh year girl simply for walking next to Albus.

"It gets boring after a while" Albus said with a shrug as they arrived at Hagrid's hut. Smoke was billowing from the top of it, signaling that Hagrid was home. Albus gave a large knock. They heard bustling around, and after a few seconds, Hagrid came to the door.

"Well, look who it is" he said gruffly, beaming at the sight of them. "Had I not seen you playin' Qui'ich I'd of thought you were dead" he added with a wink to Albus.

Albus grinned. "Sorry Hagrid" he said, and he truly did mean it. "I've been meaning to stop by for ages. Mind letting us in?" he asked, and Hagrid stepped aside to let them enter.

The cabin was nice and warm, and just as comfortable as usual. Albus and his friends sat down at the round table while Hagrid busied himself with making tea.

"Any fudge Hagrid?" Morrison asked hopefully, and Hagrid placed a large silver tin on the table. He chuckled as Morrison started to devour it.

"There mus' be summat' in that fudge" Hagrid said in between chuckles. "You'll be my size soon Morrison."

Albus thought that that statement had been a bit of a stretch, but there was no denying that Morrison was exceptionally tall for a twelve year old. He had several inches on both Albus and Scorpius, and was frequently mistaken for a fourth, or sometimes even fifth year student.

"So what have you been up to Hagrid?"

Hagrid took a large gulp of tea before speaking. "Absolutely nothin" he said with a grin. "Just taking care of a new batch of bowtruckles. There was a nasty injury the other day, some fifth year idiot was messin' 'roun' with a thestral I was showin em'."

"Thestral?" Morrison asked.

"Big winged thing. Kinna' looks like a lizar' and a horse. Which reminds me, wha' classes you kids takin' next year?"

"All three of us are taking Care For Magical Creatures" Albus said with a grin, and Hagrid beamed. They had decided and submitted their class selection papers the previous day.

"Oh you jus' wait, you three are gonna' have a blast. It'll probably be yer favorite class next year. I can still remember yer dad's first lesson, Al. Rode a Hippogriff all the way 'round the grounds."

"What about my dad?" Scorpius asked. "Did he ride one too?"

Hagrid went red and scratched his head. "Don' remember" he said. He changed the topic quickly. "So what other classes are ya' takin'? Gotta' have three right?"

"Minimum of two" Albus said. "I'm taking your class and Muggle Studies."

"Same with me" Scorpius said.

"Muggle Studies?" Hagrid asked, bewildered. "Your pick, but I'd take summin' a bit more useful."

Albus shrugged. In truth, he had only picked it because it sounded easy, and he knew that Scorpius had only picked it so that he would have someone to copy off of if it turned out hard.

"What abou' you?" Hagrid asked Morrison.

"I'm taking Divination. Seems easy *and* useful" he replied through a thick mouthful of treacle fudge. He stared down at the empty tin with a sad expression on his face.

"Ahh. Well that's not much better..."

The conversation jumped around and they spent more than twenty minutes there discussing things like Quidditch and Morrison's sisters' upcoming wedding. It eventually jumped back to one of Hagrid's favorite subjects however-stories of Albus' dad and his time at Hogwarts.

"So anyway, I ended up gettin' him an owl. A snowy one, beau'iful, you shoulda' seen it. Owls make great pets, and I wanted to give him summin' good for his eleventh birthday."

"Did you ever have any pets Hagrid?" Morrison asked him.

"Oh yeah, loads" Hagrid said. "Some of 'em not really pets, I mean, I tend to a lot of creatures an' such. But I've had a fair share."

"How many?" Scorpius asked him as he stirred around his cup of tea.

Hagrid leaned back and began ticking them off of his fingers. "Let's see, I had a kneazle named Knobby, a giant acromantula named Aragog, an' I guess all of his kids too-these are in no particula' order mind you-an' a fire crab named Clawz. Had Norbert fer abou' a week, rare he was. Or she, Norberta they call her now. And she was a bea'iful dragon. Fang, me old boar hound, he died not too long ago, I miss him. But he was ol'..."

Scorpius spit out his tea all over the table.

"OY!" the rest of them shouted as Scorpius spluttered, accidently knocking his entire cup over as he frantically apologized.

"What's the matter with you?" Hagrid bellowed as he wiped his face off, tea dripping from his enormous beard.

"Sorry Hagrid" Scorpius stammered out. He pulled out his wand. "*Scourgify!*"

The mess of tea all over the table was wiped up instantly by Scorpius' spell. Albus turned to compliment him on it but saw Scorpius giving him an icy glare. "*We have to go*" he mouthed.

Bewildered, Albus turned to Hagrid. "Right, we should be going, dinner's in a few minutes and we have some homework we want to finish first."

Hagrid gave him an inquisitive look. "You kids do homework?" he asked.

"Sometimes" Scorpius said quickly. "Sorry Hagrid, see ya' later..."

They left seconds later, Hagrid scratching his head and muttering to himself.

"What's with you?" Albus asked as they marched up the grassy slope to the castle. "That was kind of rude. And right after you knocked tea all over his table..."



"Dragonfang" Scorpius said. "The wand Ares has, it was called the Dragonfang Wand. I remember now."

Albus stopped walking. "How, what made you remember? Are you sure?" he asked, though even as he asked it, he recalled hearing the name.

"Hagrid said it!"

"Hagrid said it?" Morrison asked. They had all stopped walking now.

"Well I mean- he didn't- not exac- he just did! He was talking about Norbert-Norberta, whatever that dragon's name was. Then he mentioned his dog's name, it just clicked- trust me, it was called the Dragonfang Wand!"

Albus felt excitement flood through him. "If we've got its name, we can find it!"

He ran into the castle, Scorpius and Morrison right behind him. Charging up the stairs and ignoring the calls of students telling him to slow down, he found himself on the seventh floor, a blank stretch of wall right beside him. He quickly closed his eyes and began walking back and forth in front of it, concentrating fiercely on a single thought. *I need to know about the Dragonfang Wand.*

Scorpius and Morrison caught up with him just as a giant door magically appeared where the blank stretch of wall had just been.

"Did that door just randomly appear on that wall?" Morrison asked, dumbstruck.

"Long story" Scorpius said. "Secret room, gives you anything."

Morrison's jaw dropped, but Scorpius merely shrugged and continued. "It's Hogwarts, I'm sure there's weirder rooms."

Albus burst through the door, expecting to see little less than a library filled with the information that he craved. He was more than disappointed. There where no shelves of books, not even a stack. Just a single book laying in the middle of the floor.

Albus stared. One book? He went to go pick it up. It wasn't very big, and it had no cover. He checked the side of it. It was a biography of a man named *Vesnovitch VI*.

"What the heck is this!" he exclaimed loudly. "Who's Vesnovitch Vy?"

Scorpius and Morrison entered the room. He handed the book to Scorpius to see what he could make of it. "His name isn't 'vy', that's a roman numeral. This guys name was Vesnovitch the Sixth."

"Well open it up" Albus urged him.

Morrison spoke up, his tone mingled with both curiosity and betrayal. "What is this place? And how come you guys never told me about it?"

"Long story" Scorpius repeated. "Well you asked for a book about the wand, so it should be in here somewhere." He flipped to the index.

"In there?" Albus asked.

"Yup."

Albus grinned, his excitement returning. It was time to find out what Ares was up to. He watched as Scorpius flipped to one of the last pages of the book.

"It's in the section 'Accolades and Accomplishments.' Wow this is one of the last pages."

"Well read it!" Albus said excitedly.

"Calm down!" Scorpius snapped. "Let me find it! Okay, here we go. Last paragraph on the page. *'Despite his untimely death, the success of Vesnovitch lasted long after the famous researcher's passing. His studying of dragons in his homeland of Russia has become the basis of what is studied by dragon researchers today, and in 1754 he was posthumously awarded with the Order of Merlin, second class for his breakthroughs in female dragon behavior and the discovery that their diet was the source of their flame-creating abilities. His daughter later went on to become a researcher of moderate success, becoming the first researcher to successfully breed Ukrainian Ironbelly in captivity.*

*"His many contributions were also met with rumors of many famous inventions and discoveries, including, but not limited to, the discovery of the properties of dragon blood (not to be confused with the twelve uses discovered by Albus Dumbledore), powdered dragon's claw (said to stimulate brain activity), and the Dragonfang wand, a wand personally forged from the fang of a rare Antipodean Opaleye that had been cursed with numerous magical maladies. The wand was said to have numerous abilities, the most known of which is its ability to unlock the hidden potential within the wizard who uses it."*

Scorpius stopped reading there. He turned the page. "And that's it" he said dryly. "Fascinating."

"What do you mean that's it? It was only mentioned once?" Albus asked, getting angrier by the second.

"Yup. That's it. Index only shows this page and there's a picture on the next one."

Albus mouthed wordlessly. "How can they only mention it once, it's a *biography*. A wand that does potential and stuff, there has to be more!"

Scorpius skimmed over the page once more. "Wait, there's a footnote next to it! Let's see...let's see. Ahh here we go. '*Wand's existence has been disproven*'."

Albus jaw dropped. Morrison burst out laughing. "Here that Al? You're scared of something that doesn't exist!"

Albus ignored him and almost collapsed. He felt wobbly, and he had a headache. He needed to sit down. He turned around and saw a chair that had not been there a moment earlier. He sat in it and heaved a sigh.

"Doesn't exist?" he asked to no one in particular. "But Ares has it. How is that possible?"

Scorpius closed the book and sat down in a much less comfortable looking chair that had appeared. "Maybe...Ares is lying. Telling people he has it? I mean, it intimidates them doesn't it? My grandad was intimidated anyway..."

"Or *maybe* nothing's going on, and you're both mental" Morrison said.

Albus was still deep in thought. "No, the wand is real" he said defiantly. "Look, somehow, that bloke Chekov got a hold of it. He was hidden right? So was the wand! Erased from the history books. Or maybe never even written in it. Ares found out about it somehow, had someone kill the guy and get him the wand, and now he's using it for something, something bad, and people are joining him in the Forest because he has it. So my dad was right about there being a leak in the Ministry, and Darvy's right about following him, and I'm right about the wand!"

"So tell Darvy" Scorpius said.

"I can't, I already told him I knew nothing about that wandmaker, he'd know that I was lying before."

"Tell your dad" Morrison suggested.

"Can't, if I go off accusing people at his job of being double crossers and I'm wrong, I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do. And he's working enough as it is." Even as he said it, the image of his father's gray tinged face and tired, droopy eyes swam in his thoughts. He would not make things worse for his father, that much he was sure of.

"So...do nothing?" both of his friends asked him.

"No, I have a plan. I'm going to find out who ratted that wandmaker out, get proof, link it to Ares, and then have the Ministry interfere. This way my dad doesn't have to do anything but throw him back in Azkaban."

His two friends exchanged a look. Morrison heaved a sigh. "Don't ask me how I know, but I don't think this is going to end well."

## Chapter 14 : Rematch And The Recluse

"Okay, so let me get this straight. There's a wand that makes you really powerful, that's not supposed to exist, but does. Ares found out who had it, either killed him or got someone else to do it, and now *he* has it. For some reason he's not using it, but he is showing it off in the Forest to wizards who are probably bad news. And Darvy knows that he's up to something, but doesn't know about the wand, and you can't tell him because you already lied and said you didn't. And you can't tell any adults because it might get back to your dad, who would then have more work to do even though he's already exhausted, and you might be wrong anyway. And now you want to prove that Ares has the wand by following him into the Forest, so he can go back to Azkaban, even though you have no idea why he was in there in the first place. Is that all of it?"

Albus scratched his chin. "Yup, that's about it. Only you forgot the giant fire breathing cupcake."

Mirra smacked her notebook against her head. "Oh right, *of course*" she said. "How did I forget the giant fire breathing cupcake?" She giggled while Albus grinned.

They were in the library, and their friends had long since abandoned them. Morrison and Scorpius went to go play chess, while Rose was hanging by the lake with her group of Gryffindors. Mirra had decided to stay to catch up on homework, making Albus realize just how much homework he also had.

In truth, neither of them had touched a book for the better part of the last hour. Mirra had asked him what information he had accumulated since their last talk, and after making her promise that she wouldn't tell Rose, he had told her.

"I still think that you're taking this a tad bit too lightly, though" she said, when she was done giggling. "I mean- murder, thievery. This is serious stuff."

Albus stopped grinning immediately. "I know, I know" he admitted. "But I really am stuck on who to go to. I didn't expect to find out this much...even if I did try to. But Darvy was right about one thing, no one's in any danger. If so, we'd all be dead by now."

It was certainly true that the Headmaster had been acting quite normal. That wasn't saying much, as he was always a shady character, but Albus didn't feel nearly as endangered by his actions as he was curious of them.

"But Darvy doesn't know about his wand..." Mirra said.

Albus shrugged. "The wand's not important. It's just proof he's up to no good. I want to know who he's meeting with, and why it has to be in secret. Darvy told me about how he thinks Ares might be playing an undercover Auror...but if he is, he's playing it well enough to fool Neville."

Mirra was on the verge of saying something when a screechy voice rang out through the library. "Nine o' clock, library's closed" the librarian shouted.

"Damn" Mirra said, scooping up her books. "I didn't get to finish my History of Magic essay."

Albus was half a second away from asking "What History of Magic essay?" when he changed his mind. "Sorry, didn't mean to distract you" he said.

She threw her bag over her shoulders and brushed her long dark hair out of her face. "No, it's fine, I like talking to you. Kind of missed it there too. I wish we could hang out more, but something tells me Scorpius isn't too friendly with Charlie..."

They walked out of the library together, the others students shuffling past them. "Yeah...they're not exactly best friends" Albus said with a nervous laugh.

"Oh my gosh, I meant to ask you!" she said suddenly, and they slowed down. "Why did Scorpius chicken out on Halloween? It was the talk of my house for awhile and I never got to ask you."

Albus sneered. "He didn't chicken out. We were on our way but almost got caught. Decided not to bother with it."

With a sudden pang in his heart, he realized that Halloween had been the first night they had bumped into Ares on the stairs. They were now closing in on March. Had he really been obsessed with catching Ares for that long?

"Oh" she said. "Yeah, Charlie was a big prat for that. I know he started it. He's so stupid sometimes, and paranoid. He keeps thinking that you three were the ones who made him fall off of his broom during Quidditch tryouts, that's why he messed with you. But I told him over and over again, Al wouldn't let something like that happen!"

Albus went a deep shade of red. "What? He thinks that? Come one, that's so...ridiculous" he said with a shaky laugh.

"I know!" she exclaimed, laughing too. "But anyway I told him to chill out, he was being an idiot, and he did. I don't think that they've fought again since."

"Yeah, Scorpius is over it too" Albus lied. Just a few days ago Scorpius had been talking about how badly he was going to mess up Eckley when the time was right.

They reached the Gryffindor Common Room. "Nice talking to ya' Al" she said, giving him a wave before approaching the portrait of the fat lady in the pink dress. "See you in Herbology tomorrow."

He waved back as she entered the Common Room, then turned and left for his dormitory.

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March was a pleasant surprise for the students of Hogwarts. The bitter weather was completely gone, replaced instead with bursts of sunshine and a nice breeze to anyone walking through the

courtyard. Albus wished that he too could enjoy it, but sadly, March meant two other things. Exams and the Quidditch Final were fast approaching.

