

Albus Potter and the Dungeon of Merlin's Mist

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This is the story of Albus Potter, (the younger son of Harry Potter), and his adventures at Hogwarts. It is the first of seven installments. This installment takes place immediately after the epilogue of "Deathly Hallows". It starts at like a normal Next gen fic, but I promise, it evolves into much more. Enjoy!

Authors note -

Due to popular demand, this story (and all following stories) have been edited over for grammatical errors. That being said, however, no changes have been to the actual content of the story, with the exception of a few slight continuity errors that I don't think will be missed.

And now, where it all begins:

Chapter 1. The Sorting

Albus stepped onto the train with excitement flooding through him. He was going to Hogwarts. It had been his dream since his father had first told him about it, his passion, every year up until his eleventh had just been another year that he couldn't go to school and learn magic. Here, he would make a name for himself. Here, he wouldn't just be Harry Potter's son. Here, he would be...

"Albus will you hurry up and go!" came a loud voice from behind him.

Albus turned around and saw his cousin, Rose Weasley, who would also be going to Hogwarts for the first time this year.

"You're holding up the line!" repeated the bossy voice.

"Okay, okay...I'm going" Albus said, defeated, as he moved his way down the scarlet train looking for an empty compartment.

His brother had gotten on the train first, the result of Albus being pulled aside by his father. James had established that though he loved Albus, he was not to sit with him and his friends on the train, and that he should immediately get started on "finding some chaps of his own."

Albus hadn't even bothered to argue the matter. He was still furious at his brother for taunting him about being put in Slytherin house, and wasn't in a very big hurry to spend the entire train ride with him anyway. Instead, he made his way to the end of the train, then slid himself into an empty compartment, hoping that company would join him soon.

He didn't have to wait very long. Five minutes after he had sat down, his cousin entered looking slightly flustered.

"I guess this is the only available compartment" she said.

"I guess so" Albus replied blandly.

"What's wrong?" Rose said, catching on to his melancholy mood.

Albus shrugged grumpily, and muttered "James".

Rose rolled her eyes. "Don't let him get to you! Is he still going on about that Slytherin thing? Al, your entire family's been in Gryffindor, it's *extremely* unlikely that you'll be sorted anywhere else, least of all Slytherin."

Apparently, Rose figured that she had cheered him up enough so that she could now ignore him, and immediately dove into her trunk to pull out one of her many spellbooks. Before she could read very far however, the compartment door had slid open again. A boy with a rather pale face and straggly shoulder length brown hair was standing there with his trunk. He appeared to be

quite nervous as well, so much so to the point that he couldn't work up the courage to say anything for several seconds.

"Every- everywhere else is full" he said finally. "Do you mind if I sit here?"

"Not at all", Albus replied. He pushed his trunk off of the seat next to him and slid over to give the boy a seat. "What's your name?" he asked politely.

"Morrison" the boy said, offering his hand. "Morrison Vincent. Yours?" he asked kindly.

"Ermm..." Albus was still trying to discover if this boy's first name was Morrison, or if he'd simply introduced himself by surname first. "Albus" he replied after a long pause. "Albus Potter. And this is my cousin, Rose Weasley".

"Nice to meet you Rose" he said.

Rose lifted her eyes from her book for a split second, giving him a nonchalant glance before replying "cool".

"Ermm...she doesn't like to be interrupted when reading" Albus told him.

Albus himself had learned that lesson the hard way when they were younger. Rose would become so immersed in a book that she would smack it across the back of someone's head if they interfered with her reading, or even so much as broke her concentration.

"So you know what house you're going to be in yet?" Morrison (or was it Vincent ?) asked as the train began picking up speed.

"No clue" Albus said truthfully. Rose didn't answer.

The conversation quickly turned to Quidditch, where it stayed for over an hour. Albus' new friend was a strong supporter of the Chudley Cannons, despite having not learned of their existence until months ago. As it turned out, Albus learned, Morrison was a pureblood wizard and hadn't even known it for the first several years of his life. He had grown up in America with his dad, who was always hesitant of telling him about the wizarding world. Once he turned eleven however, and learned the truth, he moved to England with his mother, who was more than happy to explain everything to him.

"My dad decided that being a wizard was far too dangerous when he was growing up, and moved out to America. I grew up in New York City" the boy told them both, despite the fact that Rose clearly wasn't listening. "Once I found out the truth, I moved out here with my mom, and the first thing she taught me about was Quidditch. Took me to see a Holyhead Harpies game. I even got to see Ginny Pott- wait a second" he stared at Albus blankly.

Albus simply smiled at him. It struck him as odd that this boy knew of his mum, but nothing of his dad. In a way, it comforted him.

"Are you related to her ?" he asked him.

Albus nodded. "She's my mother " he said.

The boy looked as though his head was going to explode.

The remainder of the journey was spent with Albus being asked what seemed like a million questions about his mother; what she had taught him, if he had ever gotten to hold any of her trophies. Albus was embarrassed to say that he was quite atrocious at Quidditch, scared of it in fact, and that he had only seen his mum play one game.

"My brother James though," he started, as his travel companion sat staring at him with his mouth open, "is real good. He's a third year Gryffindor. He's going to try out for Chaser this year. Last year he missed tryouts because he was in trouble."

Rose snorted next to him, implying that she had been paying attention for the first time. Albus knew why. "Trouble" was quite an understatement; his brother had been serving his fifth of seven detentions. James was quite a prankster, something which Albus had heard he shared with his grandfather. On this particular occasion, he had been attempting to melt the doorknobs on the classroom doors, and had accidently set fire to an entire hallway, slightly burning several students and causing massive amounts of damage to the hallway itself.

They arrived at Hogwarts in pitch blackness. It was about a quarter past ten by the time everyone got off the train. Albus pulled his trunk while making mild conversation with Morrison; he had finally worked up the courage to ask him which was his first name during the last hour of the ride.

Morrison briskly made his way towards the carriages, looking as though he was quite ready for the journey, until Rose pulled him aside and whispered harshly "No, not over there. We go in by boat."

Seconds after she had said it, Albus heard a gruff voice bellow "Firs' years, ov'r this way".

Albus looked off into the distance and saw a man roughly three times his size waving over to the group of shocked first years.

"Hello Hagrid" Albus said as he made his way over to him.

"Lo there Albus" he replied with a broad smile.

Albus had known Hagrid since he was a baby. In fact, Albus had learned from his mother that immediately after he and his other siblings were born, his father had let Hagrid be the first person to hold them (other than his parents, of course). Albus knew a lot about Hagrid. For instance, Hagrid was only half giant, and not nearly as ferocious as he looked. He was both a teacher and gamekeeper at Hogwarts as well, and was also one of his father's most trusted and best friends.

The other children, however, didn't seem to be quite as comfortable with him. Indeed, several of them seemed to be rather terrified at the prospect of meeting him.

"We'll be gettin' inter these boats here" he said to Albus, nodding towards about twenty boats stationed by the lake.

The first year students timidly entered the boats, four to each. Albus sat with Rose, Morrison, and a scared looking girl with short blonde hair. The boats magically rowed themselves, while Hagrid, who occupied an entire boat to himself, shouted for the students to stay still while the boats did all the work, apparently not realizing that his random shouting was very likely to scare them out of the boats and into the water.

After a rather short ride, Albus stepped off his boat at the other end of the lake and took Hogwarts in with all its glory. It was a massive castle, beautiful and sturdy. It looked as though its walls could stop anything, and its large front doors seemed to radiate sheer power. He and the other students-some looking just as astounded as he-made their way towards the castle, Hagrid striding along beside them. They reached the doors and waited for Hagrid to catch up with them. Hagrid reached the doors and fumbled around with the keys in his many pockets. Finally, he withdrew the right one, muttered "ahh, thasit" and opened the doors, revealing a long hallway, with more doors at the end.

Just then, a man came striding through the doors. At first unrecognizable, Albus took a closer look at him and saw that it was Neville Longbottom, another of his dad's friends and the Herbology professor at the school. He waved to Rose and Albus, both who waved back.

"Right" he started. "Okay Hagrid, you can go in now" he said.

Hagrid walked through the doors, leaving the students alone with Neville, where they quietly waited to be addressed.

"Hello there students" he began. "My name is Professor Longbottom. I am head of Gryffindor house, and I will also be your Herbology teacher. Now I should explain something to you. There are four houses at Hogwarts, and the people in your house will be like your family while you stay here, though inter-house unity is still important. Good behavior and things like answering your questions correctly will earn you points for your house, whereas negative behavior will subtract them. The house with the most points at the end of the year will win the house cup, a great honour. Every house also has its Head of House, who you can come to if you have any problems. As mentioned before, I am head of Gryffindor. Professor Flitwick is head of Ravenclaw, Professor Darvy is head of Slytherin, and Professor Handit for Hufflepuff. Please wait here while we prepare to sort you."

He turned around and walked through the doors, but not before giving Albus a wink.

The second the doors had closed, there was a murmuring throughout the crowd of students. Apparently, very few of them knew how exactly they were going to be sorted. Albus took this time to look around at his fellow classmates. They seemed nice enough, with the minor

exception of two of them. One of them was a girl with long black hair and grey eyes, who would have looked very pretty had it not been for the sad look on her face. Albus was quite tempted to ask her what was wrong, but the second person quickly caught his attention.

He was very pale, with a pointed nose and extremely blonde hair combed back out of his face. He had a look of utter boredom. He had seen him at the Kings Cross Station, he knew that much. His Uncle Ron had even mentioned his name...Scorpius something.

Just then however, before he could search through his head for the boy's name, Neville reappeared and beckoned for the class to follow him.

They were led into the Grand Hall, and Albus almost let out a gasp. It was gigantic. There were four tables in the hall, all of them filled with students. He could see his brother James straining his head to get a good look at him. In the front of the hall, on a three legged stool, sat what Albus knew was the Sorting Hat. Silence filled the room. After several moments, a huge rip appeared in the hat, and it 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 on you head, and let your mind roam free

I can see your every thought, 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, some of the first year students joining in with the clapping. Neville stood up in the front of the hall and silence resumed.

"Right" he said. " When I call your name, please sit on the stool and place the Sorting Hat on your head. After the Sorting Hat makes its decision, take your place with your new house."

"When can we eat!" yelled a voice from the Gryffindor table that Albus recognized as his brother's.

There was laughter and mild agreement from the other students, but Neville cast him a furtive look and he went quiet.

"Anifur, Anastasia!" he called out.

A small girl with a ponytail made her way up to the front and jammed the hat onto her head. After a few moments, the hat shouted "HUFFLEPUFF"!

Anastasia made her way over to the Hufflepuff table, with another girl named Vanessa Adams following next.

"Bing, Bartleby!"

A scrawny boy with a rather smug look on his face made his way up to the stool, and after a few moments he became the first Slytherin. Albus was only mildly paying attention. He caught a few names; he had heard Elton Connor be sorted into Hufflepuff, as well as Dante Haug and Donovan Hornsbrook being sorted into Slytherin and Gryffindor, respectively. Right as he was tuning out, a familiar name caught his attention.

"Malfoy, Scorpius" Neville called.

The pale boy that Albus had recognized earlier strode over to the hat and carefully placed it on his head. He sat there for several minutes before the hat yelled out "SLYTHERIN!"

Scorpius walked over to the Slytherin table, still looking quite bored. Albus saw Neville roll his eyes, his lips muttering something that looked like it had been "big surprise".

Finally, after "Parish, Milton" was sorted into Ravenclaw, Albus was called up. He approached the hat uneasily, unsure if he really wanted to know the answer to where he belonged.

He sat down on the stool and carefully placed the hat on his head. Immediately after he had done so, he heard a small voice in his ear say "Ahh...another Potter."

Albus' heart skipped a beat. The Sorting Hat's voice was extremely scary.

"Oh goodness...you're very much like your father was aren't you? Not much in common with your brother though...let's look a bit deeper...hmmm yes...you're quite an enigma, aren't you?"

Albus had no idea what an enigma was, but could only hope it was good.

"Oh yes, it is" said the Sorting Hat, as if it could read his thoughts.