The hype surrounding Albus had died down slightly, and rather than looking back at the previous game, more time was spent looking ahead. Despite their victory over Gryffindor earlier in the year, Atticus was intent on maxing out his team's talent. They had practice every other day (with Gryffindors occupying the days in between) and the practices frequently went well into the night.

"I need time to study too, Atticus!" Albus said in the locker room after a grueling practice. "Teachers are hounding us over exams!"

Atticus scoffed at him as the rest of the team left the locker room, muttering amongst themselves about exhaustion. "Exams aren't for a while, and they're a cake walk, it's not like they're O.W.L's."

"Well the Quidditch Final isn't for a month either!" Albus argued. "But I've got essays due every day now!"

He really wasn't exaggerating in the slightest. Teachers were force feeding them information, making them review things that Albus hadn't done since his first week at Hogwarts in his first year. Just a few days ago he had been asked to transfigure a match into a needle. Even Neville, who was generally easy-going in his classes, had informed them that second year examinations were no joke; there would be no pity this time around, and the students were expected to be prepared.

"I hope you all have been studying, even when no homework is assigned" he told them after a particularly boring lesson. "Do not expect any special treatment because you are still young, I have went over the written portion of the exam and can tell you that some of those questions are O.W.L standard!"

The extra pressure of exams and exhausting training sessions had done something that Albus thought would never happen; he had nearly forgotten about Ares and the Dragonfang Wand. Apart from what he had told Mirra, he'd said barely a word about it to his friends, and as they were near the end of the year, the chances of Albus actually catching Ares were less than slim. He had no leads-no concrete proof. Until a very windy Saturday morning near the end of March, that is.

Albus had gotten out of bed that morning reasonably pleased with the night before. He had completed a very successful Quidditch practice-Atticus had complimented the entire team-and with the help of Scorpius, he had finished both his Transfiguration essay and his Charms essay, both of which weren't due until that Monday. He was looking forward to a very pleasant weekend indeed.

He approached the breakfast table in the Great Hall, stifling a yawn as he did so, and took a seat in between Scorpius and Morrison.

"Anything on the agenda for today?" he asked them as he piled pancakes onto his plate.

Morrison yawned. "Going back to bed in a bit" he said with a grin.

Scorpius shrugged. As usual, he had the *Morning Prophet* propped up against his glass of orange juice. "Hey Al, your dad is in here" he said.

Albus looked up from pouring syrup on his pancakes. "He okay?" he asked nervously.

Scorpius nodded his head. "Yeah he's fine. He's getting an award though. Not just any award actually, an Order of Merlin First Class!"

"When?" Albus asked, shocked that he hadn't heard any mention of it before. "Let me see" he said, and Scorpius handed over the paper. The story in question wasn't hard to find; it took up the entire first page.

### **Harry Potter to Receive Order of Merlin**

*Talks of a ceremony have been going on for a while now, but it's official. Meant to commemorate the defeat of the dark wizard Lord Voldemort, Harry "The Boy Who Lived" Potter will receive an Order of Merlin, First Class at a Ministry Ceremony on May 1st of this year, the twentieth anniversary of his triumph. This marks the first Order of Merlin, First Class, to be awarded at the turn of the century*

*"We meant to get around to it sooner" Minister of Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt (who will be presenting Potter with the award) told reporters. "About nineteen years ago, really. But we had a Ministry to rebuild first. I'm happy to say we're finally ready to acknowledge Mr. Potter for his outstanding courage that day, and for every day that he fought against Voldemort's reign of terror."*

*The ceremony will also feature a moment of silence for those who were killed during the second war, whether it be from combat or from assault, and there will be speeches presented by Ministry Members who fought alongside Potter, including fellow Auror Ronald Weasley. An additional Order of Merlin, Second Class, was meant to be posthumously awarded to Severus Snape for aiding in the war as a double agent (his name having been cleared by Potter soon after the war ) though Potter refused to allow this, saying that Snape "Would have detested it."*

The article continued for several more pages, but Albus had gathered the gist from it. He turned to Scorpius. "Mind if I keep skimming through this?"

Scorpius took a large gulp of orange juice. "Go ahead" he said.

Albus turned the pages of the paper, glancing at random articles as he did so. It turned out that the rest of the paper was quite boring. Most of it was advertisements for things like oven cleaner or Spellotape, and there was even an entire page belonging to a story of how Eeylops Owl Emporium was having a sale on tawny owls.

He flipped to the last page of the paper, expecting to find more nonsense and simply put it down, when a small article caught his attention. It was cramped into the corner, but it had a name that he recognized.

### **Ministry Member Wilde Still Missing**

*Fango Wilde, member of the Department of Magical Transportation, has officially been missing for two weeks. Ministry officials investigated his home after he failed to contact the Ministry for five days in a row, and he was declared officially missing soon after. Search parties were sent out, but unfortunately there are still no leads. The Ministry urges anybody with information to contact the Auror office immediately.*

"Check this out" Albus said quietly, passing the newspaper back to Scorpius.

Albus watched as he scanned the back page. "Eeylops is having a sale huh? Cool."

"No!" he snapped, and he indicated the small article in the corner. Morrison peered over Scorpius' shoulder and read it as well. When they both had finished they turned to him.

"So?" they said in unison.

"Name doesn't sound familiar?" Albus asked them, and they both shook their heads. "He was here! At Hogwarts. To investigate the school. Near the beginning of the year? Am I the only one who pays attention around here?"

Morrison stifled another yawn. "You're the only one who cares, actually. He probably just went on an extended vacation or something."

"I don't think so" Scorpius said, his voice heavy with mock concern. "Isn't it much more likely that he's the guy that murdered that wandmaker and took that wand that doesn't even exist? And now he's on the run? We should tell Darvy!"

They both laughed and Albus felt his face go red. "Whatever..."

They continued their breakfast in silence, but Albus' mind was racing. This was yet another piece in the puzzle he was trying to solve. He had to follow Ares into the Forest, and for that, he had to know when he was going, and for that he needed the Map. All he needed to do was find James.

As it turned out, finding his brother was much easier said than done. He had hoped to run into him in the hallways, or possibly see him at breakfast or dinner, but he was nowhere to be found.



Both Scorpius and Morrison hadn't seen him either, and as the only Gryffindors that he was in contact with were Mirra and Rose, both of whom he only saw in class, he had to wait until that Friday to find out where he was.

They marched into the Potions room and saw their cauldrons set up. Professor Darvy was beaming at him with his maniacal smile, ready to return the papers that they had handed in the previous week.

"Sit down, sit down" he said calmly. "Before we do anything I need to return your essays-and let me first award ten points to both Gryffindor and Slytherin, for Miss Tunnels and Mr. Potter, who both achieved perfect scores."

Albus smirked as Bartleby and Dante, his fellow Slytherins, clapped him on the back. He saw Morrison give a sheepish grin as Darvy returned his paper, and thought that he caught a glimpse of what looked like a giant red "P".

"Single work today" Darvy said as he made his way back to his desk. Albus frowned. He wouldn't be able to talk to Mirra. Darvy raised his wand and words appeared on the blackboard. "We will be making a solution for frost bite today. The ingredients and steps are on the board-in reverse order. Don't lose track. You may find that a single mishap can drastically alter your final product..." he finished with a smile.

They rose from their seats to gather their ingredients from the cupboard. Albus purposefully waited until Mirra got up to get hers to get his own. He poked her back as she gathered her things. "Can you sit with me today?" he asked. He was quite intent on finding out why he rarely saw his brother.

She gave him a rueful look. "Sorry Al, I'm sitting next to Charlie. He's so bad at potions. I'm not much better, but he could use some help. He already asked me."

Albus frowned. He was right about to ask her if she could at least tell him what was up with James while they were there, but he received a sharp poke to his back before he could speak. Donovan Hornsbrook was behind him. "Hurry up, you're holding up the line" he said.

Albus scoffed at him and grabbed his ingredients, then returned to his seat. Morrison was already prodding the flame under his cauldron. "Hey I know it's 'single work' but do you think you could-

"

"I'll help you, I'll help you" Albus told him before he could finish his sentence. He watched as Mirra walked all the way to the back of the room and sat next to Eckley. She was literally as far away from him as possible. "Just let me do something first."

He ripped a page from his notebook and scribbled a note on it.

*Do you know whats been up with my bro? I haven't seen him in a while*

He folded up the note and told the person behind him to pass it back to Mirra. After what seemed like twenty minutes, a note fell on his desk. He quickly opened it and saw her tiny, immaculate scrawl.

*You didn't hear?*

Albus rolled his eyes. He had waited twenty minutes for that? *Stupid Eckley is probably distracting her*, he thought bitterly. He picked up his quill and scribbled back.

*Obviously not.*

He glanced up at Darvy and saw him marking papers at his desk. He heaved the note behind him and waited. Ten more minutes went by before it fell on his desk again.

*That girl Denise, she broke up with him. He doesn't go to meals or anything, only his classes. Never leaves the dormitory for anything else. It happened like 2 weeks ago. He's a recluse. I thought you knew. It's the talk of my house.*

Half an hour later, Albus was pacing in his dormitory. "How come I didn't hear about this!" he asked to no one in particular, though Scorpius and Morrison were both sitting in their beds listening. "I'm his brother!"

"It's because you're out of the loop" Scorpius said apologetically. "When are you going to get it, Al? There's two groups at Hogwarts-Slytherins, and everybody else. Doesn't matter who your brother is, word isn't reaching you until you ask for it."

"Mirra couldn't have told me? I mean I was talking to her not too long ago..."

"She thought you knew, remember mate?" Morrison chimed in. "Why's it so important for you to talk to him anyway?"

"I wanted to borrow the Map" Albus admitted. "See when Ares is going into the Forbidden Forest."

Scorpius groaned. "Dangerous wizards meeting in the Forest, and you want to follow them in. That's a genius right there" he mumbled.

"I'll have the Cloak on" Albus shot. "I'm going to go and see him right now, actually."

"Will they let you in the Common Room?" Morrison asked him.

Albus shrugged. "I don't see why not. They did before" he said, thinking back to his first year, when his brother had invited him in.

"Well I've got to drop a book off at the library" Scorpius said. "So I guess we'll go up together."

They left Morrison in the dormitory and walked through the dungeon passageways and up the stairs.

"Sucks that your bro got dumped. Wasn't he like...the biggest flirt at Hogwarts?" Scorpius asked him as they passed the different floors.

Albus side stepped the blood stained ghostly image of the Bloody Baron. "For a while. His reputation must be over. It's a shame too, I heard that he really liked her."

"Well...don't go easy on him in the final just to save his reputation" Scorpius told him.

Albus laughed. "Don't worry. I won't." They reached the seventh floor, where the library and the Gryffindor common room were at opposite ends. Students were bustling through the halls, signaling that dinner was about to begin. "See you later" Albus told him, and they went their separate ways.

He walked past the shuffling students and around the corner. He thought about what Scorpius had said, and wondered if James would even play in the finals. If he had been in his slump for two weeks already, would he be better by the next month?

He reached the portrait of the fat lady in the pink dress and stood there uncertainly. He knew that it required a password, but he had hoped that a friendly Gryffindor would at least alert his brother of his presence.

"Can I help you?" The Fat Lady said in her high pitched voice, making him jump with surprise.

"Erm yes. My- my brother is in there-"

"Do you have the password?" she cut him off.

"I- no- I'm in Slytherin -"

"Only Gryffindors with the required password are allowed to enter the Gryffindor Common Room. That's why it's called the *Gryffindor* Common Room."

Albus frowned her. Did she have to insult him? "You're being really immature" he said. She raised her eyebrows at him. She was right about to say something when her portrait swung open, revealing Rose.

"Al, what are you doing here?" she asked.

Albus was so shocked at her timely arrival that he almost forgot why he was there, but the thought came to him seconds later. "I wanted to see my brother. Do you think you could let me-"

"Only I am allowed to let people in and out, and they must be in Gryffindor House!" The Fat Lady said, still in her lopsided position.

"You let me in before!" Albus argued.

"I clearly didn't know you weren't part of Gryffindor-"

"Alright fine!" Albus shot out, before turning to Rose. "Rose, can you at least bring James out here? I need to borrow something from him."

"Borrow what?" she asked.

"It's- it's a guy thing" he told her. He didn't want Rose learning about the Map. Knowing her, she would have a teacher confiscate it at once.

She raised her eyebrows at him skeptically. "Well I really don't think he'll come out of his dormitory. I'm just on my way down to get some dinner now, and I was going to bring him back up a plate."

"What, because of this whole Denise breaking up with him thing? He won't even come and talk to me?"

"He's really upset Al..."

"Well can you go and tell him that I said that he's being a prat? And that he should come and talk to me?"

She tossed her hair out of her face. "Fine" she said with a sigh. She walked back through the portrait hole muttering something that sounded like "What am I an owl?"

Thirty seconds later she returned. "He said 'you're a prat for making Rosie deliver messages. And I'm staying here. Tell her and she'll tell me.'"

"Tell him I said it's a guy thing and I can't tell you!"

"I did! He said it doesn't matter."

Albus groaned. "Tell him I said he's being really lame about all this, and that he can get a new girl whenever he wants, but I really need to talk to him."

She sighed again. "Fine." And she left again, only to return thirty seconds later with a frown on her face. "He said...he said you 'wouldn't get it Al, you stupid prude'."

Albus felt his cheeks go red.

"Sorry Al, his words, not mine" she said, and she truly did sound sorry. Albus felt the anger bubble up inside of him.

"Well you can tell him-"

"FIGHT!"

Albus was cut off from the loud yell. He turned and saw students running through the halls.

"What the-"

"Let's go!" Rose said, and they ran after the students. Five seconds later they were among a group of people, students from all houses, and they were all chanting the same thing.

"Fight! Fight! Fight!"

Albus heard a voice that he recognized from the center of the group. "You're going to get it now, Eckley!"

Albus charged through the group, knocking over two first years as he did so. He fought his way to the center and saw that Scorpius and Eckley were wrestling on the ground; their wands were laying forgotten in front of them.

It was easy to see that Scorpius was losing. Their roles were quite reversed without their wands. Eckley, bigger and burlier, had found his way on top of Scorpius and was pummeling his face. Albus thought that it was a miracle that he wasn't bleeding yet. Without even thinking of pulling out his own wand, he lunged and tackled Eckley, knocking him off of his friend.

"Hey!" he heard someone yell. He got up only to be tackled. Donovan Hornsbrook, having seen that it was a two on one, had lunged at Albus to even the score. Hornsbrook was even bigger than his friend, and Albus was nearly caught in the same position as Scorpius. He managed to roll out of the way of a deadly looking blow and ducked another one. He was at least quicker; that much he knew. He had never thrown a punch in all his life, but he had seen James do it. He squeezed his hand into a fist and cocked it back, then felt it connect with Hornsbrook's face.

He knew he had done very little damage, if any. But he had at least tried. He saw Mirra in the crowd screaming for them to stop, Rose right next to her, holding her hands up to her face. Hornsbrook shook off the weak blow and punched a distracted Albus square in the face.

*So this is what it feels like to be hit by a tank*, he thought stupidly as he fell to the ground, his head smacking against the floor. He felt Hornsbrook climb on top of him, ready to deliver the final blows...

*"Impedimenta! Impedimenta! Impedimenta!"*

Albus looked up and saw Neville standing in the hallway, his wand raised, a look of outrage on his face. "Disgusting!" he said. "Dueling like muggles! Are you barbarians?" he yelled at no one in particular. "Fifty points from both houses!"

A loud groan came from most of the people in the crowd. Albus managed to pull himself up and saw that Eckley, Hornsbrook, and Scorpius were all standing, but panting and stuck in their positions, gradually regaining movement.

"What happened?" Neville asked.

There was an outcry from everyone in the hallway.

"Never mind!" Neville barked out. "All of you go to your Common Rooms! Or dinner, wherever it is that you're supposed to be! Except you four!" he added, indicating Albus, Eckley, Hornsbrook, and Scorpius.

The other students all turned and left, muttering excitedly amongst themselves over what happened. He saw Mirra and Rose walking with them, both of them looking distraught.

"I hope you four are happy, you just lost both of your houses fifty points. Now what happened?"

"Malfoy threw the first punch-" Eckley started

"You knocked my wand out of my hand!"

"What was it doing out in the first place? Oh that's right, you were about to jinx him!" Hornsbrook added.

"Stop!" Neville said, running his hand through his hair. "I don't even care. Dueling with wands would have lost you the points, but fighting like a bunch of animals? You three are receiving detentions!" he said to everyone, except for a shocked Albus, who had miraculously managed to stand straight despite the stars he was seeing.

"What about Albus?" Eckley asked. "He was fighting too!"

"I saw" Neville said. "Albus isn't allowed to play in the Quidditch Final."

Albus jaw dropped; he saw Eckley and Hornsbrook exchange twin smirks.

"*What?*"

"You heard me" Neville said.

"But Neville-"

"It's Professor Longbottom!" Neville told him, eyeing him. "And that's the rule at Hogwarts! Quidditch players lose their right to play in the next game if they commit a major offence. And as the next game is the final...I'm sorry but that's the rule."

Albus was lost for words. Banned from the Final? Thoughts of how his house would react flooded through his head. His popularity, his reputation, gone. He felt sick.

"You four return to your common room. I don't want you going down to dinner" Neville told them.

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"What happened?" Morrison asked them an hour later. Albus and Scorpius had spent the entirety of dinner in their dormitory by themselves, seething. Only when Morrison had returned did they even bother to look up. "I heard there was a fight..."

"I'm not allowed to play in the Quidditch Final" Albus told him, and Albus saw his jaw drop in a manner similar to his own when he had heard. "For committing a 'major offence'."

Morrison looked at both of them, his lips moving wordlessly. "What happened?" he asked Scorpius. "You fought Eckley again?"

Albus leaned back against his bed post, still fuming, though he listened intently.

"Saw Eckley hanging with Mirra and Hornsbrook on the way to the library. They were just leaving. He said something, I forget what. I said something back, he got in my face. I pulled my wand out and asked him if he wanted a rematch. He knocked my wand out of my hand so I punched him in the face. We got involved in a scuffle-"

"-More like he started beating your arse" Albus shot out.

Scorpius cringed. "Anyway, a group formed around us and we kept at it, he tried pulling out his wand and I wrestled it away, he ended up on top of me. Then Albus jumped in, then Hornsbrook...and the rest is kind of blurry. We ended up losing fifty points. And I have a detention."

"Damn, I missed it!" Morrison said. "I would of taken them both on..."

Albus didn't doubt that for a second, Morrison was just as tall as Hornsbrook, and only a little bit lankier. It didn't matter though. They had lost the second Albus was banned from the Quidditch Final. Losing the fight was just pouring salt on the wound.

"Look Al, I'm real sorry" Scorpius said. "I didn't expect you to jump in..."

"What did you think I was just going to watch?" he spat out.

"I- I wasn't thinking" Scorpius admitted, hanging his head low. "I'm sorry."

Albus ignored him. "I'm going to bed" he said, and he went to pull back his bed curtains.

"Wait!" Morrison said, and Albus stopped. "Did you at least get the Map?"

"No" Albus said flatly. "And I don't care either. None of it matters anyway."

He pulled the bed curtains back and buried himself in his pillows. Sadly, he had meant it. All thoughts of catching Ares, learning about the Dragonfang Wand, going in to the Forest, they had left him. Who cared what Ares did? Who cared who he was meeting in the Forest? How could he care about anything else other than what had just happened? He had led his team to the championship match only to not be able to play in it. Teased them by having them think about winning the cup for the first time in years only to rob them of all hope for it.

The most he could do, though he hated to admit it, was hope that James didn't play as well. And with that miserable thought, he drifted off to sleep, head still pounding from Hornsbrook's hit, effectively ending one of the worst days of his life.



## Chapter 15 : The Informant

Albus had hoped that the news that he was banned from the Quidditch Final wouldn't have reached his house's ears by the time he woke up the next morning, but he was sadly disappointed. It only took one glance around the Common Room to realize that missing dinner the previous night, and then going immediately to bed, had made him lose all chances of explaining himself. There wasn't a single face that showed anything other than cold anger towards him.

He wished that he could be mad at Scorpius, as had he not fought Eckley the situation wouldn't have arose, but it would have been quite foolish to do so. With almost his entire house now against him, his brother officially a recluse, and Mirra and Rose being as close as they were to Eckley and his gang, Scorpius and Morrison were quite literally all that he had at Hogwarts. The only other person who seemed to not mind him was Hagrid.

"Ah, Qui'itch is just a game Al" he told the three of them as they sat in his cabin on a Saturday morning in April. "And once the Final's over, your house'll see tha'. They just thought that they had a chance this year, an' you took that away from 'em, tha's all."

Albus frowned. "Thanks for trying to make me feel better" he said bitterly.

Hagrid chuckled. "Anytime Al. What about the kids you fought? They lost some points for Gryffindor I heard, they gotta' be goin' through summat jus' as bad as you!"

Morrison snorted, and Albus knew why. From what he had heard (although admittedly, he heard very little) Hornsbrook and Eckley were nothing short of celebrities to the remainder of the school. They had lost points, sure, but they had not only won the fight, but also caused Albus to not play in the Final. Gryffindor's chances of winning the cup had been increased ten fold because of them.

"They're popular over there" Scorpius said, speaking up and glancing nervously at Albus. He still felt bad about what had happened, and frequently checked to make sure that he wasn't going to be chewed out when he spoke. "But that'll change. It's April. Plenty of time left for me to get some payback...finish things with Eckley."

Albus nearly threw his tea at him. "Don't even think about it!" he spat. "They won okay? Just get over it! If you could have just stomached the fact that people thought that Eckley got the better of you we wouldn't be in this situation!"

Silence followed his outburst; he had risen from his chair without knowing it.

"I'm gonna' go an' get more fudge for Morrison here" Hagrid said, before standing up and busying himself with a tin.

"Cheers Hagrid" Morrison said.

Albus was still breathing heavy, and Scorpius had turned his head away, ears pink. He knew that he was only exacerbating the situation. Scorpius, though not quite as popular as he was, was somewhat liked for having dueled Eckley on Halloween, even if he hadn't showed up for the rematch, and being Albus' friend hadn't hurt either. Now however, he had went from being "Albus' cool friend" back to the "arrogant know-it-all punk" that he had been known as the previous year.

He frowned and sat back down. "Sorry mate" he said. "I've just got a lot on my mind..."

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As the weeks went by however, it turned out that Albus had very little on his mind. With no Quidditch to distract him, he was doing the one thing that he thought would never happen - studying. Gone were the days of simply skimming through textbooks and jotting down homework assignments the class before it was due; being unpopular had its educational benefits. And his teachers had taken notice.

"Well done Albus!" Professor Flitwick, the tiny Charms Professor said as he passed Albus back his paper on the freezing charm. There was a giant red "O" on it. "Your paper was the best in the class!" Albus blushed as the other Slytherins around him muttered mutinously.

He was becoming equally as good in Transfiguration and Defence Against The Dark Arts, was still top of the year in Potions, and he had even stopped guessing and making up names on his History of Magic tests. Indeed, though he hated to admit it, he was becoming too much like Rose for his liking.

Studying and doing homework, though distracting in its own right, still couldn't cure his thirst for Quidditch however. It had been nothing short of heartbreaking when he entered the locker room for the first practice since he had been banned. He had at least been hoping he would still be able to participate in the training sessions.

"What are you doing here?" said Osmund Hall the second that he entered the locker room with his broom slung over his shoulder.

"I'm- I'm here to practice" he stammered, trying not to show how intimidated he was by a six foot seventh year holding a Beater's bat.

Atticus came running towards them, pulling on his robes. "Sorry Al, you can't practice" he said, though he didn't sound it at all.

"What, am I off the team?" Albus asked, angry, though he tried masking it in his voice.

"No, but since there's only one game left anyway, we have to spend all of our time training our reserve Seeker" Atticus told him icily. "You'll only get in the way."

Albus hung his head and left the locker room, his broom dragging across the floor as he went.

It wasn't until two days before the match that Albus got to speak to Mirra, who had done nothing but apologize to him as soon as they met in the library.

"I'm so sorry about Donny" she said. "I know you were only jumping in to get Charlie off of Scorpius, but he thought you were trying to double team him."

"Yeah, I know" he said as he took his seat at the table that they usually studied at, the only difference being that he actually planned on studying this time. "I can see why he thought that, it's cool" he told her.

She took a seat across from him and bit her lip nervously. "Did it- did it hurt when Donny hit you? It looked pretty bad..."

He was right about to snap how ridiculous of a question that was, as he had been knocked to the floor, but held it back. He had already shouted at Scorpius, and he wasn't keen on doing it to another of his best friends so shortly afterwards. "A bit" he lied.

"I really wish you were playing" she said. "Your brother isn't playing either though."

Albus looked up from his book. "Still miserable over Denise?" he said.

"Yeah" she said. "But that's not why. He doesn't agree with you being banned. Wanted to even things by not playing."

Albus gave a weak smile. "It doesn't really matter. We're still going to get crushed."

Mirra frowned, then apparently decided that Quidditch wasn't the best topic. "So...anymore leads on Ares?" she asked hopefully.

Albus sighed. "None" he said. He hadn't really thought about it. He didn't quite know why, but since his sudden drop in popularity he hadn't bothered thinking of it much. "I mean, a while back I read this article on this guy I know disappearing, and I thought he had something to do with it all. He was one of the guys here to investigate Hogwarts that day. Remember them?"

She chewed on the tip of her quill. "Yeah, I do. Kidnapping?" she said, the tiniest hint of sarcasm in her voice.

Albus grinned. He liked how she was trying to keep his mind occupied, on a topic that they were both fond of discussing no less, but for some reason, he couldn't get into it. "Maybe" he said. "I don't really know. I haven't really got proof for any of this."

"Didn't you say once you found the leak in the Ministry you were going to tell someone and have it traced back to Ares?"

He gave a small shrug. "If the entire Ministry of Magic can't find the leak, I don't think I'll be able to."

He was about to continue when he was cut off by a small crumpled ball of paper hitting him on the back of the head. Half a second later another landed, right in the middle of the table that they were sitting at. Albus spun around and saw, to what would have once been his very great surprise, two older Slytherin students laughing at him, before turning around and returning to their conversation. He felt his face go red.

"Just ignore them" Mirra said coldly. "They're only throwing stuff at you because you're with me. Being a Gryffindor and all."

Albus turned back to her. "No. They're throwing stuff at you because you're with me" he said sadly.

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Perhaps his drop in popularity was making it seem that way, but Albus thought that his time at Hogwarts was passing by much quicker than it had the previous year. His days mostly consisted of sitting in his dormitory doing work or relaxing in the Room of Requirement, where he couldn't be bothered by rude looks or crumpled up pieces of paper. All too soon, it was the last day of April, and the Quidditch Final was set to commence.

"They'll know who you are" Morrison whispered to him as they walked up the stands in a bustle of emerald and silver. Albus was walking in between him and Scorpius, his cloak drawn way over his head to avoid dirty looks.

"I know" he said. "I should've brought my Invisibility Cloak."

"Well it should all be over soon" Scorpius said to him as they took their place in the middle of the stands. "According to the wagers I've been hearing about, odds are for Gryffindor winning in under ten minutes."

"My brother isn't even playing!" he exclaimed from under his cloak, causing several students who were chatting excitedly near him to stop and glance over.

"But neither are you. And apparently, Gryffindor has a pretty good reserve Seeker."

Albus scowled as Dimitrius Parks' obnoxious voice rang out through the stadium for what would thankfully be the last time. "Welcome to the Hogwarts Quidditch Final!" he said.

The crowd erupted in cheers. Albus shrunk a bit in his seat.

"It's been a long road for these two teams, with heartbreaking victories on both sides. The biggest talk of the Final of course is the absence of *both* Potters, James and Albus, who normally play

Seeker for Gryffindor and Slytherin, respectively. And speaking of Gryffindor, here they come now!"

Albus watched as seven figures dressed in scarlet emerged from their locker rooms to tumultuous applause. The students all around him were booing and shouting. With a sharp pang in his gut, Albus realized that the last time he had watched a game from the stands was the previous Quidditch Final.

"And here comes Slytherin!"

Cheers erupted all around him, but the sounds of booing echoing from the rest of the stands nearly blocked it out completely. Albus craned his neck and saw the replacement Seeker right away. He was small and slim, much like himself. Albus would have guessed that he was no older than a third year.

"The points are almost all tied up for this match!" Parks' voice echoed through the disdainful sounds of Slytherin's arrival. "Not much strategy here, just catching the Snitch ought to do it! The previous final, also played by these two teams, went undecided after that fiasco on the field that year. So you know these two teams are eager for this one!"

More cheers, and then, as loud as the crowd behind it, a whistle. The game had begun.

As it turned out, Scorpius had been quite wrong in his estimation of the game's length. It was one of the longest that Albus had ever seen. The Chasers for both teams were doing their part, and the Beaters were certainly doing their jobs as well, but an hour into the game there had been no sign of the Snitch.

"Hathel to Finnigan - Finnigan drops the Quaffle to - no wait, intercepted by Sanders - who scores! Ninety to eighty Slytherin, goodness me this is a close game!" Parks was commentating. "Orik takes possession of the Quaffle - she's heading for the goal post, ouch that'll hurt, nicely played Bludger to the head by Reverin - where is the Snitch?"

Though it was certainly possible that the Snitch was hiding, Albus thought it more likely that the Seekers simply weren't up to par. It had taken him maybe the first ten minutes of the game to realize that it would take the Snitch literally flying into one of the Seeker's hands to end the game.

James' replacement was at least semi-competent, as he was circling high above the other players, which was the best way to catch a glimpse of the Snitch. His own replacement however, seemed nothing short of lost. He was hovering in mid-air, his head rapidly turning from side to side as if hoping it would come to him, rather than actually look for it.

"Blimey, this is taking *forever*" Morrison said from next to him twenty minutes later. They had been watching for almost two hours. "Has there been *any* sign of the Snitch?"

"Couldn't tell you" Scorpius said, his entire body slumped down in boredom. Even the noise had died down. It seemed as though the entire audience had stopped caring once both teams hit the three hundred point mark. Even Parks was beginning to lose his touch; he hadn't voiced his concerns on foul play for the last half of an hour.