"*That's because it can*" Albus said to himself stupidly.

"Oh yes, I can read all of your thoughts Mr. Potter. I honestly don't know where to put you. You're quite smart...but I'm not sure if you're Ravenclaw worthy. You could always be in Gryffindor...like the rest of your family...but then again...both your father *and grandfather* would have done quite well in Slytherin. And my goodness, you're loyal too...you could be a Hufflepuff as well. There's plenty of power there...you've got talent boy."

Albus began sweating profusely. It was taking much longer for the hat to decide on him than it had for anyone else, he knew that much.

"Hmmm...I'm honestly stumped. You seem to be a near perfect balance of them all...the choice is up to you boy."

Albus felt his heart skip another beat; his father had been right. The Sorting Hat *did* let you choose your own house.

"Well...then put me somewhere randomly" Albus told the hat, hoping he didn't sound too forceful. If he was being honest with himself, he didn't really mind where he went. Hadn't the hat just said that other people in his family would have done well in Slytherin? Maybe it was time he gave it a try...but then again, what would his parents think? Or his cousins? Or his brother? Gryffindor house was practically tradition...

"Nothing wrong with breaking tradition" he heard the hat whisper in his ear. "What's wrong with spicing things up a bit? Maybe it's time you stopped worrying about where your family thinks you belong and began worrying about where *you think you belong*".

"You're right" Albus said.

"I know I am" the hat responded, confidently. "So we're agreed then?"

Albus braced himself. He wanted to give it more thought, but he was already taking so long...

"We're agreed" he told the Hat

"Very well then...SLYTHERIN!"

Chapter 2. Settling In

Immediately after the Sorting Hat had called out his house, a ferocious applause was heard from the Slytherin table. Even the sound of Hagrid's "WHAT!" had nearly been drowned out as well. Albus stepped down from the stool feeling uncomfortable, but overall pleased with the reaction he was getting. He casually made his way over to his new housemates, with several of them—even the seventh years—clapping him on his back. He turned to face the stool again and he saw his brother looking at him from across the hall.

Albus was surprised to see that he didn't look mad, or even disappointed. He had a blank look on his face for several moments, before it split into a wide grin. Just as the clapping was dying down, he saw his brother mouth something that looked like "Told ya so."

"Right" Neville said. He looked like he had lost his concentration at the idea of Albus being put into Slytherin "Umm...so anyway...to continue...we have Rivers, Wendell!"

Albus took this time to glance up at the staff table. He didn't recognize anyone except for Professor Flitwick and Hagrid, and he had only met Flitwick once. He saw a wizard wearing emerald green and assumed that he must be Professor Darvy, head of Slytherin house and his new Potions professor. He had long blonde hair and looked to be in his early forties. But what stood out most were his eyes. Not the color or shape, but the mad glint in them, as if he was desperately trying to focus on everything that was going on at once. He looked psychotic.

"Tunnels, Mirra!" Neville called out.

Albus' eyes shot up to the front of the great hall as he saw someone move past his table. It was the sad looking girl he had seen earlier. She didn't look quite as sad anymore, but she did look scared. Actually, Albus noticed, she looked quite terrified, as if she was dreading the Sorting Hat's answer.

From the second she put the hat on her head, her eyes were tightly closed, and the Sorting Hats' mouth was moving rapidly, as if it was scolding her and she was taking it's insults. Albus felt bad.; whatever secrets she was keeping were being tossed back at her by the Hat. He noticed that the entire time she was up there she clung to a long golden necklace tucked neatly in her robes. After several minutes, the Hat had apparently stopped saying what it had to say, and shouted out "GRYFFINDOR!"

Mirra made her way over to the the Gryffindor table to applause, still looking scared, but a bit more relaxed now that it was over.

"Vincent, Morrison!" Neville called out.

Albus saw him eye the paper suspiciously. Apparently he thought that he had gotten the names mixed up.

Morrison practically ran up to the hat in anticipation, and jammed it onto his head the second he had done so. Thirty seconds later the hat shouted "SLYTHERIN!"

Albus clapped with the rest of the Slytherins at his table as Morrison walked over to him with an elated expression on his face. Albus clapped him on the back, as did several other Slytherins.

"Weasley, Rose!" Neville called out.

Albus watched his cousin walk up to the Sorting Hat with determination on her face, as if she planned on *demanding* that it put her in the house she wanted. The Hat had barely touched her head when it shouted "GRYFFINDOR!"

Albus saw all of the Gryffindors clapping intensely, especially his brother, who seemed intent on clapping loud enough to make up for the other tables lack of applause. He felt his heart sink a bit. He had figured that Rose would be in Gryffindor, but it felt weird knowing that he and his cousin were now officially separated.

Finally, after the last person had been sorted (Zuerte, Melissa joined Albus in Slytherin house) the Headmaster stood up from his chair. Albus knew from his father that his name was Professor Ares, and that he had only been Headmaster for two years. Minerva McGonagall, the previous Headmistress, had left at the end of his brother's first year, claiming she needed time to focus on writing her "novel", despite the fact that she had been quoted as saying that "no one can deal with three Potters in their lifetime."

Headmaster Ares commanded attention with his presence, though Albus wasn't quite sure why. He didn't look to be much older than Professor Darvy, and he was very short for a grown man. If Albus had to hazard a guess, he would have assumed that he was a mere five feet, six inches tall. He was very skinny as well. His hair was raven black, short, stuck out at odd ends, and he had a black toothbrush mustache that looked like it had been grown in the previous night. When he spoke, however, his deep voice almost made the windows crack.

"Hello students! It is good to see so many of your faces here again." Despite saying this though, Albus noted that he didn't look like he meant it in the slightest. It appeared as though he was struggling to smile, and his eyes kept flashing over certain students. "This is only my third year as your Headmaster, and I can only hope that it will be equally as good as my previous two. To the first years, I welcome you to this castle with the hopes that you will gain many unique and beneficial experiences."

Once again, Albus noticed that he didn't appear to mean what he was saying. His voice was dry and flat, as though he was reciting a speech he simply didn't care about.

"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 be in grave danger from the forest itself, but from me as well, as I can assure you, I will be extremely disappointed with anyone who not only neglects this rule, but is foolish enough to do 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 wince and smile slightly, but immediately returned his attention back to Headmaster Ares.

"And now that I've made those two things clear...I don't think we have much more to discuss. Let the feast begin!" he finished in his expressionless voice.

Immediately after he said this, the plates, bowls, and cups at Albus' table filled themselves with food and drink that made his mouth water. He hadn't bought anything off the trolley at the train, and now that there was food in his grasp, he realized that he was very hungry. He helped himself to roasted chicken and steak-and-kidney pie to start with, and downed his always refilling goblet of pumpkin juice in a single gulp. As he was eating, he occupied himself by conversing with the other students at the table.

"My entire family was in Ravenclaw" Bartleby, a new first year was saying. "Up until my sister that is. She was the first Slytherin, and she said she liked it, so here I am."

"What year is she in?" Albus asked him.

"Seventh. And I'm glad it's her final year too. I don't want her to go reporting to mum every time I skive off a class or *forget* to do my homework."

The other Slytherins nodded approvingly, and Morrison jumped in with his story about how he had just recently moved in with his mother. Albus, who didn't feel like listening to the story again, instead turned his attention to an older student who was sitting across from him.

"What's the deal with the Headmaster?" he asked. "He seems like he's not very fond of his job."

The student looked up from his plate.

"Yeah," he started, "and it's not just this job either. He hated being a teacher, everyone knows that."

"What did he teach?"

"Defense Against the Dark Arts. I'm only in fifth year, I don't know if he taught anything before that. He was a good teacher though. Very powerful. Used to be an Auror back in his prime. I guess teaching was boring compared to what he used to do. I'm Atticus by the way" he finished, extending a hand to Albus.

He took it, and right after letting go shot another glance up at the staff table. Professor Ares didn't look much like an Auror. Albus could only assume that being a teacher had made him lose interest in taking care of himself. He looked like a basic spell would finish him off.

He returned to the conversation just in time to hear Bartleby tell an apparently very funny joke about a troll, a hag, and a leprechaun in a bar. He didn't get to hear the punch line, but the entire table-including the older students-burst into laughter. He even saw Scorpius, who had been eating very quietly, flicker a smile for a second. Apparently, this was the wrong move though. Bartleby turned to Scorpius and asked "So what about you, where are you from?"

Scorpius turned a bright pink and turned away from Bartleby, going on to finish his meal with his back turned.

The feast continued for over an hour, and Albus, full from consuming so much food, was quite ready for bed. He was happy that today was Friday, and that he would be able to sleep in the next day. Judging from the darkness of the enchanted ceiling, it was almost midnight. The plates and goblets cleared themselves and Headmaster Ares once again began to deliver a speech.

"It is almost time for bed" he started. "First years, make your way over to the corner of the hall to meet with your prefects, who I trust will be very well adept at guiding you through the school and leading you to your dormitories. I'm sure that if you have any questions to ask, they will be more than happy to answer them for you."

"I'm a Prefect" Atticus leaned over and whispered to Albus.

"And now that all of the tables are cleared, I think it's time we make our way to bed" the Headmaster finished.

Albus and the other first year students made their way towards the corner of the hall. Atticus and a blonde haired girl were waiting for them.

"Okay, follow me, and try to stay together. The Slytherin common room is down in the dungeons" Atticus said.

Albus and the other Slytherins followed him into a large hallway with several staircases in it.

"We don't have to worry about any of those. And it's a good thing too. They're always moving" Atticus told them.

He led them towards a single door, and opened it to reveal the steps that led down to the dungeons. They followed him through, descending for quite a while before reaching what looked like a giant labyrinth.

"Okay, here's where it gets complicated" he said. He began walking straight, then left at an intersection, then right at the next intersection, that backwards at the next one, and finally left from there, where they reached a solid stone wall.

"You haven't forgotten the way?" one of the Slytherin girls asked forcefully.

"No, I haven't forgotten the way, just pay attention!" Atticus snapped at her. "Now, anyways, this is the entrance to the common room. There's a password required to enter. The passwords will be posted on the bulletin board once they are added. If you ever forget the password and can't enter, feel free to find me or Jade" he said, jerking his head towards his prefect counterpart, the blonde girl that Albus had seen earlier. "Except *you*" he added to the girl that had accused him of being lost.

Then, he turned back to the stone wall and said "Slughorn."

A stone door carved itself into the blank wall. Atticus pushed it open and told them to follow him, as well as to close the door behind him.

The common room was large, and very old fashioned. The chairs were all carved of stone, and the walls emitted some sort of green light about them, giving an eerie, yet beautiful presence. There were several tapestries throughout the room. One of them, which looked newer than the rest, portrayed a very pale man with a hooked nose and dark hair staring up at the sky. He looked very unpleasant, yet for some reason, Albus couldn't take his eyes away from it. Underneath it, inscribed on the stone wall itself, read "*S.S - A Slytherin, and a hero.*"

"Okay, so anyways" Atticus began, now that they were all familiar with the room. "The boy's dormitories are to the right, the girl's to the left. Go through the door marked *first year* to find your beds. Your luggage should already be up there."

The Slytherin first years made their way towards their beds, but Albus turned to Atticus first. There was something he wanted to do.

"Hey Atticus" he said. "Do you know where the Owlery is? I want to send a letter real quick".

"It's up on the seventh floor, but I recommend you wait until the morning. It's kind of late"

"Yeah...yeah I guess so" he replied.

He bade Atticus goodnight and entered his dormitory, surprised to see that the other students were already asleep; apparently they had went to bed during his short conversation with Atticus. He approached his bedspread, knocking over some of his luggage as he did so, and slowly crawled into bed. He fell asleep happy he was at Hogwarts, but nervous about how he would explain his house to his parents.

He woke up to the sounds of screaming.

"Ahhh dammit!" he heard. Morrison had stubbed his toe on the luggage that Albus had knocked over the previous night.

"Oh sorry" Albus said, crawling out of bed to pick up the books that had spilled out across the floor. "What time is it?" he asked Morrison.