"Finnigan - to the girl with sandy blonde hair, her name escapes me now - she dodges a Bludger, passes back to Finnigan - and now he takes - THE GRYFFINDOR SEEKER IS DIVING!"

Albus sat up straight and watched as the people around him also came out of their stupor. The noise that had echoed through the Pitch at the beginning of the game had returned.

Albus watched as the figure in scarlet swooped down and flew right past the Slytherin Seeker, who was frantically trying to tail him. It mattered not however; there was a sharp intake of breath, and the game was over.

"GRYFFINDOR WINS THE CUP!" Parks yelled into the microphone, and the cheers coming from the Gryffindor part of the stands drowned out the rest of it.

Albus leaned back in his seat and buried his head in his hands. He had known all along that it was going to happen-but hearing it said had made it all too real. Slytherin had lost. Because their star Seeker hadn't been playing.

People dressed in emerald were chucking their brooms and retreating to their locker room. Parks was announcing the score as a massive pile of gold and scarlet made its way down to the field to congratulate their team.

"One of our longest finals ever! Gryffindor wins four hundred and eighty to three hundred and ten! Look at those Slytherins storm off! Headmaster Ares should be coming out to present them with the Quidditch Cup momentarily."

"Well it's all over Al" Morrison said, giving him a clap on the shoulder. "At least you don't have to worry about it anymore. And there's always next year, right?"

Albus snorted and crossed his arms. He peered into the crowd and saw Mirra and Rose jumping around excitedly with their housemates; Rose's red hair made them quite easy to spot. The Gryffindor Seeker was being hoisted up on his shoulders, eagerly anticipating the moment when he could hold the cup.

And there certainly was a lot of anticipation. Ten minutes after Parks had announced it, the Gryffindor team was still waiting.

"It appears as though the Headmaster isn't aware that the game is over" Parks said, and the crowd began muttering. The Gryffindors on the Pitch were standing there quite stupidly, turning their heads in every direction. "Wait, here comes Professor Longbottom now!"

As he said it, Albus saw the figure of Neville hurrying towards the group. He exchanged words with the captain of the Gryffindor team, then turned to face the commentary podium. He pointed his wand at his throat, and a second later his voice was magically amplified.

"Headmaster Ares had urgent business to attend to" he said, his booming voice silencing the muttering going on around him. There was no denying the discomfort in his voice as well. "We do not know where he is currently, so I will be presenting Gryffindor with the Cup instead."

The Gryffindors on the field cheered, as did the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. Professor Flitwick entered the field, levitating the massive trophy in front of him. Neville grabbed it from mid air and began speaking again.

"Let's get out of here" Albus muttered to his friends, and he, Scorpius, and Morrison all stood and walked out of the stands, their housemates muttering in disappointment as Neville's words echoed throughout the Pitch.

"So it's kind of strange that Ares didn't watch the game, huh?" Scorpius said as they walked back to the Common Room.

"Not really" Albus said. "He doesn't care much about the school, does he? Gives us the same damn speech at the start of every term. He doesn't pay attention."

"Where do you think he is?" Morrison asked. "Forest?"

Albus knew what he was trying to do. Like Mirra, they were trying to keep him from focusing on Quidditch. He thought of the irony with a bitter smirk. Had it not been these same two people who had doubted it and ridiculed him for thinking something was up?"

"Probably" he said. "Not much we can do about it though. I still have no idea who the leak in the Ministry is, and without that piece of the puzzle, I can't prove Ares is up to anything. All he has to say is that he's never heard of the wand and he's clear. Let's just let it go."

Morrison and Scorpius exchanged a look of great surprise, and they entered the Slytherin Common Room a moment later. It was empty. Everyone was at the game.

"Ceremony should be over by now" Scorpius said. "Want to drop off our things and go to dinner?"

Albus shrugged. "I'm just going to head to bed" he said. "Tired" he lied.

"Okay" Morrison said, clearly not wanting to press the point any further. "Just try and cheer up okay? Tomorrow's May. Year's almost over."

They both gave him a clap on the back and left the Common Room. He walked into his dormitory and collapsed onto his bed.

He didn't know for how long he layed there, drifting in and out of sleep, but he supposed it must have been a few hours. He heard people enter the dormitory and knew that it must be late. He simply kept to his bed, curtains drawn around him, trying not to think.

Of course, trying not to think is the worst thing he could do, as that tended to make him think about everything. Albus realized this as different thoughts swam through his head. *Tomorrow's May*, Morrison had said.

The first of May. Tomorrow, or in a couple of hours actually, his father was going to have a ceremony in his honour. His father, the biggest success of the Potter family. His father was receiving an Order of Merlin! And what had he done today? Sat and watched his team lose. They had a chance and it had been blown because of him.

He turned on his side and wondered vaguely who would be at the ceremony. He knew that his Uncle Ron would be speaking, and Kingsley would be the one presenting the award. He thought of a few people that his father had mentioned from work. The girl Susan who had been on the elevator the time they visited the Ministry, she might be there. And the man with the long brown hair, Max, or whatever his name was, he might be there too.

He rolled over again. He knew one person from the Ministry who wouldn't be there. Fango Wilde. As long ago as it had been, he still remembered that day. He had thought of Fango Wilde as one of the most boring people that he had ever seen. But he had seen him in the Auror's office later that day, arguing with someone. That man, Mr. Fairhart. The man with the scarred face...

Albus bolted upright, sweat pouring down his face. Mr. Fairhart had been arguing with Fango Wilde that day. And Mr. Fairhart worked in the Auror office. And it must have been someone in the Auror office who knew of the wandmaker's whereabouts. And from the way that his father had been talking to him, Fairhart had been away for some time; right around the time that the wandmaker was murdered. *And that the Dragonfang Wand was stolen.*

How had no one seen it before? The evidence was all there, Fairhart had been missing, a wandmaker was murdered, and when he returned he'd argued with Fango Wilde. But Wilde knew something...that's why he investigated Hogwarts that day. And now he was missing. And what had his father said about Fairhart? That he was funny? A likeable guy? No one would ever suspect him...

He felt excitement rush through him, excitement that he hadn't felt since he'd read about Wilde's disappearance weeks ago. He had found the informant.

He jumped out of bed and pulled the curtains back. Everyone was sleeping; he must have been drifting in and out of it for a long time. He walked over to Morrison's bed and shook him.

"Morrison" he whispered. "Morrison wake up, it's important."



"Wussa' matter?" he said, rolling over, his brown hair getting caught in his mouth, his eyes half open.

"I know who killed the wandmaker" he whispered. "I know the informant in the Ministry is!"

Morrison stared blankly, then rolled over. Albus narrowed his eyes. He looked over to Scorpius' bed. Things had been rocky with him since their fight with Eckley and Hornsbrook. But he needed someone to back him up...

He walked over to Scorpius' bed and shook him awake as well. He opened his eyes up at once. "What's going on?" he said. He peered at his watch. "Al it's midnight."

"I know" he said, though that was a complete lie; he hadn't had the slightest idea what time it was. "But I know who the informant is. The one in the Ministry."

Scorpius sat up straight and rubbed his eyes. "What? How? Who?"

"It just came to me. It's this guy Fairhart. I'm going to go and tell Darvy, he might be able to contact my dad."

"You'll have to tell him about the wand won't you?"

Albus nodded. "You coming?"

Scorpius glanced at his watch again and sighed. "Let me get my slippers on."

Five minutes later and they were walking along the stone passageways in the dungeons, still dressed in pajamas, on their way to speak to Darvy.

"Think he'll be up?" Scorpius asked him as he stifled a yawn.

"If not, we'll wake him" Albus said. "This is important. Damn I should have brought my wand!" he added as he bumped into a wall. The torches were not lit at night, and he and Scorpius were forced to feel their way through the darkness.

"Same" Scorpius said. "So, this bloke Fairhart, you got like, concrete evidence it was him?"

"Yeah" Albus said, though he knew that was kind of a stretch. "Well, it all fits, and I can see why no one's suggested it before. Everyone likes the guy."

Scorpius stifled another yawn. "Well that makes sense. You never suspect the ones you like."

They reached the Potions classroom. Albus gave a small knock. There was no answer. He knocked again. He heard bustling around, and Darvy came to the door.

Albus raised his eyebrows when he saw him. He was dressed in all black, including a cloak that looked very much like it would blend in with tar. His long blonde hair was ruffled and sticking

out at odd ends, and his bright blue eyes did little to detract from the look of surprise on his face. Albus knew at once why he was dressed. They had caught him moments before was going to leave to spy on Ares in the Forest.

"Albus!" he exclaimed. "Scorpius! What are you boy's doing up at this hour? What's wrong?"

"We have something to tell you sir-" Albus began.

"Come in, come in" Darvy ushered them, and they entered the Potions classroom. Darvy flicked his wand and the lights turned on. He took a seat at his table, forcibly reminding Albus of the last time he had been in this position.

"Is everything okay?" Darvy asked them both.

"We're fine" Albus said. "But we have something to tell you."

Darvy looked at both of them and began biting his fingernails. "Boy,s I'm sure it's important, but I have somewhere to be."

"We know, you're going in to the Forest to spy on Ares" Albus said. "That's kind of what this is about."

Darvy froze. "Has something happened?"

"Do you remember when you asked us if we knew anything about that wandmaker being murdered?" Albus asked. "Because...we do. We think we know who did it."

Scorpius nodded his head stupidly, Darvy merely continued to stare. "You do?" he said.

"Yes" Albus said. "Sorry we didn't tell you before. My dad said he thinks that there's an informant in the Ministry, and we think he's the one who killed the wandmaker."

Darvy continued to stare, then slowly closed his eyes and ran his hands through his matted blonde hair. "An informant in the Ministry you say? Dear me...who?"

"We think it's someone named Fairhart" Albus said. "We have to hurry and tell my dad."

"Oh yes, certainly" Darvy said, standing up. "But I'm afraid we'll have to wait until morning-"

"There's more sir" Albus said. "We think that the person who killed that wandmaker stole something. A wand."

Darvy froze once more. Albus quickly glanced at Scorpius. "A wand?" Darvy asked. "What kind of wand? Like a particular kind, or what?"

"It has a name" Albus said. "The- the Dragonfang Wand?" he said, hoping that it would register for Darvy.

It did. The Potions professor looked like he was going to faint. "The Dragonfang Wand! Do you- do you know who has it now?" he asked hesitantly.

Albus was quite taken aback. He had expected to be bombarded with questions about how they knew about the wand, or at least told that it didn't exist. "We- we think Ares has it."

"Oh my" Darvy said. He stared up at the ceiling for several seconds. Albus and Scorpius traded looks once more. "Boys...boys this is serious" Darvy said. Albus swallowed. "You could be in great danger."

"From who?" Scorpius asked, speaking for the first time. "From Ares?"

Darvy nodded. "I'm afraid so. If Ares does have the wand..." he trailed off.

"So what do we do?" Albus asked, trying to ignore the panic in his voice. "Tell my dad now?"

"No" Darvy said. "First- first we get you boys to safety."

"Safety?" they both said. "Can't we just go back to the Common Room?" Scorpius asked.

"No!" Darvy yelled, and they both jumped. "You will be in danger. Ares- the wan- you boys have no idea how did this happen-"

He began pacing, beads of sweat dripping from his forehead. "Come with me" he said, and he opened the door. He raised his wand and the tip became illuminated at once, allowing them to see in the stony passageways. They followed him through the labyrinth of the dungeons.

"Can we go to the Common Room first?" Albus asked as they followed him. He wanted to get his wand, and maybe his Cloak too. He felt quite frightened without them. One look at the terrified expression on Scorpius' face told him that he was thinking along the same lines.

"No, we don't have time" Darvy said, and they picked up the pace. Soon they had left the dungeons and entered the Great Hall.

"Where are we going?" Scorpius asked. "The grounds?"

Darvy nodded, but didn't look back. "Believe me, it's the safest place until I can get a message to the Ministry."

They exited the castle and entered the grounds. The night sky was starless, and a fierce chill made Albus' spine tingle. He wished that he at least had a jacket. They descended the grassy slope and Albus saw Hagrid's hut, smoke coming from the chimney. "You're taking us to Hagrid's!" he exclaimed.

"No" Darvy said. It was hard to see him now. His cloak was so dark. "Follow me" he repeated.

They followed him until they reached the edge of the Forest. Then he turned and looked at them. He sunk down onto his knees and stared at them both intently. "Boys, I need you to listen to me carefully. You are in danger. I am going to take you somewhere safe, and then send a message to the Ministry. We are going into the Forest."

"But isn't that were Ares is?" Scorpius exclaimed.

"Shhh!" Darvy whispered. "I need you to trust me, I have a plan."

Albus stared into his electric blue eyes. Darvy had spent the entire year spying on Ares and preventing him from causing harm. "We trust you" he said, and Scorpius turned to look at him.

"Good, now follow me" Darvy said once more. He stood up, and placed his hands onto their shoulders. He began steering them into the Forest. "Stay quiet" he told them.

They did as they were told. For five minutes, Darvy walked them though the Forest, the only sounds the snapping of twigs and hooting of owls. Darvy appeared to be leading them along a very poorly made trail. Eventually they began fighting their way through bushes. It wasn't long before they heard voices. Eventually they found themselves just outside of a forest clearing; the very same clearing that Albus had found Rookwood's wand in. He peered into the clearing and his jaw dropped.

There was a large fire in the middle of it, crackling merrily under the night sky. Standing all around it was a group of cloaked figures, at least fifty of them, and most of them were wearing strange looking masks. Albus tried to turn around only to realize that Darvy's hands were still on his shoulders. Holding him in place. He heard Scorpius give a small whimper. They were no more than twenty feet away from the congregation.

Though the cloaked figures were all standing together around the fire, there seemed to be another, somewhat shorter man, in the center near the crackling flames. Only when he spoke did Albus realize who it was.

"We are one step closer, my brothers!" Ares announced. "The Dragonfang Wand will soon join our arsenal, fully ready to aid us in our endeavors! For I have here in my hands the very tool that will help us create this war! Help us continue to support the arts that we cherish so much!"

The men all muttered in excitement, then stopped at once when they spotted Darvy-and Albus and Scorpius.

Even if Darvy weren't holding him in place, Albus wouldn't have been able to run. His legs felt like jelly. He could feel Scorpius shivering, and hear his teeth chattering as well. Ares turned and saw what the cloaked figures were looking at. He too was wearing a black cloak. He saw Darvy and his face turned stony. He approached them.

"What is this?" he barked, his black mustache quivering. His grey eyes lingered on Albus and Scorpius. The group of cloaked figures behind him were still muttering. "Sebastian, what's going on?" Ares said. "Why have you brought them here?"

Albus looked up and saw Darvy staring back at Ares, his blue eyes narrowed as he spoke directly to him. "We have a problem, Red. These two kids know about the wand. They know everything."

## Chapter 16 : At The Edge Of The Forest

Albus felt as though he was being showered with ice. The very hair on his skin was standing up; he had never been so terrified in his life. Ares was standing right in front of him, scratching his chin, apparently deep in thought. Darvy still had his hands on his shoulder. He tried making eye contact with Scorpius, who was also frozen in fear, but it was to no avail. His eyes were tightly jammed shut, as if hoping he were still sleeping.

"You said they know everything?" Ares repeated in his gruff voice.

Darvy nodded. "What are we going to do?"

"Keep them here. Do not let them so much as twitch. Let me sort this out" Ares said, and he turned his back on them and walked back towards the group of masked figures. Albus watched as the fire in the center of the Forest seemingly extinguished itself. Ares had not even muttered an incantation.

Darvy removed his hands from Albus shoulders and turned to face the both of them, then removed his wand from his robes and held it at them threateningly. Albus recoiled; he felt his own two feet back up a few steps.

"Stay right there!" Darvy barked, and Albus stopped mid-step, his mind racing.

*How are we going to get out of here?* he thought hopelessly. And how had this happened? Darvy...was betraying them?

Everything seemed to click in his head. Darvy had not been spying on Ares in the Forest all year, Neville had had it quite wrong. He was joining him. And he had made Albus promise he wouldn't tell his father about Ares and the Forest, not because Ares was doing something good, but the complete opposite. And he had fallen right for it.

"We have... a slight problem" he heard Ares say from what sounded like a million miles away; he had been lost in his own thoughts. Snapping back into reality, he somehow managed to ignore the wand pointed at him and saw that Ares was now standing with his hands on his hips, the cloaked figures just a few feet away from him, moving around nervously in what was now a semi-circle. "It appears as though our whereabouts have been discovered by some students, nothing to be concerned of."

"That's Potter's son!" one of the hooded figures yelled out, and Albus thought that he recognized the voice as the oily Rookwood's. "That's the Potter boy!"

Cries of anger and fear flew through the crowd as they all began yelling. "Kill him!" one of them shouted, and Albus felt his body freeze up, though he was sweating quite a bit.

"No!" Ares barked out, and he whipped his wand out from under his cloak. In the split second that it was illuminated from the glow of the moon, Albus saw it glimmer and knew at once that Ares had not been bluffing, and that he had been right. Though he had never seen a picture of it, he somehow knew that it was the Dragonfang Wand. "We will do no such thing!" he yelled.

The cloaked figures stopped yelling, though continued muttering in fear. One of them emerged from within the group. "I will not be put in Azkaban!" he yelled, and he charged forward, removing his wand from his robes.

Albus closed his eyes, then heard Scorpius yell-

*BANG!*

Albus opened his eyes and he saw the man had been knocked backwards off of his feet. Ares had the wand pointed directly where the man had been standing moments before.

"Yes, that will keep us all from Azkaban, kill Potter's son!" Ares snarled. The crowd fell silent. Darvy was looking back over his shoulder, watching, though his wand was still pointed at he and Scorpius...

If only he could somehow wrestle the wand away from him. Then they would have a sliver of a chance of escaping. But backing up earlier had cost him his chance. He was much too far to lunge at Darvy without risking a spell to the face. Scorpius, however, was quite close.

"Scorpius" he muttered under his breath. "Scorpius" he repeated when his friend made no indication of having heard him. But he couldn't capture his attention. Scorpius was standing still, teeth chattering, and Albus didn't dare speak louder in fear that Darvy would hear them.

"Now I understand we are all frightened!" Ares said, which Albus thought was a bit of an understatement. Some of the cloaked figures were shivering just as much as Scorpius. "But I have a plan! Stay calm. We are going to wipe their memories and send them back to the castle!"

"Memory charms can be broken!" someone called out, and there was a murmur of agreement.

Ares sighed. "Now really Markson, you think I don't know that? Are you forgetting what wand I'll be using? I can assure you, no spell will break though this memory charm..."

Albus became even more frightened, if it were possible. He refused to have his memory wiped. He was at least going to put up a fight, he had decided on that much. Darvy was still looking over his shoulder, his wand dangling casually from his fingers...

"Scorpius" Albus muttered, louder than the previous two times. It worked; it caught his attention. And Darvy's. They both turned to look at him. He needed to find a way to get the message across without giving Darvy a warning...

"Scorpius, go to your room" he said.

Scorpius raised his eyebrows, as did Darvy. "His room?" Darvy snapped. "What rubbish is-"

He never got to finish the sentence. In one quick sweeping motion, Scorpius had cocked his leg back and kicked Darvy right in the groin. He let out a yell so loud that the cloaked figures and Ares stopped talking to look at him. Albus watched as he fell to the floor, dropping his wand to grab his privates in pain.

He dove for it. Snatching up Darvy's wand from the ground and stepping over his shrieking body, he took aim at no one in particular. He thought he heard a door slam somewhere off in the distance, but thought nothing of it. "Run!" he said to Scorpius. "*Expelliarmus*" he cried, waving the wand wildly, and to his complete shock, the spell hit one of the cloaked figures, knocking them off of their feet.

"Get him!" they yelled in unison, and quite suddenly all fifty of them had their wands drawn.

"No!" Ares exclaimed, waving his hands in an attempt to keep order.

It was to no avail however. The masked figures, terrified at the thought of Albus telling his father of their operations, had no intention of letting him leave it seemed. They all lunged, ignoring Ares frantic yells of "STOP! STOP!"

"*Incarcerous!*" one of them shouted, and thick ropes burst from the tip of his wand. Albus ducked just in time, though from the sound of the yell just behind him, Scorpius hadn't been so lucky.

He turned and saw his friend on the ground, ropes wrapped tightly around him as he squirmed and shouted. "Scorpius!" he yelled, though there was no time to help him. A red spell had been fired at him. "*Protego!*" he cried, praying it worked.

Once more to his very great surprise, the spell was deflected at the last second, sending it right back at the figure who fired it, who promptly crumpled to the ground.

"*Expelliarmus!*" another one of them cried. Albus was not quick enough this time; the spell hit him right in the stomach. He was blasted to the ground, and he felt Darvy's wand fly from his fingers.

"No!" he gasped, the wind having been knocked out of him.

"HOW DARE YOU HURT HARRY POTTER'S SON!" he heard someone roar.

Albus rolled over in the dirt and saw Hagrid running into the Forest clearing. He quickly approached the man who had hit Albus and punched him square in the chest, giving a cry of outrage as he did so. His blow was so powerful that the man was thrown back across half of the



clearing, colliding with a tree that split in half on impact. Had he not been convulsing, Albus would have thought him dead.

Hagrid gave another roar and began swiping at the group of cloaked figures, who were falling left and right. Soon, there were cries of "*Stupefy!*" and red beams of light were hitting Hagrid from all sides.

"No!" Albus gasped again.

He was worried for nothing however. The beams did so little that the men were better off kicking at his shins. Albus watched as Hagrid, still in full rage, grabbed a man in each of his massive hands, lifted them from the ground, and knocked their heads together before tossing them into the dirt.

"Kill!" someone shouted.

"No! Do not harm the gamekeeper!" Ares shouted. "Only stun him!"

One of the men who had thus far managed to avoid Hagrid's powerful swings took aim with his wand. "*Avada Ke -*"

"No!" Ares shouted once more, and he waved his wand viciously at him. Albus saw the man fall to the ground screaming in pain.

"Only seek to stun!" Ares repeated.

Albus could tell that Ares had lost control however. The men were now ignoring him, intent on fighting their way and fleeing. Their numbers had dwindled though. Albus counted ten men on the ground unconscious, and Hagrid was showing no signs of slowing down. He grabbed a man by his arm, twisted it until he heard a snap, and threw him into the air. Albus didn't see him come back down.

Hagrid turned and looked directly at him. "WHAT ARE YER WAITIN' FOR AL! GET YER FRIEND AND GET OUTTA' HERE!" he bellowed.

Albus didn't need to be told twice, he had spent way too much time watching the battle. He crawled towards one of the unconscious cloaked figures on the ground and picked up the wand that had been dropped next to him. He took a quick glance up and saw at least one of the wizards had some sense; he had abandoned his attempt to subdue Hagrid with spells and had jumped on his back, attempting to strangle him.

Hagrid gave yet another roar and flipped the man over onto the ground, then stepped on his stomach. The man gave a squeal and began shaking uncontrollably. From right behind him, someone had gotten off of the ground. Darvy was standing, hunched over in pain still, but he had

his wand drawn. How he got it back Albus didn't know, but one glance at the murderous look on his face told him that he wasn't aiming to stun.

Albus watched as Darvy made complicated movements with his wand, muttering strange words as he did so. A jet of black flames emerged from the wand's tip and hit Hagrid square in the back. He gave a growl and fell to the floor in agony.

"Hagrid!" Albus yelled.

"Get...outta'...here!" Hagrid responded in between breaths. Red spells were still being fired at him, and now that he had been weakened, they were apparently taking their toll.

Albus crawled over to Scorpius, who was still squirming and shouting. He knew he didn't have long before the wizards started paying attention to them again. "Hold...still" he said, wrestling with the tied up Scorpius.

Scorpius did as he was told. Albus aimed his wand at where the ropes seemed thickest.

"*Diffindo*" he said. The severing charm worked. Within seconds, Scorpius had worked himself free.

"Go get help!" Albus told him.

"I'm on it!" Scorpius answered, and he took off, running through the clearing and jumping into the bushes.

Albus turned his attention back to Hagrid. He was miraculously standing again, though the constant stunners were finally starting to have an effect. He was swiping at them as hard as he could, giving inarticulate yells of rage as he did so, but Albus knew it was only a matter of time before they took him out of the battle permanently.

Ares was watching, horrified. He had stopped yelling for them to stop and was now pacing, unsure of how to handle the situation. Albus stared at him maliciously before turning back to Hagrid.

"Hold on Hagrid!" he yelled. "*Expelliarmus! Expelliarmus! Expelliarmus!*"

He watched as the wizards, caught off guard, had their wands knocked from their hands. Darvy had managed to keep a hold of his wand though. He fired a blue lethal looking spell at Albus, which he just barely managed to dodge by rolling out of the way. He thought that he heard a tree explode behind him.

"*Expelliarmus!*" he cried. Albus knew that using basic disarming spells showed just how unmatched he was, but it had worked well so far hadn't it?

Darvy sneered and deflected it casually. The maniacal grin that he usually wore had returned to his face, only its effect on Albus was now quite the opposite of what it usually was. It did nothing but terrify him now.

Darvy made more complicated motions with his wand, and Albus knew that if he didn't dodge this one as well he wouldn't be getting up anytime soon.

"Not so fast!" he heard someone say, and he turned and saw Neville and Professor Bellinger emerging from a dense clump of bushes into the clearing. Scorpius had evidently gotten them.

"Albus, return to the castle!" Neville said. "Your father is coming shortly!"

At this, the masked figures all gave yells of terror and dashed for the trees. The grin slid from Darvy's face. He fired a blue spell at Neville, who dodged and fired a yellow one back. Darvy deflected it with a casual flick just as he had done to Albus' and waved his wand once more. Twin fiery red spells flew from it. Professor Bellinger managed to deflect hers but Neville was thrown off his feet, clutching his ribs and screaming in pain.

Professor Bellinger aimed her wand at a large branch that had fallen to the ground in the ensuing chaos and flicked it. The branch sprang up from off the ground and was thrown at Darvy, who ducked. Two masked figures behind him were hit square in the face with it. She flicked her wand once more and the branch was set ablaze, and another sharp flick and it was hurled at the group of wizards who were still chipping away at Hagrid, who had fallen to the ground and was breathing heavily. They yelled as the branch came for them and ducked, then ran away with the rest of the group. All that remained standing now were two or three hooded masked wizards, Darvy, Professor Bellinger, Albus and Ares.

Albus turned his attention to Ares and saw that he had started to run into the denser parts of the forest. He felt anger swell up inside of him. After causing all of this, he was going to flee? He ran after him.

"Albus no!" he heard Neville yell.

But it didn't matter, he refused to let Ares escape. He ignored the fact that Ares had an extremely powerful wand, and that he was an ex-Auror, and a much more accomplished wizard. He ignored the fact that he wasn't even using his own wand, and that there was no spell in his arsenal that could do any amount of damage. No, all that he thought about was that this night had started with him trying to have Ares thrown back in Azkaban, and that he would be damned if it didn't end that way as well...

He chased Ares so far into the Forest that he could barely hear the battle behind him. Ares was fast for a man his age, but Albus was quickly gaining ground. Once he realized he was being tailed Ares flicked his wand and a red beam of light nearly missed Albus by inches. He ran as fast as his legs could take him, ducking as another spell missed him narrowly.

"Come off of it boy!" Ares yelled back, jumping over a tree root and ducking to avoid a stray branch. Albus did the same, still in hot pursuit. His ribs were on fire from running so fast, but he refused to show even the slightest signs of slowing down.

"Don't make me hurt you Potter!" Ares spat, and another spell flew from him. Albus ducked just in time.

Albus decided it was time for him to take the offensive as well. He had momentarily forgotten the wand in his hand. "*Impedimentia!*" he cried, echoing the same words that Neville had used to slow down Hornsbrook and Eckley weeks ago.

Ares flicked his wand and a large bubble appeared from behind him, repelling the spell backwards with much more force and accuracy than a normal shield charm. Albus managed to dodge it, but the spell grazed his hand, knocking his wand from his fingertips.

He knew that he didn't have time to stop and pick it up; he was simply going to have to try and tackle him.

"You are defenseless!" Ares spat as he continued running. "Don't be foolish boy!"

Albus didn't bother replying, he wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of knowing that he was right. He ducked under a branch and narrowly tripped over a stone on the ground, but he could still see Ares through the light of the moon. And he was quickly losing him. Albus was afraid that he would soon lose sight of him...

"AARGH!"

Albus watched as a centaur emerged from the trees and stood on its hind legs, giving a horse like squeal and kicking the unsuspecting Ares in the chest. Albus thought that he saw the shadow of a hoof print on the centaur's chest, and recognized it as the centaur that he'd talked to the previous year.

The centaur ignored him however, and marched right past them. Albus heard more centaurs galloping through the Forest as well, and he understood at once what was happening. They had heard the battle and were going to defend their Forest.

Albus stopped running and grabbed his chest, breathing heavily. He glanced up and saw Ares on the ground, groaning in pain. Just a few yard away was the Dragonfang Wand.

They both saw it at the same time. Albus dove for it just as Ares lunged as well. They collided, but Albus had been faster. His reflexes had improved exponentially from his Quidditch training, and despite being farther away, he had somehow managed to grab the wand a moment before Ares had gotten there. He felt their heads smack against each other, and felt Ares' hand scrape against his own in an attempt to wrestle the wand away from him.

Whether Ares got to touch it or not, Albus didn't know, but he had rolled over the second he knew that he had the wand. He stood up and aimed the wand directly at Ares, who was still on the floor. Albus watched as he glanced up, saw the wand aimed at him, and recoiled, almost childlike, against the back of a tree.

"No- no. P-p- please don't! Drop it!" he managed to stammer out.

Albus stood quite still, his heart pounding, desperately trying to catch his breath. He took a moment to survey his surroundings. He didn't know how far they were from the edge of the Forest, but the sounds of the battle and of the galloping centaurs were completely absent. They had instead been replaced by an eerie silence and the sounds of leaves rustling in the wind. And Ares' whimpering.

There was no sign of a trail of any sort. They had been running for what felt like ten minutes, and Albus doubted very much if even Hagrid had been this far into the Forest before. The trees were so massive that the moonlight barely squeezed through, Albus had to squint to see the man cowering twenty feet away from him.