"Ehh...about half passed eleven. We woke up a bit later than everyone else. I hope breakfast is still going on, I'm starving. You coming?" he asked.

"Ermm...I'll catch up with you later" he told him. "I have to write something to someone real quick" he added.

"Ahh okay" Morrison said, and with that, he left, leaving Albus to himself.

Albus pulled some parchment out of his bag and picked up a quill, trying to formulate what he was going to write in his head before actually putting it on the paper. He walked down to the common room, and, seeing that it was empty, sat down near a large stone table. He placed the parchment on the table, then stared at it blankly.

"Okay, what's the best way to tell them this?" he said aloud.

Dear Mum and Dad, - he started.

Sorry for not sending you this last night, but the Prefect recommended that I wait until morning. I'm a bit surprised I haven't seen some of the stuff you guys mentioned. I haven't seen a single ghost yet, not even Peeves. The food is fantastic though. I'm looking forward to starting my classes after the weekend, but I haven't gotten my schedule yet. Can't wait for your response -

Albus.

PS. I'm in Slytherin.

Feeling slightly better, he left the common room for the owlery, planning out his day as he was walking. He figured he would go see Hagrid, or maybe even find Neville and talk with him for a bit. Before he could think of much else however, a flash of red caught his attention as he began walking on the main floor. Rose was walking with two Gryffindor girls, neither of whom he recognized.

"Hey Rose!" he called out from the back of the hallway.

She turned around smiling; apparently one of her friends had said something funny. The moment she saw who had called her though, the smile slid off of her face. She wore a pained expression, as though she was struggling to say something, but after a few moments she turned around and continued walking with her friends.

Utterly bewildered at why she had ignored him, he called out her name again. Perhaps she hadn't recognized him from afar.

"Hey Rose!" he called out even louder. This time, it was her friends who turned around. One of them giggled, before they both turned back around and entered the door to the Great Hall. Rose hadn't even bothered to look back.

What is with her? he thought to himself, before turning to go up the stairs. Rose's odd behavior gave him something to think about as he made his way to the seventh floor. He would simply ask her about it later. He entered the owlery and instantly smelled the worst smell his nose could possibly endure. There were owl droppings everywhere.

He carefully walked around the circular room while owls hooted, desperately trying to avoid the filth on the floor. He took a good look around and saw the family owl, Marauder, in the corner farthest from him. *Of course*, he thought bitterly.

Still trying to dodge the mess on the floor, he carefully tiptoed towards the tawny owl perched in the corner. Marauder gave a small hoot and nip of affection on his fingers as he pet him. Pulling out the letter he had written minutes ago, he carefully tied it to his leg and brought him towards the window. "Take this to mum and dad" he told him. Marauder nodded his head to show that he understood and flew from Albus' arm into the sky. Glad he had accomplished one thing today, he decided to check the Great Hall to see if breakfast was still available.

He entered the Hall just before noon and saw Morrison and a few other people eating. The second he sat down at the long table, Morrison passed over a small color-coded card to him.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Weekly schedules" he replied, though it was quite hard to make out what he was saying with his mouth full of cereal.

Albus scanned the card, trying to remember everything in one go. He didn't want to have to carry it around everywhere.

Class Schedule for First Year Slytherins

Monday - Morning classes- DADA, Transfiguration

Afternoon classes- Charms, Astronomy

Tuesday - Morning classes- Double Herbology

Afternoon classes - Double History of Magic

Wednesday - Morning classes- Transfiguration, Charms

Afternoon classes- Double DADA

Thursday - Morning classes - Charms, Herbology

Afternoon classes - DADA, History of Magic

Friday - Morning classes - Double Transfiguration

Afternoon classes - Double Potions.

"Wow, they don't seem to care much about Astronomy and Potions do they?" Albus said.

"Guess not" Morrison replied. "But I heard from some seventh year that Astronomy's lame anyway, and that Potions is really tough in the later years. Good thing we don't have to take it too often."

"Do we know who we take our classes with?"

"Erm...it's the teachers isn't it?"

Albus frowned at him. "No, I meant what other houses we're with"

"Ohhh" Morrison replied with a patronizing expression, as if that had been much too hard to figure out without Albus telling him. "Right, yeah. Defense Against the Dark Arts, Potions, and Herbology are with Gryffindor. Transfiguration and Charms are with Ravenclaw. And History of Magic and Astronomy are with Hufflepuff"

"Oh good" Albus replied. He wanted his first class to be with Rose, so that he could ask her why she had ignored him. "Well, I'm going to go visit Hagrid for a bit. Wanna come?"

"Hagrid? The gamekeeper?" He looked horrified. "No thanks" he said quickly.

"Oh...okay then. Well, I'll catch up with you later then" he told him. He grabbed some toast from the nearest plate and left to go see Hagrid. His parents had always told him that if ever needed to talk to anyone at Hogwarts, it was him.

He left through the castle doors and onto the grounds, heading straight toward Hagrid's cabin. The breeze felt good, and a small part of him regretted knocking on the cabin door, knowing from the smoke that the fire was going to be lit. Hagrid opened the door a second later.

"Albus!" he said. "Come on in, come on in, I'll make yer' a cup o' tea."

He welcomed Albus in and made himself busy with the tea kettle while Albus took a look around. The cabin was extremely cramped, and some of the wood looked blackened, as if it had been burned before. Still, despite the sweltering heat from the fire place, it was quite cozy.

Hagrid brought over his tea and gave Albus a cup, chuckling while he did so.

"What's so funny?" Albus asked.

"Oh nothin'. I'm just rememberin' the first time I made your grandad tea."

"What happened?"

Hagrid did his best not to laugh as he told his story. "Well, I had been friends with your granddad since his third year. I had gotten into an argument with some students and they said some pretty 'urtful things. So your granddad and his best friend, Sirius, jinxed the mess outta' em'. Two of them ended up unconscious with boils all over their faces. The third got knocked into the lake. And your granddad was always welcome here after that. And one day, in his seventh year, he brought your grandma 'long. My goodness he was obsessed with her. She asked for tea, but I couldn't find any tea leaves. So your granddad spent five hours wandering the Forbidden Forest looking for tea leaves. Didn't know that the secon' he left I found some. Came back with a defeated frown on his face an' all."

He began laughing again, Albus joining in this time. "Yeah, I heard he was a bit of a troublemaker too."

"Aww, well no more than your dad!" Hagrid said.

"My dad?" Albus asked. He knew his father hadn't gotten perfect grades, but he couldn't imagine him breaking any major rules. He was quite wrong of course. By the time that he left Hagrid's house an hour later, he had learned that his father had hardly been a model student. Apparently, he had smuggled a dragon out of the school, crashed a flying car into a huge tree, flown to the Ministry of Magic on a Thestral, and went so far into the Forbidden Forest he had been forced to fight off acromantulas.

Feeling rather cheery from his visit with Hagrid, Albus walked towards the castle looking around, admiring the scenery. He had just gotten done admiring the beauty of the lake when he bumped into someone, knocking them over.

"Oh! Sorry!" he said, helping the person up. It was Mirra, the sad looking girl from Gryffindor. "I'm so sorry, I didn't watch where I was-

"No, no it's okay, neither was I" she said.

"Hey- are you- are you coming back from Hagrid's hut?" he asked. They had bumped into each other at what was sort of an odd angle. If Albus hadn't known any better, he would have assumed that she had been coming from the same direction as him.

"Oh- oh no" she said quickly. "I was coming from the lake. And I seemed to have left my bag there as well...I'll have to go and get it." And with that, she turned on her heel abruptly and made her way towards the lake.

Albus watched her go feeling uneasy. He couldn't see any bag by the lake. Had she been scared of him because he was a Slytherin?

He shrugged it off and continued towards the castle, this time someone else catching his attention. His brother was walking towards him, accompanied by a Gryffindor girl who looked elated to be in his presence. He quickened his pace when he saw Albus eyeing him, flashing him a grin and leaving his friend behind as he hurried towards him.

"All right there, Al?" he said once he was within talking distance.

"I'm all right" Albus replied. "Bored though. Just got back from Hagrid's."

"Bored? Ahh well you just haven't had your classes yet. It doesn't get real interesting 'till you start learning magic. By Monday, you won't know what to do with yourself."

"Yeah I guess" he replied. He didn't really feel like talking to his brother; for some reason he felt uncomfortable. Maybe it was Rose ignoring him.

"Well you just gotta ride the hippogriff lil' bro" James said, seeing his brother's melancholy face.

"I have to- what?"

"Ya know. Fly with a dragon!"

"I...what? I don't even *know what that means*" he said.

His brother heaved a huge sigh. "You have to *settle in*. Just get used to your surroundings. Relax."

"Oh, right" Albus replied.

"Well, talk to you later. I have to accompany this lovely young lady to the lake" he said, smirking at the "friend" who had caught up with him.

He grabbed her hand and walked her forward, and Albus could here her giggling as she went.

Well, I might as well go have lunch now, he told himself. And he left for the castle, thinking about Rose, James, and "settling in" as he went.

Chapter 3 : Professor Darvy

The next few days went by in a blur of spells and textbooks for Albus. His brother-though he didn't want to admit it-had been right, it was the classes at Hogwarts that made it so interesting. Sunday had been spent examining the castle with Morrison. The revolving staircases and talking portraits made Albus think he would never get used to the sheer wonder of the school. Albus had heard about these things from his parents of course, but to see them for himself was an experience like no other.

Albus found his classes both difficult and fascinating, even if some of them were slightly embarrassing. Professor Handit, the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, made it a habit to reference Albus' father almost every time the subject of dark magic and the war against Voldemort was brought up. Professor Handit was very young, a few years younger than the wizarding legend, in fact, and had grown up supporting him with his family.

Charms, unlike Defense Against the Dark Arts, was mostly practical and focused on teaching basic spells that were bound to become useful in any situation. To demonstrate their power, Professor Flitwick, the elderly and short wizard (who had come to Albus' house for dinner the previous summer), levitated the books he was standing on top of out from under his feet, resulting in a thundering crash and laughter from the students. Transfiguration was in a similar mold. Professor Bellinger, a kind woman who was quite patient with her students, immediately began teaching them to transfigure matches to needles, as well as paper plates to paper airplanes.

The spellwork was quite difficult to grasp. Albus only knew one spell, the disarming spell taught to him by his father, who claimed that it was "a lot better than it sounds." Albus learned quickly that the ability to do one spell didn't guarantee perfection with the others. He had thus far been unsuccessful in both *lumos*, the illumination spell, and almost all transfiguration spells. His teachers assured him, however, that no one was expected to get a complete grasp of these spells on their first try, and were encouraged to practice them throughout the entire year.

As if the difficult spellwork wasn't enough, Albus felt completely lost in his other classes. History of Magic was easily the most tedious subject by far. He could hardly blame Professor Binns for being a ghost, he himself would have most likely died of boredom as well had he been forced to drone on about centaur revolts that had occurred more than a thousand years ago. The only thing keeping him from falling asleep was playing hangman with Morrison, though he was afraid that they would run out of things to guess by the time the year was over. Astronomy was equally pointless. He had no idea how to identify the planets, and in the highly unlikely event that he guessed the correct one, he had no idea what he was supposed to learn from it.

Herbology, Albus was thankful to say, was different. Professor Longbottom had kept them intrigued in his class from the very beginning.

"Good morning students!" he said when they had all entered Greenhouse Number One in their first lesson.

"Good morning professor" the class chorused in a bored voice, clearly unexcited at the thought of managing plants for forty five minutes.

"Now that's not a very enthusiastic welcome is it? We'll begin in a few minutes. Take the time to look around and get used to your surroundings" he said cheerily.

Several of the students took a small glance at the corners of the greenhouse before returning to their lethargic state. Neville didn't resume class however. He continued looking around until someone raised their hand and asked "Professor, what's that?", pointing at a large sword leaning against a wall.

Neville gave an excited look before turning around, apparently bewildered, and saw the sword, its rubies glittering in the sunlight.