He glanced at the wand in his outstretched hand. It was unnaturally long, a few inches longer than his own, and it was strangely thin as well. The wand itself was a magnificent shade of gold, which glimmered even in the small light of the moon, but the handle was most peculiar. It was shaped just like a fang, and it was so black that had Albus not felt it in his fingers, he wouldn't have known it was there.

It felt no different from his usual wand, he felt no warmth from it as he did with his own anyway, and there was certainly no sense of power in it. Nevertheless however, he knew that it was special. The wand felt no different, but he certainly did.

After he was done examining it he resumed pointing it at Ares, who was still cowering against the tree. "Please" he begged. "Please put that down. You have no idea...no idea."

"I have a pretty good idea!" Albus spat out, his grip tightening. "I think I'll see how well this thing works! See why it's so great you need to show it off to your little dark wizard pals!"

"No!" Ares shouted, and Albus had never seen someone look so terrified.

They waited for five minutes in silence, Albus still trying to decide what to do.

*"Kill him"*

Albus froze. That voice, where had it come from?

"What?" he said aloud, and Ares froze as well, eyeing both he and the wand in fear.

*"Kill him. Kill him before he kills you."*

Albus glanced down at the wand. The voice that he heard was so dark, so eerie, and yet, he was sure that he had heard it before. Somewhere...

*"Don't be foolish, if Ares escapes there will be nothing holding him back, his cover is blown."*

"What?" he repeated, confused. Where had he heard that voice before? Was the wand...talking to him?

"Don't listen to it!" Ares managed to spit out after a few moments. "Don't listen to the voice! Please, you don't understand it!"

"I couldn't" Albus said aloud, though he was not speaking to Ares, but the voice, wherever it was coming from.

*"You could. You know the spell. And now you have the power to use it. Kill him and end this all!"*

"DON'T LISTEN TO IT!" Ares shouted. Could he hear the voice as well?

"Shut up!" Albus spat at him. "Shut your mouth and stay still!"

He needed to think. He did not want to be a murderer. He could not, would not, murder someone, whatever the wand told him.

*"He will seek revenge if he lives" the voice said. "Everything you know and love will pay if you don't kill him now, you know this."*

"I- I don't-" but he didn't get to finish his sentence. He had heard footsteps. Albus turned, the wand still pointed at Ares. He peered his eyes into the the dense clump of bushes that he had chased Ares through. His father emerged from it.

"Dad?" Albus said.

His father was panting heavily; it was easy to see that he had been running. He took one glance at Ares, then another at Albus, and saw the wand in his hand. "Albus no!" he shouted. *"Stupefy!"*

Albus saw a flash of red light, then felt as though he had been punched in the stomach; hard. He felt the wand slip from his fingers as he fell to his knees, the sound of the eerie voice screaming something inaudible as he fell, and then his head hit the ground, and he drifted off into sweet unconsciousness.

## Chapter 17: A Bittersweet Beginning

Albus heard muffled voices. He tried moving, but his body seemed frozen. He opened his eyes just the teeniest bit, but even this was a struggle. Something was glittering in the distance.

He tried to open his eyes more, but couldn't. The glittering thing-whatever it was-was moving closer to him. He squinted. What was it? Was it...the Snitch? Everything was so blurry.

He made a grab for it. His body ached, but for some strange reason, seeing the Snitch had cured his paralysis. His arm shot up and grabbed at it before it could flutter away-

"OUCH!"

The yell made Albus sit up straight. He wished he hadn't. His neck felt broken. He managed to open his eyes fully, and the blurriness ceased at once. He saw his father, and he was looking quite agitated. His glasses were lopsided, anyway.

"What was that for?" his father asked him.

"Huh?"

Albus looked around and surveyed his surroundings. He was in the Hospital Wing, he knew that much. Judging from the drawn curtains around him, it was nighttime. His father was sitting on his bed, where he had been tucked in quite vigorously. He could barely feel his legs. He went to wipe sweat from his face and felt that his head had been bandaged.

"Why'd you hit me?" his father asked him, intrigued.

"Huh? Oh..sorry. The Snitch. I thought- and the- it glimmered..." he trailed off.

His father removed his glasses and wiped them down with his robes. "There's something wrong with you, boy" he said before returning them to his face.

Albus felt his bandaged head, then tried moving his neck. It wasn't broken like he thought it was, but it was certainly stiff. "What's going on? Where- where's- no! Hagrid!" he shot out suddenly, and he actually made to rise from his bed.

His father held up his hand to stop him. "Hagrid is okay" he said. "As is your friend Scorpius, and Prof-"

"Dad, Darvy and Ares! " he cut his father off.

"I'm getting to it-"

"The wand! A leak. Dad the leak in the Ministry!" he cut him off again.

"Albus!" his father yelled, and it was more than frightening enough to silence him. "I understand you have questions, all of which I am trying to answer for you now. Be still. And I assure you, there is very little that you can tell me that I don't already know."

"How- how long was I out?" Albus stammered.

"Just a day. Your friends tried stopping by but Madam Clearwater made it quite clear that only I was allowed in the Hospital Wing. They'll be ecstatic to know that you're okay."

Albus rubbed his bandaged head. His mind was swimming. Flashes of what had occurred in the Forest were running through his head. Hagrid roaring in rage. Scorpius, tied up. Ares, his back up against a tree. A flash of red light.

"You...you stunned me?" Albus asked his father uncertainly. He nodded. "Why?"

"I had to, before something terrible happened. I will explain everything Albus, but I need you to be still and stay quiet. First I must ask you. How are you feeling?"

Albus wasn't entirely sure what he had meant, but could only assume it referred to him physically.

"Like crap" he said truthfully. "Body aches. My head feels like it's on fire. Everything's hazy."

"That's what a direct stunner will do to you" his father said. "I think I may have overdone it though. I wanted to revive you, but Madam Clearwater said that doing so before you were ready to be revived may have put you into shock. She suggested that we wait it out until you woke up."

"Well I'm up" Albus said. "Dad what- what happened? Did Ares get away?"

His father shifted his weight on the bed. "I see that there's no dodging your questions any longer. Let me give you the short rundown. Ares and Darvy both escaped, but we know who the leak in the Ministry is. Or should I say was."

"Mr. Fairhart" Albus said, but was shocked to see the look of confusion on his father's face.

"Fairhart? Sancticus Fairhart of the Auror Department? What are you playing at Al?"

"I thought- no - yeah. Yeah! The leak is Fairhart...isn't it?"

"No!" his father said, and he waved his hand as though he were batting the accusation away.

"Why on Earth would you think that?" he said.

"Because- because, I don't know. He was gone for a month. And he- I don't know, he just looks the type" he finished stupidly. If he were being honest with himself, he didn't quite remember why he was so positive it had been Fairhart. He supposed that he may have been simply looking for an excuse to go after Ares, but he wasn't going to confess that to his father.



"Ahh I see" his father said. "You were judging a book by its cover. Or more accurately, a man by his face. Yes, Sancticus Fairhart *looks* the type I admit, but he's more than trustworthy. No, the leak I mentioned to you last summer was someone who doesn't look the type at all I'm afraid. It was Fango Wilde."

"What?"

His father nodded his head. "Yes. I'm sorry to say that we are not mistaken. He confessed to it hours ago. Under the influence of veritaserum, actually. That's a powerful truth potion, if you didn't know."

"Fango Wilde?" Albus repeated, shocked. "Wow" he whispered softly, and he truly meant it.

"Yeah" his father said. "Shocker right? But anyway, I'm going to start from the beginning with you Albus, I see no other way to avoid being bombarded with your questions. Everything that you want to know I will answer in time, or try to at least. Let me start from the beginning. Albus, do you know what an EP is?"

Albus nodded his head. "An 'Ever Present' wizard right?"

His father didn't ask how he had acquired that information, but instead simply nodded his head. "Indeed. An Ever Present. Wizards who have been accused of dark activity before, through one or more generations of dark wizard uprisings."

"What does this have to do with- wait! The men in the Forest tonight!" Albus said suddenly. He regretted yelling; his head was pounding.

"Correct. We will get to that. But anyway, my job as an Auror for the last two years now has been to track these men. We spent very little time on it before now, these people are hardly a threat singularly, but the Ministry has grown fearful recently. Known EP's had been gathering in certain areas all across the world. I was sent to spy on them."

Albus remembered his father's frequent absences the previous year. And he remembered, with a slight pang in his heart, Ares and Darvy discussing EP's in Ares' office as well. How did it all fit...

"The Ministry, myself included, grew fearful that these people were gathering with a new leader in mind. It is our top priority to ensure that these people never acquire someone to rally behind. The EP's moved closer and closer to Hogwarts."

Albus stayed silent. He thought he knew where this was going...

"I received my first clue that Reginald Ares was the leader of these men last year. It showed up on our doorstep if you'll remember."

"Last Christmas!" Albus yelled, his head pounding in pain again.

His father nodded. "Ares appeared at our home over Christmas to ask a favor of me. He asked me to back off my investigations."

Albus' jaw dropped. "That was your *clue*? That's practically confirmation!"

"Not exactly" his father rebutted. "His excuses, though somewhat weak, were viable. He claimed that there had been reports of Ministry members in Hogsmeade, on Ministry business. This was true. He claimed that it was worrying the parents of his students. I had no way to refute this claim. He also insisted that by spying on these wizards I was showing that I did not think of him as a sufficient enough Headmaster to be able to handle the problem on his own, and more importantly, by spying I was drawing attention to them, which was bound to have them try something stupid under pressure. We reached a shaky agreement. I agreed not to bother or spy on those wizards, as long as Ares personally told them off. It appeared to have worked. The EP's traveled from out of Hogwarts reach. I breathed easy."

Albus went silent once more. This was all only covering last year. He wanted to know what had happened *this year*.

"The Ministry eased up a little. Ares was still at Hogwarts, the EP's were traveling abroad, and, more importantly, were meeting less frequently. Then something very suspicious happened last summer."

"The wandmaker" Albus said.

"Yes. Vladimir Chekov, a famous wandmaker, was murdered. Chaos ensued throughout the Ministry, my department in particular. Chekov was the owner of something very dangerous, and was permitted to keep it so long as he was relocated. Years ago, we had placed him in a muggle village, with very few people knowing his whereabouts. His murder showed that there was a leak in the Ministry. We now know that it was Fango Wilde. His place in the Department of Magical Transportation somehow helped him get the information he needed."

"So... Fango Wilde murdered the wandmaker?" Albus asked.

"No. According to Mr. Wilde, he gave the location of the wandmaker to one Sebastian Darvy."

Albus hung his head low. "Why" he muttered. "Professor Darvy..."

"He's not your professor anymore" his father said. "Anyway, at the time, we had few leads. I attempted to check up on Ares and see if he had any connection. Wizards teachers here, including Professor Handit and Professor Flitwick-told us that Ares hadn't left the castle at all over the summer."

"So Ares got Darvy to do it" Albus said.

"Yes. But not just for the sake of murder, no. They stole something. The thing that Chekov was hiding."

"The Dragonfang Wand" Albus said.

His father raised his eyebrows, and Albus knew at once that he had not expected to hear that. "That's right" his father said. "The Dragonfang Wand."

Albus braced himself to be attacked with questions, but his father merely smiled for a second and continued. "We can only assume that Darvy brought the wand back to Ares and that he's been in possession of it for quite some time. Strangely, there was a trace on this wand, a trace that hadn't alerted us of anything."

"A trace?" Albus asked.

His father nodded. "Much like the ones implanted on young wizards to know when they use underage magic, this trace would show us when the wand was used. Ares was clever however. He didn't use it until he had broken the trace on it. How, I do not know, but as powerful as he is, I don't doubt it. How long he's actually been using the wand, I also don't know."

"But why? Why did he want the wand?"

"I will tell you later, but first I think it is important that you understand how the events of tonight occurred" his father told him. "I asked Neville to keep an eye on Ares this year; just trusted my instincts. I learned that Ares was going into the Forest. Neville was unable to follow him. He told me, however, that he wasn't the only teacher attempting to do so."

"Darvy" Albus spat bitterly.

"Yes, and I felt comfort by it. Two spies were better than one."

"But he wasn't spying dad!" Albus said. "He was joining-"

"I know, I know. I know now anyway. At the time though, it appeared as though Ares would be unable to do anything illegal with at least two people checking up on him. I turned my attention to other matters. Your Uncle Ron confided in me that you and your friends had told him that the Ministry visited you this year. To inspect Hogwarts, he said. No such inspection occurred. Nothing Ministry sanctioned anyway. This baffled me. We know now, of course, that it was merely a clever charade orchestrated by Ares. He no doubt had something urgent to discuss with his little band of wizards, who at this point were already meeting him in the Forest. Unable to accomplish it at night, he had Fango Wilde and the other visitor meet him during the day, in his office. The other wizard wasn't from the Ministry at all."

Albus felt anger bubble up inside of him. He grabbed the white linen sheets of the bed he was in with fury. This entire year they had been tricked...

"Ares was having a meeting, an apparently very important meeting with his EP's in the Forest last night Albus. I cannot begin to imagine how you ended up tagging alongside Darvy, but you should know that you are extremely fortunate. Had Hagrid not shown up...I don't know what I'd be doing now."

"How did Hagrid know what was going on?" Albus asked.

"According to him, he heard a terrible scream. He ran to investigate, and arrived as you were being attacked."

The terrible scream had come from Darvy, Albus knew that much. "And he's...he's okay right?"

"He suffered some internal damage. No one was expecting Darvy to have been so adept as a wizard, let alone in dark magic, and had it not been for Hagrid's tough skin he may have died. Giant blood, Albus, is very useful in a fight. I take it you noticed that most spells bounced off of him?"

Albus nodded. "Will it heal? The internal damage?"

"Oh yes, in time, he will be fine. As for some of his victims...we cannot be sure" and Albus immediately remembered the image of a man seizing up in front of a broken tree. "There were, however, no casualties tonight. We do have several EP's in custody as well, most of which are thanks to Hagrid."

"And Neville and Professor Bellinger?" Albus asked.

"Professor Longbottom," his father corrected him, "was banged up a bit, but fine, as was Professor Bellinger. Shortly after I arrived Darvy fled. I learned that you had chased Ares into the forest. I'm lucky that I got there in time."

"In time?" Albus asked, his anger bubbling up again. "I had Ares on the ground! I had his own wand pointed at him!"

"And you came very close to making a big mistake Albus" his father said sternly. "Tell me, what do you think that wand does?"

"It- it increases potential. Or something like that" he said. He had honestly forgotten the specifics, he only knew that it was dangerous. "What does it do?" he asked.

"The Dragonfang Wand is so dangerous because it makes its owner more dangerous. Potential is a strange thing Albus. Sometimes, it's best to leave it alone. The wand has many, many abilities, some of which we know about, others of which we can't fathom, but we do know that the main point of it is to give power to a wizard. Power they could have anyway. Do you understand?"

"Not really" Albus admitted.

His father smiled. "Let me try and explain more. Every wizard has a degree of power in them. Raw talent. It may take centuries to tap into this power, or it may take but a week. It depends on the wizard. However much power a wizard is capable of having, this wand will unlock it. The weakest wizard in the world could hold the wand, and if they had nothing left to unlock-any more potential to tap into-they'd still be the weakest. In theory, the Dragonfang Wand is only as powerful as its owner. Or as powerful as its owner could be."