"What's what? Oh *that*? Oh...that's...that's nothing" he said nonchalantly, though he was clearly excited. "It's just the sword I used to help kill Voldemort. Nothing big really" he finished with a shrug, as though it were no big deal.

"*You* helped kill Voldemort?" one of the students asked.

"Well - I don't think I can really claim - well then again, I suppose yes *it is true*. I certainly contributed. I really don't even know how that thing got down here. I kept it as a souvenir and always keep it in my office -"

"- I saw you carrying it down to the grounds this morning, Professor" another student said loudly.

The smile slid off of Neville's face.

"Oh - oh you did, did you? I suppose I may have been sleepwalking...so used to fighting dark wizards I actually dream about it..."

He broke off there, and didn't mention the sword for the remainder of the class, instead choosing to let them plant Slovakian Fingertraps - plants that tried to bite at your fingers while you were planting them. Albus tightened his gloves, wondering what on earth a biting plant could be good for.

Friday came with more than just the prospect of the weekend. Albus' first Potions lesson was to take place that afternoon. He had to admit, he was slightly worried. His father had told him that Potions was the toughest subject, although he'd admitted that it could have simply been his teacher. He sat staring at his breakfast while Morrison frantically scribbled Transfiguration homework on a piece of parchment

"Quick, what's the difference between transfiguring a solid and a liquid?" he asked, erasing full lines from his paper.

"Don't ask me, I can't transfigure either" Albus replied.

"Well then what did you put?"

"I just kind of wung it to be honest. Twisted it into a question of my own. Asked if a solid can still be called a solid when it's in the process of being transfigured."

"Wow...that had nothing to do at all with the question."

"I know" Albus said gloomily.

"What's wrong with you? It's just one paper. You seem down over something."

"I seem - what?" he had been looking over at Rose and her friends, who were talking cheerily and giggling at something; Albus could only assume one of them was wearing new fingernail polish. Regardless, she seemed happy, and not at all concerned with the fact that Albus had avoided talking to her in all of his classes thus far.

"You seem distracted" Morrison said again.

"Oh it's nothing. I was just think -" but he was interrupted by a thundering chorus of "boos" from his table. Looking around to see who the unwelcome guest was, he saw his brother casually walking towards the table.

"Get away from our table Potter!" yelled a shrill voice a few seats down from Albus.

"Can it Watson, before I jinx that hideous makeup off your face!" James yelled back, waving his wand threateningly.

The girl immediately shut up, and James crouched down next to Albus as the boos died down, signaling that the Slytherins no longer cared he was there.

"What's up? Enjoying your classes?" he asked.

"Sort of" Albus replied honestly. "Herbology was interesting, but the rest is kind of hard"

James gave a small chuckle. "You've had Herbology already? Did Neville *accidentally* bring his sword to class like he did my first year? And who's this kid?" he added, nodding his head towards Morrison, who was staring at him very intently.

"Yeah he did. And that's my friend Morrison. Morrison, this is my brother" he said, introducing his friend to James.

"Hello" Morrison said before turning back to his paper.

"Hey" James replied simply before turning back to Albus. "You gonna watch my Quidditch tryouts? They're two Fridays from now."

"Erm... yeah. I guess. James, is Rose mad at me?" he asked quickly.

James gave him a small frown and clapped his hand on his brother's shoulder. "She's not mad at you bro. Just a bit confused. Rose...she's in a different crowd from you. I think she's afraid she won't be as popular if she associates herself with Slytherins. There's bad blood between our houses Al."

Albus tried to hide his fury. How dare she? If he was willing to be her friend, why couldn't she do the same? He never thought his cousin would act like this. Before he could express his anger though, he found himself asking another question.

"Aren't you afraid *you* won't be popular for associating yourself with me? You're Gryffindor too."

James gave a small laugh before saying "Al please, I'm popular regardless of who I talk to. In fact, you're probably a bit more popular for talking to me right now. That includes you too kid" he added, nodding towards Morrison. "I'm off to go find a snogging partner, we have ten minutes left before classes. Later Al" he added, turning to leave.

"Wait!" Albus said quickly. "One more thing. Is Potions hard?"

James gave him a small smirk and clapped his hand on his brother's shoulder again. "With Professor Darvy? Well it's interesting, I'll say that much."

He turned to leave again, this time walking away from the Slytherin table without a distraction. As he reached the halfway point to his table, Albus heard another Slytherin menacingly yell "That's right, run away Potter!"

He saw his brother chuckle again and yell back "Are you lecturing me on running Colton? You're so fat you can barely walk!" and with that, he sat down at his table.

The morning passed by uneventfully, with the minor exception of Morrison stammering a fruitless excuse to Professor Bellinger that involved his paper miraculously catching fire right as he was writing the "extra credit bit you mentioned". After lunch, they descended into the dungeons for Potions.

Albus approached the Potions room a bit later than he had planned, Morrison by his side. They had gotten lost on the way, confusing the way to the Potions room with the way to their common room. Expecting to be forced to say an apology, he had been rather surprised when he saw that all of the other students, both Gryffindor and Slytherin, were waiting outside the door.

"Where's the teacher?" Albus asked Bartleby.

"No clue" he responded, peering over his shoulder for signs of him. "Guess he's just as late as you guys. The door's locked."

At that instant, a large "Bang!" came from inside the classroom, and the door flung open, revealing Professor Darvy in a cloud of smoke. In between his coughs, he yelled out to the students.

"My apologies kids, I was in the middle of creating an Essence of Explosion, and I got a bit carried away. Needless to say however, It was a success "

He recoiled from behind the door and shouted "Come on in!"

The students nervously entered, apparently unsure if it was safe or not. Albus could see Scorpius Malfoy looking around for signs of more potential explosions before settling himself into a seat in the very back. Albus and Morrison, being the last to enter, found themselves occupying seats in the very front. Professor Darvy emerged from his office, wiping some sort of green liquid from off of his robes.

"Good afternoon students, and welcome to Potions!" he said loudly. "Now you'll find that your Potions class works *slightly* different from your other classes. You can be an extremely poor wizard and be a brilliant potions master, or you can be a fantastic wizard, and be quite poor in the art of brewing these liquid wonders. Anybody have any comments as to why they think that is?"

Albus saw Mirra's hand shoot up, Rose quickly following after it.

"Hmm...you there, with the black hair, you were first" he said, pointing at Mirra.

"The art of potion making depends on a wizard's ability to pay attention, remain focused on what they're doing, and the way in which they are using their ingredients" she said clearly.

"Very good!" Professor Darvy exclaimed. "Ten points to Gryffindor. Very well explained, Miss Tunnels, I believe it is?"

Mirra nodded her head. Albus realized that Rose's hand was still up.

"Yes Miss Weasley, you have further comments?"

Rose cleared her throat loudly. "Excuse me sir, isn't ones abilities in potion making at least partly influenced by their capabilities as a wizard? Wouldn't a more powerful and wise wizard have more knowledge of the ingredients they're using, and also be able to detect when their potion is becoming dangerous or not? Can't experienced wizards use intuition when it comes to magic?"

"Terrific Miss Weasley! That is very true! Take another ten points to Gryffindor!" Professor Darvy exclaimed, even more excited then he had been from Mirra's answer. *Leave it to Rose to argue with the teacher* Albus thought to himself.

"Miss Weasley is very right of course! Potion making *does* require a certain amount of intuition and knowledge, both of which are generally gained as a wizard grows in power. For instance, it would be extremely hard for a muggle to create a potion, even an extremely competent point I am trying to make is that just because you may be struggling with spellwork in your other classes, that does not necessarily mean that you cannot be talented at potion making. What's more important is your ability to test boundaries, remain focused, and experiment a little bit! And that class, brings us to our first assignment" he finished with a grin on his face.

He waved his wand and the cupboards to the left of his office opened, revealing a wide assortment of jars and trays.

"For today's lesson, I want everyone to make me a potion. Ingredients are in the cupboard, I trust you all have cauldrons. Begin!" he said, the mad glint in his eye sparkling as he did so.

Albus raised his eyebrows and turned to Morrison, who was staring blankly with his mouth open.

"Erm...Professor Darvy?" Rose spoke up. "I think you forgot to tell us what potion to make. And to issue directions." There was a murmur of agreement at her words; the rest of the class seemed to have been thinking along the same lines.

"I did issue directions Miss Weasley. I told you to make a potion" he said simply. He didn't seem mad at all, or even flustered by her question.

"What- what potion?" she asked.

"I don't recall naming one" he said with equal kindness in his voice. "Ingredients are in the cupboard" he said again, pointing to it once more.

The class sat still for a few seconds, before a scraping of chairs came from the back of the room. Scorpius had gotten up and went over to the cupboards. He began filling up his hands with numerous seeds and insects. A few seconds later, the entire class had gotten up and made their way towards the cupboards.

It was easily the most unusual lesson Albus had done so far. He went to collect ingredients and saw labels on Tupperware bowls like "rabbit tail" and "shark eyes". He saw some words he didn't even recognize, like "bezoar" and "ashwinder venom". And at the very top, he even saw what looked like a row of unicorn horns. He took several ingredients, including pufferfish eyes and eel eggs back to his cauldron, and began filling it with things randomly, occasionally stirring the liquid inside at random speeds.

Professor Darvy simply sat back and watched, saying nothing, though he kept an unusually large smile on his face. Occasionally, he would make a small "ooh" or "ahh" whenever someone's potions would start to smoke, or if it changed colors abruptly. He even gave a large "woahh" when Morrison's green potion turned to blue and started bubbling.

"What! What does that mean!" Morrison said frantically, backing up from his own potion in fear it would splash him in the face. But Professor Darvy didn't answer. He simply continued smiling, and began walking around, occasionally smelling someone's potion.

An hour into the lesson, Albus heard him say "Stop."

Albus wiped the sweat from his face. He had just gotten done stirring fairywings into his cauldron, and the resulting heat had made him very tired.

"Assuming your potion does not melt your container, I would like everyone to fill a vial of it and write your name on it. I will mark them and give you your grades next Friday. There will be no homework tonight. Afterwards, feel free to go, I will clean up this mess" he said.

Albus filled his vial with his pink potion, scribbled his name on it, and gently placed it in the tray on Professor Darvy's desk. He left the dungeon with Morrison, discussing the lesson, and voicing an opinion rather different from his friends.

"That was terrible! He didn't even teach!" Morrison was complaining.

"But regardless, we got to experiment a little. And it was better than History of Magic!" Albus argued.

"True, but I don't see how he can possibly mark our potions! What if one of us accidently made poison?"

"He'll probably give us passing grades. He would only give it a bad mark if we didn't do it."

They argued the rest of the way back to the common room. "Basilisk!" Morrison said when they reached the stone wall. The door showed and they entered, revealing a large crowd near the bulletin board. "What happened?" Morrison asked a fellow first year girl, Denise Toils.

"Something about Quidditch" she said before walking towards the fireplace.

Albus and Morrison joined the chattering crowd, but were too far behind to see anything. Morrison, being slightly taller than Albus, stood on his toes to get a good glance of what was posted.

"Can you see what it is?" Albus asked him.

"Quidditch tryouts!" Morrison said excitedly. "They're next week! The captain said first years are welcome to tryout!"

"Right...that's cool and all, but I think you're forgetting something."

"What?" Morrison asked him, quite bewildered.

"We don't know how to fly!"

"Oh right. Well...we can take lessons! We can sign up tomorrow!"

"I don't think so" Albus told him. Being terrified of flying wasn't going to change because there was a chance of him being knocked off of his broom by a bludger. He liked his feet where they were; on the ground. "You're welcome to try it if you want" Albus told him.

"Nah it's okay" he said, though he looked thoroughly disappointed. "I don't have a broom anyway" he said.

They went up to the dormitories to get started on their homework. Professor Bellinger had asked for eight inches of parchment on the difference between transfiguring living objects and inanimate objects. Just as Albus sat down on his bed and pulled out his parchment however, he noticed something. Scorpius Malfoy was lying down on his bed, staring up at the ceiling with his bed hangings crumpled on the floor; it looked as though he had ripped them down in anger. There was a letter unfolded next to him.

Albus wanted to say something, to ask what was wrong, but decided against it. Who was he to help someone with their problems, when he couldn't even solve his own? Thoughts of what James had told him were ringing in his ear. *I think she's afraid she won't be as popular if she associates herself with Slytherins. There's bad blood between our houses Al.* The thought infuriated Albus. He turned away, completely forgetting about Scorpius, and began writing his essay, pretending that the parchment was Rose's face every time he scratched his quill across it.

Chapter 4: The Golden Tulips

Similar to his first week, the following went by in a blur. Albus was now accustomed to a daily routine. He would wake up, attend his morning classes, throw an ugly look at Rose, attend his afternoon classes, dish out another ugly look, and spend the rest of the day hanging out in the common room with Morrison, playing wizard's chess and Gobstones with some older students.

The pattern was tedious, but worked well. He got a certain amount of satisfaction from it, and he had to admit, he had eased into it better than he thought he would. He was doing better in his classes as well. In his last Transfiguration class, he had managed to transfigure a quill into a toothpick, making him only three lessons behind the rest of the class, and he had received an "O" on his last piece of Defense Against the Dark Arts homework as well.

The following Friday was set to be particularly exciting for the first years. Not only were the Quidditch tryouts planned for that weekend, but they were to have their next class with Professor Darvy.

The class filed into the Potions room with different expressions on their faces. Some of them looked excited at the idea of another completely random class, others terrified at the thought of what grade they would get for the potion they had concocted.

"Good afternoon students!" Professor Darvy greeted them.

"Good afternoon" the class chorused back.

"As I'm sure you all know, I have the results to your last assignment written down on my clipboard here. I could call you up to hear your grades, but that would take too long. Instead, I'll simply announce them to the entire class" he said with a bright smile.

Murmurs of panic spread throughout the students, Albus included. Though he had assured himself that he would get a passing grade, the thought of a failing one being announced out loud frightened him. Professor Darvy had said that potion making was based more on someone's competence than magical ability. What if he lacked both, and everyone ended up knowing?

"I'll go through the list alphabetically" he started. "Bartleby Bing-"

Albus saw Bartleby flinch.

"-O"

"I knew it!" Bartleby called out. "I knew I made the truth serum perfectly!"

Most of the class laughed, including Professor Darvy.

"Candice Blue. O" he called out.

The class looked around. Bartleby simply could have been lucky, or a talented potion maker. But that was now two in a row.

"Xavier Comley. O. Dante Haug. O"

The list went on and on, with every student (Albus included) receiving an "O".

Professor Darvy put the clipboard down on his desk and began pacing the room.

"The point of this assignment, as I'm sure some of you may have deduced, was not to see whether you could make a potion, but to see whether you had the potential to. The goal here was to experiment. To not be afraid of the results, to take risks, and to imagine a little bit. You all passed with flying colors" he told them.

"Today's lesson," he said, waving his wand as words filled the blackboard, "will be similar. However, we will actually be aiming to make a specific potion."

Albus, once again sitting in the front seat with Morrison, gazed at the board and read the directions. He noticed that they didn't seem complicated at all, simple in fact, but that some words were missing, and in their place were blank lines filling the gaps.

"We will be making a burning solution today, class" he told them. "The directions are on the board, though you'll notice that several key ingredients are missing. The burning solution is quite easy, and as such, isn't in your book. What *is* in your book however, is a list of ingredients and their properties. By learning the properties of an ingredient, you should be able to deduce what is meant to fill those blanks. Or at least make an educated guess."

The class looked around excitedly. This lesson seemed as though it might be fun. They had a definite goal, unlike their last one.

"I do not, of course, expect anyone to get it exactly. Some ingredients are too similar in description, and others are downright hard to make the connection with. But the person who makes the potion *closest* to a proper burning solution will earn his house fifty points. The cupboards are open. You may begin."

As soon as he had said "fifty points", the class had frantically hurried out of their seats to get a variety of ingredients that they would need. Albus found the lesson quite easy, though he knew he had made mistakes. Reading and comprehending was something that he was good at, so when he was told to mix Doxy eggs (which decrease the temperature of something) with a random ingredient, he knew to use Bowtruckle feet, as his book told him that they absorbed the properties of whatever they're mixed with and add it to the temperature of the potion. He deduced that the potion would need to be cold (as it cured burning) and was able to figure out several other steps quite easily.

His biggest challenge however, was helping Morrison, whose cauldron looked like it was no closer to creating a burning solution than it was chicken stew. He frequently had to tell him to remove certain ingredients, to stir harder, or to simply add what he himself had added.

At the end of the lesson Professor Darvy began pacing around the class, smelling peoples potions. He started with Albus. He took a quick whiff before saying "Hmm...shouldn't have added those dead tarantulas, but overall I'm impressed. Very good, this would probably soothe a burn, even if it wouldn't cure it."

He next turned his head to Morrison's. He gave his a quick whiff as well, looked in the pot, and asked "Pea soup?"

The class laughed loudly while Morrison put his head down, though Albus could see he was grinning as well.

"It's okay, no need to look ashamed" Professor Darvy told him. "There's still plenty of room for improvement, but I trust you can do it." He gave him a pat on the shoulder before continuing his patrol around the room.

As he passed each student, he took a huge whiff of their potions. Some were good, others bad, but apparently none had been better than Albus'; or worse than Morrison's. He finally reached Rose, gave it a short smell, and said "Ahh, Albus, I'm afraid that Miss Weasley here has you beat. This is very close to perfect. I doubt anyone's going to beat this."

The Slytherins gave a large groan. They thought they had been guaranteed fifty points with Albus' potion. He threw her a furious look before turning back to face the front.

"Now now, it's not over yet" Professor Darvy told the class. He continued his patrol, making no comment on anyone else's potion until he reached the last person. He bent down his nose low to Scorpius Malfoy's potion, picked his head up and said "We have a clear winner. A perfect burning solution!"

The Slytherins cheered, and now it was the Gryffindor's turn to groan. Despite the victory however, Scorpius didn't look the slightest bit happy, or even amused. He had won his house fifty points, but he hardly seemed to care.

"So that's fifty points to Slytherin" Professor Darvy said. "And now it's time to go. Once again, I'll clean up this mess, feel free to pack up and leave. And enjoy your weekend!" he shouted after them. Many students wished him the same as they left the dungeon, and they went off to enjoy their weekend.

The next morning Albus woke up rather earlier than usual. He decided there was no point in staying in bed and went down to the Great Hall to get some early breakfast. He was quite

shocked to see James sitting at the Gryffindor table with several other people, including a ghost. James waved to him and motioned for him to come over and talk to him.

"How's it goin' Al?" he asked. "Want some toast?"

"No thanks, I'm alright. What are you doing up so early?"

"Quidditch tryouts, they got pushed up a week to have more time to practice before the first match. I was gonna' pass a message along to you in a few minutes. They should be in a few hours. Oh, by the way, Nick, this is Albus, my brother. Al, this is Nearly Headless Nick."

The ghost turned around and gave a small jump.

"What's wrong Nick? You look like you've seen a ghost" James joked.

"I daresay, you look just like your father!" Nick exclaimed. "Very nice to meet you" he added.

"Err...yeah, nice to meet you too" Albus replied, doing his best to wonder how someone could possibly be *nearly* headless.

"All right guys, lets move out!" came a brisk voice from down the end of the table.

James turned around, bewildered. "What? Now? You said a few hours!"

"I lied" the person called back.

"C'mon, follow me" James told his brother as he slung his broomstick over his shoulder and began the trek to the Quidditch Pitch.

Albus sat on the very bottom row of the stands, and watched as what looked like almost all of Gryffindor house shuffled their way onto the pitch. The Gryffindor Quidditch Captain was a fifth year named Cooper Lanely. Albus could tell from the way he was issuing directions that he was either very passionate about Quidditch, or very bossy.

There was only one open spot on the team for Chasers, and over ten people trying out for it. Every time someone would get called up, they would fly a little better than the previous person. They all had to do the same thing, take ten shots on the keeper (Cooper) while dodging the Bludgers being whacked at them by the Beaters, two burly seventh years. Most people managed to make around five or six, and many of them managed to avoid the Bludgers completely the entire time they were flying.

James was the last one up. He picked up the Quaffle at the other end of the pitch, and with a sort of elegant grace literally *danced* across the field, swerving the Bludgers so quickly that the Beaters became confused. He made his first nine shots, grinning ear to ear as he did so.

Cooper was starting to get furious at the fact that he hadn't saved a single shot. "Stop! Stop!" he yelled as James came flying towards him to take (and probably make) his tenth and final shot.

James stopped abruptly, while the other students looked around to see what had caused the diversion. Cooper had flown down to the ground and was pointing at the stands, making a gesture towards Albus to come over to him. Albus looked around. Perhaps he had pointed at the wrong person... but there was no one within 15 seats of him.

Albus walked over to Cooper just as his brother came floating down on his broom, hovering about 10 feet off the ground.

"What's this kid doing here!" Cooper said nastily.

"He's my brother" James replied simply.

"Well he's in Slytherin! And he's spying on our techniques!"

"I'm *what*?" Albus asked. This was the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard. What techniques? Surely the other teams knew that the Gryffindor team could fly by now?

"He's not spying on anyone Cooper" James said in a grim tone.

"Yes he is! He is from a rival team, a team that we are playing in a month, and he has information now, not just on our new playing roster, but on the techniques that we have been practicing. He knows how our Beaters swing, he knows what post I fly to, he has seen enough to ensure that his house team is more than prepared to face us."

James floated down to the ground and got off his broom, mouth open at what he was hearing. "He's *eleven!*" he said loudly.

Albus stepped in. He knew what this was about. "I know what's going on" he said. Both James and Cooper turned to him. "You suck as a Keeper, and you need to take your anger out on someone, so you picked me, a Slytherin!"

There was laughter from some surrounding students. Apparently watching Cooper get insulted by a first year was funny, regardless of what house he was in.

Cooper turned angrily to James. "Get this coward off the pitch. Right now."

There was a large gasp of "Ohhs" from the crowd of Gryffindors surrounding him. James whipped out his wand and pointed it directly at Cooper's face. Apparently he had a tendency to jinx people when he was mad, because the crowd around them recoiled.

Cooper stared at him blankly, then quietly began speaking when he had regained his composure. "James. I'm seconds from putting you on the team. But if you don't take that wand out of my face

and send your brother off the pitch, I will make sure that you *never* play Quidditch so long as I'm captain."

Albus had been expecting his brother to tuck his wand away and tell him that he was sorry, and that he needed to leave the pitch at once. He was quite wrong. Instead of tucking his wand away, he tightened his grip on it. Realizing that his brother was going to lose his spot on the Quidditch team, he interfered quickly.

"It's fine James" he said. "I was going to go and visit Hagrid now anyway. I was already leaving."

James flashed him a quick look that clearly said *You don't have to go*, but Albus turned on his heel and left the pitch without looking back.

He crossed over to the grounds with his head hung low, both at the thought of his brother almost losing a spot on the Quidditch team because of him, as well the thought of how being in Slytherin had been the reason. Were Slytherins really that bad? He had spent time with his housemates, and they weren't nearly as terrible as they had been described to be. What was it that made them so hated?

Questions flew through him as he wandered the grounds, miserable. He really didn't know where to go now. He supposed he might as well visit Hagrid. *I don't want to be a liar today, in addition to a Slytherin coward*, he thought bitterly.

He turned around midstep and walked towards Hagrid's cabin, hoping he wouldn't be out patrolling the grounds. He knocked on the cabin door. No answer. He knocked again, louder. He heard a loud groan and a thump and could only assume that his knocking had woken the gamekeeper up. Seconds later, Hagrid came to the door bleary eyed.

"Wa - wassa' matter. Oh! Albus. Everythin' ok?" he asked.

"Fine" Albus lied. *Great, there goes that plan*. "Can I come in?"

"Well com' in, com' in" he said, holding the door wide open. Albus entered and took his usual seat at the table in the kitchen.

"Rock cake?" Hagrid asked. "They're only a couple days old!"