"So...so why was I in danger? I was holding the wand."

"From what we know, the wand must respect its owner before giving them that boost in power. Wands have rightful owners, Albus. You may notice that another person's wand will not perform as well in your own hands. What the Dragonfang Wand will do however, is test you."

"Test me?" Albus asked. "How?"

"There is more than one kind of potential Albus. As wizards, we have a certain amount of power in us, some more than others. But as *people* Albus, we share something in common with muggles. All people, magical talent or not, have the potential to do extraordinarily amazing things; benevolent, peaceful things. And the potential to do horrific evil as well. And in either case, the possibilities are quite limitless. Holding that wand in your hand last night blurred the lines of your morality. With the Dragonfang wand at your disposal, your instincts could take over."

"You thought I was going to hurt Ares" Albus said, and his father shook his head.

"I was afraid you were going to do much worse. I was afraid that you were going to kill Ares."

Albus stared at the floor. The voice that he had heard had entered his head once more, though now it was but an echo. He remembered its words. It was telling him to kill. Telling him that he would be powerful enough to do it. "Dad...the wand talked to me" he said uncertainly.

"Wand cannot speak Albus. They do not have mouths."

"Well then-"

"Nor do they have minds capable of communicating telepathically. Wands are designed by wizards to do certain things. They may be powerful enough to recognize when its owner is in danger, or had changed, but that is a magical science that I myself know nothing about. Wandlore is very complicated. If you heard a voice, I can assure you it didn't come from any wand."

"I did hear a voice" Albus said.

"Was it familiar?" his father asked him.

Albus nodded. "Think now" his father continued. "Where may you have heard it before?"

Albus thought as hard as he could. He tried going through every voice in his head that was instantly recognizable, but came to nothing.

"No?" his father asked, and Albus shook his head. "It didn't sound a bit like your own?"

Albus froze. It clicked. The voice he had heard, it was darker, more vile, more threatening, but it was his own. "I was...talking to myself?" he asked, dumbstruck.

His father nodded. "With the wand in your possession, your deepest, most innermost thoughts and feelings were free to speak. The voice told you to kill Ares, didn't it?"

Albus nodded. He felt miserable. He had convinced himself when the voice had spoken to him that he would not be a murderer, assured himself of it, but now...now everything was different. He had been telling *himself* to murder Ares. How close had he come to actually doing it?

"Yeah it did" Albus admitted. "It- I- told me- myself- I told myself that he would be dangerous if he was allowed to live. Maybe I should have done it!" he spat out viciously, knowing full well that he didn't mean it. He was trying to justify his thoughts, but he knew it was of no use.

"Should you have really?" his father said. "To murder is a terrible thing Albus. I can say without exaggerating in the slightest that it quite literally tears the soul in half. If you ask me, to kill is to lose your humanity."

Albus hung his head low at what he had said. He came very close to burying his face in his hands, but his father reached out and held his head still. Then he picked it up, moved closer, and looked directly into his eyes. "Albus I want you to listen very carefully to me" he said, in what was barely more than a whisper. He knew that it wasn't for dramatic effect either; his father really wanted him to pay attention.

He held himself still, ready to hang onto every word.

"There is a monster inside of all of us, Al. What you heard last night was that monster trying to free itself. It is important, not that we hide that monster, or abandon it, as it is a part of us, but contain it. Control it. I know many a wizard who would have heard that voice and taken Ares' life, then lived the rest of their own knowing full well what they did. And possibly regretting it. I stopped you last night before you made that mistake, but believe me when I say there are very few wizards who could have fought off that temptation as long as you did. When your own mind tells you to do something...you usually do it. But you didn't. You fought that urge to kill, Albus! That instinct, that monster! The Dragonfang Wand tested you and you damn near passed it! You passed it in the same way you stayed awake in that Dungeon last year and saved your friends!

"How...how is that?" Albus asked, a little frightened.

"I haven't the slightest idea!" his father exclaimed, giving him a wide smile. "But however you did it, I know you did it because there's something different, something special about you. It takes a very special kind of person to tell himself no, especially when they're holding a wand that makes them fight themselves every step of the way. And I can also tell you that I've never been more proud of you Al."

Albus came very close to hanging his head again. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you everything I knew dad. I knew all year what was going on with Ares, I've known about the wand for weeks. I knew he had it. I knew there were wizards in the Forest. I just didn't want to bother you with it. Not with how hectic things were for you at your job."

His father gave him a grim smile. "Albus, I am a father first, an Auror-a wizard even-second. I need to know that my children are safe, and if something is bothering them, I need them to come to me and tell me. I understand that you want to do things by yourself, and that you don't want to be a bother. But believe it or not, much could have been avoided had you simply told me what was going on this year."

"I'm sorry" Albus said. And he truly meant it.

The sun was rising outside, he could see the light through the curtains. They had strayed away from so much during the conversation. He felt a little better, but there were still a few things he had to know. "And you- you said that Ares got away?"

"He got away. Along with Darvy and a large group of EP's."

"And the Wand?"

His father nodded sadly. "He picked up the wand just as I rushed over to get you. He left the grounds and disappeared soon after."

Albus frowned. He layed back down in his bed, miserable.

"Why the long face?" his father asked him. "We managed to capture several dark wizards, and none of your friends got hurt."

"But I failed" Albus said. "Ares got away with the most powerful wand in the world, he's going to start a war, and it's all my fault."

His father stared at him blankly. "Wow" he said after a moment. "I can only hope you do much better on your exams than you did there. First off, Ares does not have the most powerful wand in the world. The most powerful wand in the world is currently in the possession of a wizard more than worthy of having it. Ares isn't going to start a war Albus, he has fifty men at his disposal! Less because of Hagrid! And none of it is your fault. If anything, we're closer to stopping him now. He may be in hiding, but we'll find him. No more hiding in plain sight for him."

"What will happen to Hogwarts?" Albus asked.

"Well, you'll need a new Headmaster, that's for sure. And potions professor. There will be some staff changes next year. Professor Flitwick is filling in as Headmaster now, until a permanent replacement is found. Sill no Potions teacher, I'm afraid."

"Dad, there's something else I don't get. Why did Ares want the wand in the first place? Why was Darvy helping him? Why were they both willing to kill someone to get it..."

"Well I can hardly blame Darvy for aiding Ares. They are brothers, after all."

Albus' jaw didn't even bother dropping. He felt lightheaded. He knew he would faint if he didn't keep himself up. "*Brothers?*" he asked, awestruck.

His father nodded. "Well, half brothers actually."

"Did- how? You always knew?" he asked.

"Not until recently" his father replied. "It wasn't until Neville grew suspicious of Darvy that he asked me to check the records of him. I confess the Ministry looked very little into him before. You see Albus, the year that Reginald Ares became Defence Against the Dark Arts professor here, Horace Slughorn, the potions master, unfortunately died of Dragonpox. Desperate for a teacher, the Ministry of Magic accepted the first person suggested to them. Ares had informed them of Darvy, claiming him to be a friend who was talented at Potions. He passed the Potioneers test, had no illicit activity of previous charges on his record, and was more than willing to teach for little pay. You can imagine the Ministry's good fortune."

"He ended up being a murderer!" Albus spat. "Can anyone be a Hogwarts teacher these days!"

His father chuckled. "Not anyone, no, just those who are uncommonly good liars. It was strange that Ares had someone lined up, though we weren't concerned with it. When Neville told me a few weeks ago that he was suspicious of Darvy's departures into the forest, I read through his records a bit more. Turns out he and Ares have the same mother."

Albus felt woozy. The urge to faint was gone; he thought he was close to dying. Ares and Darvy... were brothers.

"We have very little information on it, but we know that Ares' mother had a child with a muggle man. He was abandoned shortly afterwards, and adopted into the Ares family. I'm not entirely sure he even knows his own real last name. A few years later, the same woman gave birth to Sebastian Darvy, this time out of wedlock to a wizard. He too was abandoned, though his childhood is much harder to trace.

"How long they've known they were brothers themselves, I do not know. Perhaps just before Ares became a teacher. It would have to be before then, if he was so eager to get his brother a



job. I believe it is more likely that Ares found his brother however, rather than the other way around. When I knew him, Ares was quite obsessed with learning about his real family. He wasn't particularly fond of his adopted one. I can only imagine that shortly after meeting his brother, they began concocting the plans that have come to fruition today, including that of the Dragonfang Wand."

"But why?" Albus asked. "Why does Ares want the wand so badly? Who does he want to fight with it?" he said, absolutely desperate for answers now.

"No one. If there's one thing that I know about him, it's that Red Ares, above all else, likes to test himself. He is an immensely powerful wizard who has gotten where he is today through pure determination. He never had a wizard's education. I believe that Ares thinks that fate robbed him. He thinks, as some wizards still do-mostly those like him with no formal education-that half blooded wizards are genetically inferior to purebloods. As powerful as he is, he thinks that had he been born pure blood, he would have been so much more powerful today."

"That's why he wants the wand so bad" Albus said. "He thinks he has so much more potential."

His father nodded. "He is sadly deluded though. His power is an anomaly, there is no reason for it other than that he was born with it. He has achieved so much through his determination and hard work that he has tapped his potential out. Pure blooded wizards are no more naturally powerful than any other. Whether the Dragonfang Wand obeys him or not, he will never be more powerful than he is now."

"So then...what's the big deal? Why are we after him? Trying to stop him?"

"Because when a man craves so much power Albus, then he wants to test it. He is dangerous. So long as Ares tries to push himself to his limits, tries to tap his magical potential, less fortunate wizards will be his test subjects. Those men in the Forest were pawns, deluding themselves into thinking that Ares supports the dark arts. He uses them to perform tasks and claims that he wants to start a war to keep them under his command. Darvy may be the only of his henchman who knows his true motives. To test his limits. Even at the expense of others."

Albus let his father's words soak in. Everything was so different than it was before he had entered the Forest. A small part of him wished he could go back to being clueless. He, Albus, had come quite close to murdering someone. He had been tricked all year, Darvy had betrayed him. His friends, like Scorpius, had been endangered. And Ares was out there now, biding his time, trying to reach the power that was out of his grasp.

"Dad, why was Ares in Azkaban?"

His father stared at him for a moment. He looked as though he were going to speak-he certainly started to, anyway-but then fell silent. "I'm afraid that's his business Albus. It's not mine to say."

Albus frowned. That was he dad. Always being noble. Even to his enemies. "Then how did he get out?"

"Someone let him out" his father said.

"Who?"

Albus watched as his father did something he himself had been doing all night. Hung his head low. "Someone who regrets it very much Al. Someone who may have made one of the biggest mistakes of their life when they did so."

And on that enigmatic note, he stood up to leave. "Anything else?" he asked.

Albus tried thinking. There were plenty of things going through his head, most of which had to do with one person in particular. Darvy. His idol, his favorite professor, the man that he had trusted all year. Darvy's words rang in his head. *It is what we hate, that shows who we truly are.* Well he certainly hated Darvy now.

"I hate Darvy" he said aloud. "I can't believe he tricked us. Tricked me. I trusted him all year."

"Yes, you feel betrayed" his father said. "But hatred is a powerful word Albus. Use it wisely."

"Isn't- isn't it hatred that shows who you are?" he asked hesitantly. He had lived by those words for part of the year, believed them anyway. He needed his father's opinion on it. "Doesn't that define you?"

His father shifted his weight a little bit. "Maybe" he said, and Albus' heart sank. "I suppose it depends on the person. When you've been through as much as I have, you start to realize you're defined by something else. But maybe that's just me. Why don't you wait a couple of years, then tell me if you still think that."

He turned to leave, and Albus noticed a box of chocolates in his hand. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"Back to the Ministry. Have some wizards to interrogate. Paperwork to pretend to care about. Have to help reorganize another Order of Merlin Ceremony too."

"Dad I forgot all about that! I'm sorry."

His father shrugged. "Albus please, I've been putting that ceremony off for twenty years now. I was quite happy to have another day without it. Between me and you, I hate those ceremonies. They're so boring" he chuckled.

"Well... who are the chocolates for?" Albus asked him.

"Well before I go I have an extremely heartbroken son to attend to" he said. He held up the box. "Some chocolate and a good speech should get James back on the right path. Poor boy, he hasn't realized yet that this is just one girl. There's plenty of others out there, waiting to break his heart too. He had best prepare himself now."

He waited until his father had opened the curtains and walked to the door before speaking up again.

"Wait!" he called out. "One more thing." He knew that it was incredibly random, but talking of James had given him the urge to bring it up. "How come you gave me your Invisibility Cloak?" he asked suddenly. "Why didn't you give it to James?"

His father stopped with his hand on the doorknob. He shrugged. "I thought it was only fair, James had the Map."

Albus' eyeballs almost fell out of his sockets. "You know about the Map?" he asked.

His father laughed. "'Do I know about the map?'" he said in a mockery of Albus' voice, before opening the door and leaving.

Albus rolled over in the comfortable Hospital Wing bed after his father had left, his mind racing.

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He wasn't permitted to leave the Hospital wing until the next night, Madam Clearwater had insisted that he waited until he felt completely better. Sneaking into the Slytherin Common Room at two in the morning, he had expected to quietly go to his bed and wait until morning to see his friends. One step through the stone wall told him differently.

"Al!"

Scorpius had run up to him and given him an enormous clap on the back.

"Ouch!" Albus said, grabbing at his back. "That's still a little sore" he admitted.

The common room was entirely empty except for Morrison and Scorpius, who had both kept the fire going. He vaguely wondered if they waited up for him every night, but was distracted by Morrison giving a similar, but lighter clap on the back.

"We missed you man" he grinned.

Albus smiled and took a seat in one of the stone cut arm chairs. "So what's been going on while I was in the Hospital Wing?" he asked.

His friends took seats as well. "Not much" Scorpius admitted. "No more Potions lessons anyway, they're all free periods until they find a replacement."

"And Flitwick is filling in as Headmaster" Morrison said.

"Yeah, the Ravenclaws went crazy" Scorpius said. "Said that should have happened years ago."

"Otherwise, things are right around normal here. Exams in two weeks" Morrison chimed in.

Albus groaned. Right around normal was exactly where he didn't want to be.

"Why the groan?" Scorpius asked him.

"I don't want to have to face Slytherin tomorrow" he admitted. "First I lose them the game, then I get Darvy fired..." he trailed off.

Both of them laughed. "Blimey Al, are you an idiot?" Scorpius asked. "You're a hero now! No one cares about Quidditch!"

"Huh?"

Morrison managed to stop laughing long enough to talk. "Scorpius here's been getting the hero treatment for two days. You should hear the rumors going around. Anyways, you're more popular than you've ever been!"

"Really?" Albus asked them, dumbstruck.

"Yeah. But real quick" Morrison continued. "Just so we know, what did happen in the Forest?"

"You don't know?" Albus asked. "Scorpius was there!"

"We know what happened up until I left and found Neville and Bellinger patrolling" Scorpius said. "But the only announcement that we heard afterwards was that Darvy and Ares were on the run from the Ministry and that you were in the Hospital Wing."