"Err- no thanks. I'm not very hungry. Just wanted to talk. Hagrid, can I ask you something?"

"Sure sure, whas' on yer mind?"

"What does everyone have against Slytherin?"

Hagrid gave him a blank gaze as he said it. Apparently he was at a loss for words. Albus had expected this-he knew that he had gotten to the point awfully quickly. But his curiosity was piqued, and his parents had told him that he could always go to Hagrid.

"What makes ya ask tha'?" He sounded casual, but Albus knew he was trying his best to do so.

He explained what had happened on the Quidditch Pitch. Everything from what Cooper had said, to being accused of being a Slytherin spy, to walking off the pitch feeling miserable. Hagrid listened intently, and made to interrupt a few times, but Albus would raise his voice whenever he did so. He wanted Hagrid to hear everything before giving his opinion. When he had finished, Hagrid quickly said "Called you a coward' did he?"

"Yeah. Yeah he did" Albus said.

Hagrid gave him an uneasy look before he began speaking. "Well ye see Albus. Slytherins had a bad reputation long before the war wit' Voldermor'. He was in the house, other dark wizards had been in the house, and it was Salazar Slytherin himself who had a grudge against muggle borns in the firs' place."

He gave a huge sigh, but Albus pressured him to continue.

"Well...durin' the second war with Voldermor', there was a huge battle, right here at the castle. And the Slytherins, instead of fightin' with the rest of the school-defendin' the place that had kept them safe and taught them magic-they fled. Coward' used ter' be a term to refer to anyone who's jus' frightened, but now the term seems to stick with them. It's an old term though, you don' hear it as much anymore."

Albus looked down in disgust. He could hardly blame Cooper for calling him a coward. Had his entire house really abandoned their school? Abandoned his own father?

"Now don't look like tha'" Hagrid said at the look on Albus' face. "That was years an' years ago. And it's not like Slytherin's didn't play their part. In fact - one Slytherin did come back".

"They did?" Albus asked. "Who?"

"A man named Horace Slughorn. Powerful wizard he was. And he wasn' your average Slytherin either. He was Head of the House! From wha' I heard, he dueled Voldermor' *personally*."

"He did?" Albus asked, astounded. For some reason, this knowledge made him feel better.

"Yeah he did. People seem to forget that fact though."

"What ever happened to him?"

"Died" Hagrid said grimly. "A few years ago. Dragonpox. "

"Oh" Albus said, reverting back to his miserable state.

"Now - don' go back lookin like that. C'mere, I got summin to show yer'. This oughta cheer yer up. Always does it fer' me."

He led a very curious Albus to the vegetable patch outside his cabin, humming joyfully as he did so. Apparently he was very excited to show him something, and he kept muttering to himself about his "golden thumb."

The second they reached the vegetable patch, Albus knew why. He was met with the most beautiful scenery he had ever laid his eyes on. The flowers in the vegetable patch were pale gold, glistening in the sunlight. "How did you do this?" he asked him, astonished.

"No clue to be hones'. Just water and sunlight. They're all tulips. I was growin' them for about a week and they started ter get yellow. And just a few days ago, they turned gold. Soothing, aren' they?"

"Yeah. They are." He wasn't lying this time. The golden tulips emitted some sort of radiant power from them, much like the Hogwarts castle itself. Despite its sheer power though, it had a rather calming effect on him. As long as he was staring at the tulips, he was fine. He found himself subconsciously crouching down to feel the tulips in his fingertips. "Do they have any magical properties Hagrid?"

"I have no idea. Don' think so. I went to Professor Longbottom and he said he had never seen anythin' like it. He just suggested I take good care of em'. So I will" he finished happily.

Albus left the cabin a few minutes later, thoughts of the golden tulips still shining in his head brightly. It was still relatively early, but more students had left bed since his departure to watch James tryout for Chaser. As he entered the Great hall, he saw Morrison running up to him, holding an envelope in his hand.

"Al! Al you got a letter!" he called out.

"It's about time" Albus said, taking the letter from his friend. "I wrote to my parents weeks ago. Was my owl okay?"

"Fine" Morrison replied, and Albus saw that he was sweating. He must have ran to find him. "He flew off to the owlery right after he made the delivery at breakfast."

"Oh. Guess that means it's not his fault then. I'll be right back" he told him.

Albus ran to the common room as fast as he could, anxious to read his letter. Would his parents judge him just as Cooper had?

He entered his dormitory at top speed, ripping his letter open as he did so. He turned to the window for light and read:

Dear Albus,

That's great news! We already knew of course, Neville told us the night you were sorted, but it's still great to hear it from you. How's the common room? Last time I was in it, it didn't feel very comfortable, though that may have just been because I wasn't exactly myself that day. I'm assuming you've seen the ghosts by now, so there's no point in assuring you of that, but I do have an apology to make. I'm sorry you're getting this letter weeks later than you should have. I was on a special Auror assignment in Turkey the day we got it, and your mother, while cleaning the house, stashed it in a random drawer (ironic really, considering the first time she cleaned the house thoroughly she almost got rid of something important). Fortunately, the second I got home I found it, so no major harm done.

I also received a letter from James as well, and apparently, Rose has been treating you unfairly for how you were sorted. Uncle Ron was furious, but we agreed not to mention anything about it to her. Accepting you for who you are is something she'll have to do on her own, and though I love her, she has to realize she's wrong soon. Just tough it out for now and be the bigger man-erm- student.

Also, your mother doesn't want me to tell you this, she's afraid you'll use it to avoid going to class, but I think I know the perfect room for you to use when you need a place to think to yourself (which I assume you need a lot). On the seventh floor, near the tapestry of Barnabus the Barmy, there should be a blank stretch of wall. Just pace in front of it a bit and tell yourself you need somewhere to be alone and think-I have a feeling you'll find exactly what you need.

Your mother and I are both very proud of you, and regardless of where you are, we know you'll do great. Never forget that. Make friends, do (most of) your homework, and have fun. We'll talk to you soon, but feel free to write back, we love hearing from you.

Love,

Your Father.

PS. Please do try and keep an eye on your brother.

Albus read through the letter twice more, his heart lightening each time he did so. His parents were not ashamed of him. They were fine with it, it made no difference to them. And they had been right about Rose, he knew that. He quickly scanned over the part about the room on the seventh floor that his dad had mentioned. Deciding to check it out later, he stashed the letter in his trunk and turned to the empty beds around him. He decided not to write back until something interesting happened. Instead, he let the emptiness and quiet of the room consume him. The thoughts of the golden tulips and his father's letter were soothing, and he stretched himself on his bed feeling better than he had in weeks.

Chapter 5. Assyrian Alert Seeds

November brought more than just harsh wind and cold temperatures. Tension started to rise between the houses more so than before. It was quite common, and even expected, to see dueling in the hallways between some of the older students. Quidditch season had begun.

The first Quidditch match was planned for the third weekend of November, and as a result Albus got to talk to his brother even less than he usually would have. It was already difficult communicating with him when their houses were separate, but with the constant onslaught of practices scheduled, they were reduced to merely giving each other encouraging smiles (or smirks, in James' case) in the hallway.

Albus was going to support Slytherin, of course, but he was all but guaranteed that they were going to lose. He had sat in the stands to watch Slytherin practice with Morrison three times in a row-his friend seemed to enjoy this very much-and had noticed one thing in particular; his house team was not very good. Compared to the way his brother flew, the Chasers were terrible, and Albus didn't expect the Keeper to do much better, considering he would frequently get scored on by them.

His classes, he was happy to note, were doing much better and were now much more interesting. Professor Handit had begun teaching them about improvising spells, and using Latin etymology to create the proper incantations. To demonstrate, he used *mobilucandlus* to fling the candles in the room against the walls, and taught the children to experiment with things like *mobiluseatus* to move their chairs, or *mobilutextis* to move their books.

Albus quickly learned to love his Potions lessons above all of his other ones though. Professor Darvy had the uncanny ability to take something as basic and boring as stirring a potion and make it entertaining and enjoyable. His last two lessons had comprised of brewing potions with a blindfold on (meant to make you more aware of the ingredients you were using, as you needed to feel them in your hands first) and brewing a potion with his partner-Morrison-without speaking. They had to communicate only with hand signs, which was extremely difficult considering Morrison had no idea how to identify the flailing of Albus' arms when he went to stir gurdyroot with dried turnips, resulting in a melted cauldron.

The Thursday before the Quidditch game was met with very little enthusiasm from the students. They had Herbology that morning, and if their next lesson was anything similar to their previous few, they would be doing nothing but digging holes and sprinkling water on the soil to ensure that any unexpected plant life would have a place to grow. They were met with much surprise however, when they saw Professor Longbottom waving to them from Greenhouse Number Two.

The students exchanged looks of glee at the sudden change in scenery. Greenhouse Number 2 was meant to house plants that needed the most sunlight, and as such were also the most

interesting. They practically skipped into the sunlit room, muttering about what Professor Longbottom could have up his sleeve.

As soon as they had all entered, Professor Longbottom clapped his hands together and gave an excited squeal of delight.

"Okay okay, I know you all enjoy planting the foundations for new plants -"

Many students raised their eyes at this, while others simply smirked.

"- but I've decided to do something a tad bit different. A bit of a year long project actually."

At this, the students stopped rolling their eyes and turned to their neighbor to see if they had heard about this sudden change in their class lessons. Everyone appeared to be equally curious however, and they all turned their heads back to Professor Longbottom when he began speaking again.

"We will be growing Assyrian Alert Seeds, class. And as such, we will need to nurture their parents, Assyrian Alert Plants. Can anyone tell me what they know about them?"

Naturally, Rose's hand shot up first, quickly followed by Mirra. The students who had class with them were used to this by now. The order switched occasionally, but you could be guaranteed that either Rose or Mirra could answer whatever question had been asked.

"Yes, Rose?" Professor Longbottom called out in anticipation, no doubt preparing to hand out ten points to Gryffindor.

"Assyrian Alert Plants are not just located in Assyria, but are named so because that was where they were first discovered. They can, in fact, grow anywhere provided they are given the proper treatment. The Alert Plants are very ferocious, and will frequently snap at people with their strong jaws, as well as fling their vines at them, which can leave deep scarring. They have several important uses though -"

Albus and the other Slytherins groaned. Once Rose got started, she could recite an entire textbook.

"- their seeds are digestible, and can wake up anyone from even the deepest of sleeps, including the Drought of Living Death. Also, if consumed while awake, the seeds can keep you awake for up to three days depending on their potency."

"Excellent Rose! Take twenty points to Gryffindor!"

Rose gave a tiny giggle as two of her friends patted her on the back. Albus bit his tongue to stop himself from saying anything. His dad had been right, he simply had to be the bigger student and let her be.

"The Assyrian Alert Plants are extremely rare, and we are quite lucky to have the few that we do here at Hogwarts. I originally had not planned on even using them at all, but Miss Tunnels here-" he nodded his head towards Mirra "-was very interested in them. And as I seem to be running out of lesson plans very quickly, I decided that if my students enjoy these things, I might as well make a project out of it."

He smiled at them and went to the back of the greenhouse, coming back a minute later with a tray supporting what looked like seven or eight of the most unusual plants Albus had ever seen.

They were a bright red color, comprised entirely of a stem with vines sticking out from them and a large circular head that had massive yellow teeth in it. The vines and stems themselves were not moving, but the heads were bobbing around, making screeching noises at the air around them. On more than one occasion, one of them would accidentally snap at another one, resulting in a very vicious fight that involved them attempting to bite the vines off of one another.

"Okay now, we don't have that many plants, so we need to divide into groups of three. Pick your partners carefully, you'll need to stay with them for most of the year. We will be plucking off the dead vines to allow new ones to grow, full of vitality and ready to defend themselves. They will need to be watered and fed-I have some dead ladybugs here-and we will also need to ensure that they are given enough attention. You will need to raise this plant during your next few lessons, and hopefully, by late May or early June, they should have provided us with plenty of Alert Seeds, so we can spend the entire summer awake and full of life!"

Despite Professor Longbottom's enthusiasm about the project, most of the class looked like they would rather sleep through their entire summer than nurture a plant that was sure to strangle them and bite at their fingers every time they went to feed it.

Albus partnered himself with Morrison and Denise, the girl who had told them about the bulletin board weeks ago. She was very pleasant, and was more than willing to do the majority of the work. Albus was quick to note that this may not have been out of genuine kindness though. She had only begun doing most of the work when she realized that Albus and Morrison were completely clueless about how to take care of a plant, especially one that was willing to battle them every step of the way.

It was tiring, aggravating, and painful. Though Denise had made it quite clear that she would do all of the feeding, she gave Albus and Morrison simple instructions-break off the dead vines. This proved to be much more challenging than they had originally believed, as the newer vines were full of energy, and did their best to wrap themselves around Albus' and Morrison's arms.

"Ahrrg! Get it off me!" he heard Morrison yell from behind him.

He turned just in time to see two vines latch onto Morrison's arms and try to pull him towards its slobbering mouth.

There was yelling from the students around him as he frantically tried to pry the vines off of him. Albus searched through his head for a spell that would help in this situation.

"Help me!" Morrison yelled.

Albus saw Neville pull out his wand from the corner of his eye, but he was quicker. "*Diffindo*" he shouted, aiming his wand at the vines.

The vines were cut clear in half, and Morrison managed to pull them off of his arms, breathing heavily as he did so.

"Thanks mate" he said with a relieved grin.

"Good job Albus, way to look out for each other. Take ten points to Slytherin" Neville said, smiling.

The rest of the class went by uneventfully, and by the time it was over the class was more than ready to depart to lunch, arms red from where they had been grabbed and mending the cuts from the Alert Plant's ferocious jaws.

"Remind me to thank that Mirra girl next time I see her" Morrison spat bitterly as they walked across the grounds. "It was her insane idea to have Neville teach us about those things. And now we have to deal with them every Herbology lesson!" he added scathingly.

"Yeah" Albus replied, but he wasn't really listening. For some inexplicable reason, he had just remembered that he had never checked the room that his dad had mentioned to him. "I'll catch up with you later" he told him.

"You're gonna skive off lunch?" Morrison asked him.

"Yeah. Not very hungry" he lied. He didn't want anyone to know about this supposed room before he did, even his friends.

He turned left after entering the Great Hall and practically ran up the staircases. He had just reached the seventh floor when there was a large thud and he was knocked back onto the stairs. He had bumped into someone. *Why do I always do that*, he thought to himself. He found himself being helped up, and ended up staring into the face of Scorpius Malfoy.

"Oh- erm, sorry" he said uncomfortably. He shared a dormitory with this boy, but had never even spoken to him. In fact, now that he thought about it, he didn't recall ever seeing Scorpius talk to *anyone*. For a split second, he contemplated asking him why that was, or at least inquiring about why he wasn't at lunch with the other students, but before he could speak Scorpius had turned on his heel and began walking down the hallway without making a comment.

Deciding it was best not to look like he was following him, Albus turned and went in the other direction, deciding to come back in a few minutes. He aimlessly walked around, staring at the portraits and marveling at the way they interacted with each other; he was sure that he would never get used to it.

After about ten minutes, he made his way back towards the hallway with the Barnabus the Barmy tapestry, walking down it until the tapestry was just inches away. The coast was clear. No one was there. He could only assume that the other students were still at lunch, and hoped that he would have enough time to experiment. Excitement flooding through him, he closed his eyes and began pacing back and forth in front of the opposite wall, thinking to himself, *I need a place to think and be alone. A place were I can just relax and think to myself.*

He opened his eyes after several minutes of pacing, and stared towards the wall. There it was...an empty stretch of wall. He wiped his eyes with his hands and kept staring. There was no door. He was sure he had read the letter correctly.

He tried again and again. For almost twenty minutes he paced back and forth in front of the wall, becoming more and more agitated each time. Then of course, the truth dawned on him. *The room isn't there anymore.* His dad had been at this school twenty years ago, and the Battle of Hogwarts had completely destroyed certain parts of the school. The room his dad told him about had either been destroyed completely or moved somewhere else. And in a castle this big, it would be impossible to find.

Disappointed, he turned and went down the stairs, meeting with the students who had just gotten out of lunch.

"Where'd you go?" Morrison asked him.

"Absolutely nowhere" Albus answered truthfully.

"You ready for Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

"No" he said with a small frown. "I'm hungry."

The weekend came with an air of anticipation far bigger than anything Albus had so far experienced at Hogwarts. The air was not only chilly on Saturday morning, but it was rainy as well. Albus walked down to breakfast with Morrison shortly before noon just in time to see the Slytherin table applaud as their team made its way towards the pitch. He could see Atticus, the Slytherin seeker, smiling as he led them away. Seconds after, the Gryffindor team arrived to thunderous applause roughly three times the size of the one given to the Slytherins. For a second, Albus wondered why, before realizing that both Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff had joined in. *That's nice*, Albus thought bitterly.

They went down to the stands at noon, tucking themselves into their cloaks snugly to avoid the full force of the rain; it was now pouring. Albus took a seat in the middle of the stands with Bartleby and Morrison, the latter of whom had wanted to go to the top row. Albus' strongly rejected this however, his fear of heights told him that he wanted to be as close to the ground as possible. In the end, they had decided to compromise, sitting in what Albus was sure was exactly the middle row of the stands.

The Slytherin team flew out first, with their house clapping loudly as they did so.

"That's my sister! That's my sister!" Bartleby called out, pointing at a green and silver blur streaking across the field.

The Gryffindor team flew out next, the applause similar to how it had been in the Great Hall-overwhelming. The loud clapping and powerful rain even managed to drown out the booing from the Slytherins.

The team captains, Cooper and a Slytherin sixth year whom Albus was pretty sure was named Frederick, met in the center of the pitch to shake hands. Mr. Wood, the flying teacher and referee, demanded that they shake hands. Even through the rain, Albus could see them glaring at each other with contempt as they did so, squeezing their hands so tightly it looked as though they were trying to crush each other's fingers.

"He used to play for Puddlemore United" Morrison yelled to him over the rain as Mr. Wood released the snitch and blew his whistle.

Broomsticks flew into the air and the commentary began. Apparently, as it was a Hufflepuff commentating, the remarks made were supposed to be impartial. Albus doubted this would be the case though. He had the strange feeling that the Slytherins were going to be made out as the enemy, regardless of who was commentating.

"And the game begins!" said a magically magnified voice. "Gryffindor quickly takes possession of the Quaffle, now they're passing it to one another-the Slytherin Beater aims and connects quickly, that looked like it was D'Angelo-Bludger hits its target-quaffle gets dropped into Slytherin's possession-no wait, it was stolen first-who is- it's Potter, new Chaser and he is *fast!*"

Ten seconds later, cheers erupted from three of the four stands. James had scored with relative ease.

"Gryffindor takes the quick lead, it's ten to nil. That was James Potter scoring, son of the legendary Harry Potter, and-what's this? He has the Quaffle again! Speeding towards the Slytherin Keeper, Thompson, and-yes, he's scored again!"

More cheers from the Gryffindors. Albus groaned. He was happy for his brother of course, but Slytherin was down twenty to nothing barely a minute into the game.

Albus thought he would get used to the loud cheering from the surrounding stands, but he didn't. Gryffindor scored five more times within the next ten minutes, three of which had come from his brother. Slytherin had only managed to take a single shot, which had been blocked easily by Cooper.

"And Potter has the Quaffle again, drops it to Finnigan-who dodges a Bludger-and yes! They've managed to score again! Fantastic flying! From the better team anyways...Slytherin should quit now."

This remark was met with angry yelling and boos from the Slytherins, but it was drowned out by a sudden intake of breath from the remainder of the crowd. Atticus had went into a sharp dive in the corner of the pitch. He had seen the snitch.

"And Sanders has seen the snitch! He is gaining speed fast! Aim a Bludger at him-someone-anyone!"

The commentators wish came true-a well aimed Bludger from Roger Werth had smacked into Atticus' shoulder, knocking him off course. There was a large groan from the Slytherins, Albus especially. Not just at the fumbled chance, but he wanted the game to be over. His team was getting crushed and he was getting soaked.

Albus wasn't as lucky as the commentator though, as the game proceeded for twenty more minutes of Gryffindor cheering (with some minor applause from the Slytherins) before the Gryffindor Seeker caught the Snitch. They had been absolutely crushed, the end result being three hundred and twenty to thirty. James had left the pitch to much applause, having been responsible for eleven of the goals made. Albus felt his stomach churn as this happened-though he wasn't quite sure why.

The Slytherins made there way back to the common room both disheartened and disgruntled. Albus curled himself up in a large chair by the fire and watched Morrison and some of the other students play chess. After a few games, his eyelids became heavy. His wet clothes had been dried by the fire, and he found himself unusually warm as he tuned in and out of the chess games...

He was back at the Quidditch Pitch, only this time he was standing in the center of it, a broomstick slung over his shoulder as the crowd around him cheered.

He slid himself onto his broom and began levitating a few feet off the ground. The spectators went wild as he circled the pitch. He could see Morrison clapping from up above-next to him was Rose, and for some inexplicable reason, Scorpius Malfoy. They were clapping and whistling more so than anyone else. He heard his name called over the loudspeaker, not from the Hufflepuff voice, but from a voice he recognized.

"Albus Potter! Quidditch Captain and winner of the Quidditch Cup! Look at this kid fly!" James' voice rang out from the skies above. He began waving at the spectators, who were now cheering his name.

"Albus! Albus! Albus!" the crowd chorused.

"Albus! Albus wake up!"

"Wha'? Whassamatter?" he heard himself groan.

He opened his eyes and saw Morrison standing next to him, Bartleby and Denise in the background sniggering.

"You fell asleep while we were playing chess. You started waving your arms around, and you almost took out my eye you great prat!" he said.

"I - I what?"

"We're going back to the Great Hall for dinner, you coming?"

"How long was I out?" he asked, so groggy that he hadn't even comprehended Morrison's question.

"A few hours. But you didn't start flailing your arms around until a few minutes ago. You comin' down to dinner or what?"

"Erm...no. I think I'll skip it. I'm really tired. Im gonna' go lay down for a bit" he told him, wiping his eyes.

"Want me to bring you back something?" Morrison asked.

"No, I'm okay" he said as he started up the steps.

He entered the dormitory and stretched himself out on his bed. What was that about? He knew why he had dreamt of Rose and Scorpius. Though he ignored her, he still wanted to be friends with his cousin, and he had just had an uncomfortable moment with Scorpius days ago. But why was James calling out his name? Shouldn't it be the other way around? He wasn't jealous, he knew that much. Why would he want all that attention and popularity? He didn't care what other people thought of him. *Well that's not true*, he told himself. *I obviously care what Rose thinks*.

He tucked himself under his warm blanket and put the pillow over his head, thoughts racing, wishing now more than ever that he had a secret room he could go to and think to himself.

Chapter 6 : Expelliarmus

Albus ignored his dream over the course of the next few days, coming to the conclusion that it was simply his mind showing images of his past activities, then melding them into one. His classes were getting tougher now that the holidays were fast approaching, and he wouldn't have had time to analyze it anyway.

Instead, he spent his next few days crammed up in the Common Room, stacks of books next to him as he scribbled furiously on parchment. In addition to his classes becoming more challenging, the teachers had evidently decided that more work in class also translated to more work during free time, and homework had become more of a chore than ever.

"Grr...I can't get this!" he heard Morrison groan from next to him. "When could *Wingardium Leviosa* ever be useful during an attack? Flitwick's gone mad making us say when these spells are necessary!"

"No clue" Albus replied truthfully. He was having trouble with an essay of his own, a rather hard Defense Against the Dark Arts one about identifying the weak points on a troll, as well as what spells could be useful against it despite its tough magical skin.

"Blimey, I'll do this rubbish tommorrow" he heard Morrison groan from beside him. "I'm going up to bed."

"Ok. I'll be up in a little bit" Albus told him.