Albus grinned. He told them everything he could, describing the battle with every minute detail. Their jaws dropped when he told them of Darvy cursing Hagrid, they squealed when he mentioned Professor Bellinger chucking flaming branches, and they refused to even blink when he told them of how he had chased Ares into the heart of the Forest.

"So then the centaur knocked him down. He dropped the Dragonfang Wand. We both dove for it -"they both gasped" -and I ended up wrestling it away from him. I had the wand pointed right at him."

They exchanged glances, eager to know what happened next. Albus was quite sure that he was going to tell them, as well as Mirra and possibly Rose what he knew about Darvy and Ares. About how they were brothers, about how Ares was the leader of the EP's, and about how Ares wanted nothing more than to achieve the power that he felt he was robbed of. But the voice...his own voice telling him to murder. He wanted to leave that particular part out.

"And then?" they both asked him, hungry for more information.

"And then... and then my dad showed up. He got mixed up in the dark. Shot a stunner at me thinking I was Ares. Ares got away with the wand."

They both groaned. "Damn!" Scorpius spat.

Morrison leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. "I miss everything!" he exclaimed.

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It turned out of course that Albus' friends had been quite correct. There wasn't a single day for the rest of term that someone, whether it be someone that he knew or didn't, approached him with questions about what had occurred in the Forest.

"Is it true you and your friend fought fifty dark wizards back to back and won?"

"Is it true that you turned Professor Ares' head into a cabbage-

"I heard you and your friend fought off our old Potions professor with your hands tied behind your back, is that right?"

"Is it true that you fought off a giant and an acromantula in there too?"

Albus shrugged it all off uncertainly. "Erm...I don't remember" he told everyone. "Still a bit hazy."

Day after day this occurred. It seemed as though no one, not even those of his own house, remembered him as the Quidditch player who had gotten himself banned before the Final. Even people from his own team were asking him questions.

"How did all these rumors start?" Albus asked his friends.

"Easy" Morrison said, grinning. "We started them."

Albus' last month of classes seemed to float by with his newly regained popularity. No Potions meant plenty of free time to sleep on Fridays, he had managed to talk to Rose and Mirra in Defence Against the Dark Arts about what had actually happened in the Forest, and even his teachers seemed more than happy to see him whole and well. Indeed, he had the strange suspicion that a lot of them were glad to be rid of Ares. Professor Handit, for instance, had awarded Albus twenty points for "being on time and looking sharp" one day.

Apart from his class, Albus spent most of his time in Hagrid's cabin, checking up on the giant who he figured that he probably owed his life too. Almost every day since he had been freed from the Hospital Wing he knocked on his cabin, and every day he and his friends (even Mirra sometimes) were welcomed in warmly.

"How are you feeling Hagrid?" Albus had asked him the first day that he had seen him.

"Ahh I've been in tougher scuffles than tha' Al" he said proudly, putting his enormous feet up at the table, almost knocking over Morrison's tea.

"I heard you got cursed pretty bad" Scorpius said.

Hagrid gave a shrug. "Ahh it stung a bit. They were just lucky I had had a bit to drink that night. Had I been sober, ol' Darvy never would've got that lucky hit in on me" he said with a smile. Albus and his friends grinned.

Exams came and went as they did the previous year; not too bad, not too good. The lack of a Potions exam frightened Albus a bit, he had the feeling that it would drop his average considerably, but the extra studying he had done during his stint in "unpopularville" (as Morrison had once called it), had considerably paid off. He didn't make up a single name during his History of Magic exam, and was able to list every incantation necessary in the Transfiguration exam as well. He felt that a few practical exams could have went better however. For the second year in a row he blew up something that he was supposed to be altering in some way in the Charms exam. This time it was Headmaster Flitwick's desk.

All in all, Albus was a bit relieved and a bit upset on the last day of his second year. Headmaster Flitwick had announced that Gryffindor had won the house cup, much to the chagrin of Albus and his fellow Slytherins, who had came in third. Albus looked around nervously to see if his housemates were blaming him, but it appeared as though his popularity was going to last until the end of the year. No one was so much as frowning at him. Relieved, he allowed himself a grin and turned his attention to the magnificent feast layed out before him.

The next day everything had been packed. Students complained loudly about the notes reminding them not to use magic over the holidays. Teachers said goodbye to their favorite students, students to their favorite teachers, and before Albus knew it, he was boarding the train, Hagrid waiting by it to ensure that everyone boarded.

"Have a good summer you three" he said as Albus, Morrison and Scorpius began to board the train.

"Cheers Hagrid" they all said.

"Professor Hagrid" he corrected them with a grin. "Terms over. You lot are in me Care for Magical Creatures class this year aren' ya?" he said.

They laughed and boarded the train, waving to him as they did so.

"I can't believe I used to be so terrified of him" Morrison said once they were on the train. "He's harmless, isn't he?"

"To us" Albus said. "Not to those blokes in the Forest."

They all laughed. "Shall we find a compartment?" someone said from behind them.

Albus spun around and saw that it was Rose, with Mirra right behind her. Together, the five of them made their way to the back of the train, finally settling in one of the very last compartments.

Scorpius and Morrison immediately struck up a game of gobstones as soon as the train had started moving, leaving Albus to fill Mirra and Rose in on everything that he had eventually told his other two friends.

"Darvy and Ares are *brothers*?" Mirra gasped when he had said it.

Albus nodded. "Half brothers anyway. They don't look it, do they?"

She shook her head furiously, still in disbelief.

"And you said Ares is half blood right?" Rose asked him. "And Darvy is pure blood?"

"Yup, that's right" Albus said. "And my dad reckons that Ares is pissed off that he's only half blood, because he thinks that pure bloods are more powerful."

"That's gotta' make for some awkward Christmas conversations between those two" Morrison said, and everybody laughed.

"So where do you think they are now?" Mirra asked. "Doesn't your dad have any leads on where they are?"

"He just knows they're hiding" Albus admitted. "But if anybody can find them, it's my dad."

"I think we all owe Albus an apology" Rose said suddenly.

Mirra gawked at her, as did Albus. Scorpius and Morrison both glanced up from their game as well. Rose turned a bright red. "Well...we all doubted him at least once this year didn't we? And he ended up being right about almost everything. So...sorry Al" she finished dramatically.

"Sorry Al" the other three said, though it was easy to see that only Mirra had meant it. Scorpius and Morrison could barely contain their laughter. Albus turned as red as Rose and turned his attention to the gobstones game.

"Sucks about how things turned out though" Scorpius said after a few moments.

"What do you mean?" Albus asked him.

"Well, they both got away didn't they? And they got the wand too. *And* we lost a very easy Potions teacher in the process! Bit of a sour ending, really."

"If you call that teaching" Rose spat, and everyone laughed.

"I don't think of it like that" Mirra said, turning her attention to Scorpius. "Sure, all that stuff happened, but those guys were dangerous anyway. And now they're gone. We'll have a new Potions professor next year, and a new Headmaster, and they'll both probably be better. Plus Albus' dad caught a whole bunch of dark wizards didn't he? Yeah, some bad things happened, but they go with the good. Not really a sour ending. More of a- a bittersweet beginning really. Plenty to look forward to next year."

"Yeah, I agree" Albus said. Mirra smiled at him, and he returned it. No sooner had he done so that they heard a knock on the compartment door.

Scorpius stood and opened it, and ended up face to face to with Charles Eckley. They all went silent at once as the two stared each other down. As far as Albus knew, it was their first time face to face since their fight. It was hard to see because Eckley was so tall, but behind him Albus could just make out Donovan Hornsbrook. Or at least most of him. His head and face were heavily bandaged, and his arm was in a sling.

Eckley stared at Scorpius in silence before turning his head to Mirra and Rose. He smiled. "You two want to come join us now?" he asked them. "Rides about half way over."

Albus crossed his arms and frowned. Leave it to Eckley to split the group up when they were all having fun.

Rose stood to leave, but Mirra didn't. "Actually" she said. "I thought we'd stay here. Just to catch up, ya know? I haven't had the chance to talk to these guys in a while. I'll catch up with you guys after the train ride okay?" she said.

Albus watched as the smile on Eckley's face flickered for an instant. It returned before anyone who hadn't been eyeing it could notice though. "Yeah that's cool" he said nonchalantly. "See you guys in a bit then."

He closed the door and Albus heard the two of them walking away. Mirra struck up a conversation with Rose about something while someone nudged Albus.

"What are you smiling at?" Morrison mouthed to him.

Albus hadn't even noticed how wide his grin had been. "Nothing" he murmured back, though he thought he noticed Scorpius smirking at him as he sat back down.

"What happened to Hornsbrook?" Albus asked them after a moment.

"You didn't know?" Morrison asked. "Oh right, I forgot, you were in the Hospital Wing that day."



"So tell me!" Albus said.

"Right, anyway, the last day you were in the Hospital Wing, your brother kind of snapped out of his stupor. I don't know what made him do it, but something got him over that girl, and he left his Common Room for the first time in weeks. Played a nasty prank on some first years that made a toilet explode, did a whole bunch of stuff. But apparently one thing that he had been putting off until he got better was finding the kid who punched you in the face. No one from Gryffindor would rat him out."

"So how did he find out it was Hornsbrook?" Albus asked.

"It slipped" Mirra spoke up ruefully, cringing as she did so.

"It wasn't pretty" Scorpius said. "I caught a glimpse of him on the way to the Hospital Wing. I don't know if James started with his fist and moved to his wand or vice versa, but either way, Hornsbrook looked a mess. So many spells. Jelly Legs Jinx, Bat Bogey Hex, this spell that turned his eyelashes into worms-don't know where he learned that one, a few others too. Plus a beat down with his bare hands. From what I heard he tried fighting back. Only made it worse, poor bloke."

Albus cringed as well.

"It wasn't as bad as you think" Rose said suddenly. "I mean, he was unconscious after the first couple of minutes anyway."

They all laughed, even if Mirra and Rose only did so half heartedly, and the rest of the train ride was spent swapping chocolate frog cards and playing exploding snap.

A few hours later, they departed from the train into King's Cross station. Albus gave a yawn and looked around for his Uncle Ron, who he had heard would be picking him and his brother up along with Rose. Normally he would be bothered by the fact that his own father wasn't doing it, but now that he thought about it, he knew his dad was hard at work. It didn't bother him in the slightest anymore.

They moved through the crowd of students meeting with their parents, dodging familiar faces and keeping a lookout for their own. They eventually reached the middle of the noisy station, where they stood and waited, chatting about their summer plans.

"Well there's my grandparents over there" Mirra said after a couple of minutes, pointing at an elderly couple who was waving to the group of them merrily.

Albus waved back uncertainly. Mirra gave him a big hug, then did the same to the others. "Make sure you all keep in touch this summer!" she said. "Al, I'll make sure I get an owl to you for your birthday. And keep me posted on your sister's wedding!" she added to Morrison.

She gave them all another hug, then gave Rose an extra big one, and went to go meet her grandparents.

"I'm gonna go meet my folks too" Morrison said. He clapped both Scorpius and Albus on the back, hugged Rose and left, waving his hand as he did so.

"Have a good summer" he called back to them.

"You too!" they called out to him.

"Al, there's my dad" Rose said, pointing at Uncle Ron, who was lazily standing with his hands on his hips. An older student accidentally rolled over his foot with his trunk as he was passing.

"Watch it pal, I'm an Auror!" they heard him bark, waving his wand threateningly as the kid ran as fast as he could. He turned his attention back to his daughter and nephew. "You kids coming or what?" he yelled to them as they laughed.

"All right, we're out mate" Albus said, clapping Scorpius on the back. Rose gave him a hug.

"Try and hang out this summer okay?" Scorpius said as they turned to leave.

"I'll see if you can come visit" Albus told him.

Scorpius grinned. "Later Al."

They slapped each other's hand and Albus and Rose left to go meet his uncle.

"So" Uncle Ron said as he wrapped his arm around his daughter. "How was your second year?" he asked them both.

"Fantastic daddy" Rose said quickly. "You wouldn't believe how much I learned!"

Albus thought a bit harder about his answer. He thought of Darvy betraying them in the Forest, thought of being punched in the face by Hornsbrook and shunned by his house, and of Ares escaping with the wand...

Then he looked back over his shoulder and saw Mirra walking with her grandparents, all three of them looking quite happy. A few feet away he saw Morrison pushing his trunk aimlessly, looking for the family that probably hadn't shown up yet. He smiled and saw Scorpius standing with his back to him, and Mr. Malfoy standing beside him, waving over to Albus.

Albus waved back and turned back around. "It was pretty good" he said after a few moments. "I can't complain anyway."

His Uncle Ron laughed as they passed through the barrier to the muggle world. "From what I've heard, you probably could. But don't expect anything like that to happen next year. The Ministry will make sure you kids don't get idiots like that Darvy teaching you."

Albus smiled at him as they made their way back to the Ministry car they would be taking. "I don't know. I don't want things to be *too* boring next year" he said.

And with that, he got into the car with his cousin and uncle, more than ready to experience a relaxing summer, and more importantly, more than ready to return to Hogwarts for his third year.

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**So that's that. I hope you guys enjoyed reading my second story as much as I enjoyed writing it. For those of you who read both, which do you prefer? Any favorite characters or favorite moments?**

**As always, reviews are very much appreciated, and I hope you guys are looking forward to the next book! Thanks for reading,**

**-Vekin87**

## **Book 3 Preview**

**Hello faithful readers! As I mentioned at the end of Dragonfang Wand, this is a small update I'm making to answer any questions and to give out some info on my next book. Strangely, there weren't any questions asked, meaning-**

**A. My stories make complete sense and no one is lost**

**OR**

**B. No one's really paying attention**

**I can only hope for the former!**

**:)**

**Now, also as mentioned, Book 3 may take a while to get out. The truth is, as I was writing Dragonfang Wand, I realized that it wasn't nearly as planned out as my first book. So even though I have a series planned out, I've decided to take some time off and really get my stuff straight for Book 3. This means that I won't be starting it right away, but when I do, I should be updating more frequently than I did with my previous story, sometimes maybe even by posting 2 or 3 chapters at once.**

**Hopefully you guys stay interested enough in my series to be patient and wait, but I figured that it was only fair that I gave you all some tidbits of info and things to look forward to in my third story. So here it goes.**

**Things to look forward to in Book 3 -**

- One of my favorite magical objects from JK's books, the pensieve, will be used in this book.**
- There will be some romance in this one, though not nearly enough to change my stories from their T rating.**
- It seems like a lot of people's favorite OC was Sebastian Darvy. Don't worry, he'll be back.**
- You'll finally get to see Harry duel, and see how far he's come magically from age 17. But don't be surprised if he's not the only Potter you see stretching their wand muscles a bit.**
- As hinted at at the end of Book 2, there will be significant staff changes made at Hogwarts.**
- You will find out why Ares was in Azkaban, but more importantly, you'll find out exactly how he got out.**

**- Some of the chapter titles that I have planned out include " Renegades", " Office Pranks", and " The Awakening".**

**- For the first time in my series, Albus will venture away from Hogwarts with no adult supervision.**

**- And finally, the title to Book 3 will be " Abus Potter And The Foulest Book".**

**Well that's that, this was the last update for this story. I hope you guys enjoyed reading, and I hope you're just as excited about Book 3 as I am!**