Morrison slid out of his chair, slammed his books shut, and went up to their dormitory muttering something that sounded like "Stupid assignment."

Albus yawned. It was almost midnight, and Defense Against the Dark Arts was the first class that they had tomorrow. He tried his best to focus on his paper, but found his eyelids getting heavier the harder that he tried. He was going to fall asleep right here at the table...he knew it...

But the second before his eyes closed, a small flicker of light appeared in the corner of the room. Albus turned around wildly and tried to make out its source. Scorpius Malfoy had his wand lit, and was shining it around in the darkness. He didn't see Albus apparently, and instead made his way towards the door leading out to the hall. Albus thought of following him for a second; he was quite curious as to where Scorpius needed to be this late at night, but he was quite ill equipped for spying on someone. All that Scorpius had to do was look back and he would see him, which would probably lead to some very curious questions indeed...

The common room door slid open, and without looking back, Scorpius crossed through it. Albus sat in the common room for a long time after, mind still buzzing with thoughts as to where Scorpius was going. He waited for more than an hour, but didn't see him return. Coming to the conclusion that he wasn't going to come back anytime soon, he shut his books and went to bed.

The next morning was painful for Albus. He had only gotten about five hours of sleep, had completely forgotten to do his Defense Against the Dark Arts essay, and was met with with an extremely irritated Morrison, who was apparently no closer to figuring out how useful *Wingardium Leviosa* was today than he was last night.

They had a very quiet breakfast, then left for Defense Against the Dark Arts on the first floor. Albus had managed to scribble something down about disarming the troll of its main weapon, though he thought that his argument had been rather weak. He could only hope that he would manage to scrap an "A".

They entered Professor Handit's room and took their seats, Albus in between Morrison and Bartleby. He watched as the professor shuffled through a stack of papers happily, apparently having a much better morning than Albus.

"Okay, I believe your most recent essay on dark creatures is due today, so can I have someone volunteer to collect them? Mr. Eckley? Thank you."

A Gryffindor boy the seat behind Albus rose to collect the papers, giving him a rather smug smirk as he did so. Apparently he had seen the significantly short amount of writing he had done on his essay.

"Okay class, so now that we've finished working on how to stop dark *creatures*, I think it's time we have a basic outline on how to stop dark *wizards*."

He paused for a second to let the words soak in. Some of the class exchanged excited glances.

"Now obviously, I don't expect any of you to be fighting against a dark wizard anytime soon. You're only first years. But the Ministry of Magic feels that it is important to allow all wizards and witches-regardless of age-to learn the proper defenses against one who is intent on harming you. There are several spells that can cause damage without being potentially fatal. The first one I am going to teach you is *Expelliarmus*."

Albus could barely hide his grin. His morning had turned around unusually fast. He had not only practiced this spell with his father shortly before coming to Hogwarts, but had been becoming increasingly good at it as well.

"Now I want everyone to take out their wands and pick a partner. *Expelliarmus* is meant to disarm your opponent, but with enough power into it, you can blow any enemy backwards, and the blast itself can even become painful; it is, after all, a pure, sudden burst of concentrated energy. As you are all quite young, with no practice, we shouldn't have too many instances of that."

Albus reached into his pocket and pulled out his wand, twirling it between his fingers; it was custom made. Ollivander, a famous wandmaker who had long since retired, apparently owed his father a special favor. Despite being out of business, his father had requested three custom made wands when each of his children were to go to Hogwarts, specially made by Ollivander and using a magical object other than the basic three. His brother James had his wand made from oak and kneazle hair, taken from his Aunt Hermione's pet. His own wand was made from holly and the feather of a hippogriff, whom his dad had claimed was "a bit of a family pet". Though it had only been in use for a few months, Albus has particularly strong feelings towards his wand; it felt like an extra arm.

Albus partnered himself with Morrison as Professor Handit made room for the pairs to practice. "Okay, agree on who is going to make the first attempt, then switch. Begin on three. One...two...three!"

"*Expelliarmus!*" Albus yelled. Morrisons wand flew out of his hand and landed at another student's feet.

"Disarming cowards, eh? Harry Potter's son for sure" he heard a loud voice say from behind him.

The Gryffindor side of the classroom laughed. Albus turned and saw that it had been Charles Eckley, the boy who had collected his paper, that had said it. He felt his ears go red, but ignored it.

He and Morrison switched back and forth, attempting to disarm each other as the pairings around them did the same. Morrison wasn't bad, he could feel his wand jump two or three times, but he always managed to hold onto it. It became very clear to Albus though that his practice had paid off. Few people were able to successfully disarm their partner, but he did so every time, always resulting in Morrison's wand flying unusually far away. Each time, he could hear giggles from the group of Gryffindors behind him. It seemed as though they were having too much fun ridiculing Albus to practice.

He went to disarm Morrison again, and upon being successful, heard Charles yell out "Cowards disarming cowards, how on Earth did they work up the courage to face each other?"

The group of Gryffindors began crying of mirth, hanging onto each other for support. Albus spun around, furious. He was mad at Charles for saying those things, but what made him absolutely apoplectic was Rose. She was laughing just as hard as the rest of them, clinging to one of her friends for stability.

Without thinking, he began shouting at them. "Will you shut the hell up! You guys find it funny that you guys are absolutely pathetic wizards-can't even disarm someone-and you take it out on me? Someone who actually has talent?"

The Gryffindors continued laughing, but Rose had stopped. He turned to face her and gave her the ugliest look he could recall giving anyone in his life. "And you, you're the worst excuse for a cousin ever! You stand there calling me a coward behind my back, and yet you're frightened to be friends with someone who isn't in the same *crowd* as you. What happened to being a brave Gryffindor? You make me *sick*."

Then, before he could stop himself, he yelled in her face "I *hate* you. Don't ever talk to me again!"

The laughter stopped. In fact, all noise seemed to stop. Albus stood there, panting in absolute silence, his face red. Professor Handit was staring at him with his mouth wide open. Rose looked like she was going to burst into tears, which gave him immense satisfaction.

"Al- Albus, why don't you come over here- I have something for you" Professor Handit told him.

Albus walked over to him, shaking from fury, but doing his best to control himself. Professor Handit grabbed a random piece of parchment off of his desk and began scribbling what looked like nonsensical words on it. "Take this to Headmaster Ares. Don't read it. It's very important" he said, clearly lying.

Albus did his best to keep his voice stable. The room was still silent. "Where's his office?"

"There's a stone gargoyle on the seventh floor leading to his office. The password is *Red*."

Albus snatched the paper from his hand and left the classroom. The second he closed the door behind him he could hear the students resume talking. He unfolded the parchment and saw what he had suspected. Random letters pieced together. Professor Handit simply wanted him to leave the classroom and calm down, and so, he chose the room that was furthest away. Albus had little doubt that a message would be sent to the Headmaster alerting him of Albus' presence soon enough.

Feeling as though he might as well play along, he took the staircase up to the seventh floor, seeing a familiar face once he was walking down the corridor; his brother was walking ahead of him.

"James!" he called out. His brother turned around, looking confused, but saw Albus and flashed him a grin. Albus hurried to meet him.

"What are you doing out of class?" his brother asked him.

"Professor Handit wants me to deliver a message to the Headmaster. Long story. You?"

"I got called out of Divination to Neville's office. I got detention."

"What? What for?"

"Setting Hagrid's cabin on fire."

"*What!*" Albus shouted. "Why would you do that?"

"I didn't! I was framed!" he exclaimed.

"Im not jokin-"

"- Neither am !" James said. He didn't look it either. "I was outside Hagrid's cabin, and the trees next to it just caught fire. In a few seconds the whole damn cabin was ablaze! And Hagrid knows I didn't do it, and so does Neville apparently, because he only gave me one detention. I kind of have a previous record with fire though...so they couldn't exactly let it go unpunished" he finished with a shrug.

"Yeah I guess" Albus replied. They walked a little more down the corridor until James reached the entrance to the Divination room.

"Later, Al. Have fun delivering your message" he said.

Albus continued walking until he reached the end of the corridor. Instead of turning however, he stood staring at a gigantic stone gargoyle. "Red" he said. The gargoyle sprang open, revealing a large spiral staircase. Albus stepped onto it. The gargoyle closed, and he was taken up to the office.

Albus reached the large oak door and went to knock on it, but was stopped by a familiar voice. Neville was talking.

"Regardless Headmaster, this recent amount of activity suggests that they *are looking* for someone to rally behind."

"But that is not our problem" said a deep voice he recognized as the Headmaster's. "I am no longer an Auror. And their activities could simply signify that they are proud to claim they used to support the Dark Arts. This is *not* something that should interest *us* in the slightest. It's not as if they attend this school!"

"But it happened right outside of Hogsmeade! We'll have to cancel the Hogsmeade trips and increase security -"

"We will do *nothing*" Headmaster Ares said firmly. "This is none of our business. The school is well protected, I assure you."

"The safety of our students isn't out business?" he heard Neville say, voice clearly dripping of sarcasm. "We have every reason to worry."

"EP's meeting outside of the castle are hardly something to worry about" said a third voice.

For a second, Albus wondered where he had heard the voice before, but soon recognized it to be Professor Darvy's. The excitement in it was gone however. It was more of a serious tone, and Albus was almost positive that he was not wearing his usual smile.

"If we had something to worry about, the head of the Auror department would have certainly sent us a warning. He wouldn't count on us to simply pay attention to it ourselves."

"Harry did contact me" he heard Neville say. "He told me that there had been a previous meeting not too far from Hogsmeade."

There was a moments silence, before Headmaster Ares began speaking again.

"Dammit Longbottom, they could have been having a *barbecue*. Maybe one of them is pregnant, it could have been a *baby shower*. There are so many possibilities other than the one you've suggested. Until I see further evidence of danger, the school stays as is. And this is hardly the time to talk about it, the first class is almost over. I suggest you go and prepare for your next lesson."

Albus heard two pairs of footsteps coming to the door. Deciding it was better to walk in now and pretend as though he'd heard nothing, he knocked abruptly. Neville opened the door, then smiled at him and left, Professor Darvy doing the same.

Albus entered slowly and saw Professor Ares sitting behind his desk, looking very agitated. "Yes?" he said as Albus entered.

"Erm...I have a message to deliver to you. From Professor Handit" he said as innocently as possible.

He handed the note over and watched as the Headmaster quickly scanned over it, a look of complete bewilderment on his face. "What's this rubbish?" he said angrily. He thrust the note back into Albus' hands. "Tell your professor he obviously gave me the wrong note."

"Will do, Headmaster" Albus said, turning to leave. As he turned the handle though, he glanced back over his shoulder and stared at the portrait directly above the Headmaster's head. The person in the portrait was very old, with long silver hair and a matching beard. The portrait smiled at him, and Albus saw one of his bright blue eyes wink at him. For some strange reason, he suddenly had the same odd feeling that he had when he looked at the tapestry in the Slytherin common room.

He walked back down the large staircase and went to hurry towards the Transfiguration room, his mind racing as he did so. "EP's". He had heard the term before, his father had mentioned it more than once. He had no idea what the term was an abbreviation for, but he knew that his father had not been in the best of moods when he'd used it.

He turned the corner on the fourth floor and saw one of the most unusual things he had ever seen. The two most unlikely people to interact (in his opinion at least) were facing each other in the empty corridor; Mirra and Cooper. They did not however, seem to be enjoying each other's company. Mirra had her hands on her hips, looking both pretty and disgusted. Cooper appeared to be lecturing her on something that she was clearly uninterested in.

"You can't look every where *except* where it is your going!" he was saying.

"Well maybe you should take your own stupid advice!" she responded acidly. "The only reason I bumped into you is because you don't look where you're going either!"

"I can barely see you, you're so small!" he yelled.

"Well then I guess I have a lot in common with your brain then, don't I?"

"Why you-" he pulled out his wand threateningly.

Acting on instinct, Albus did the first thing that came to his mind. He whipped out his own wand, and knowing that he had only a few precious seconds, took aim and cried "*Expelliarmus!*"

Cooper turned around just in time to see the jet of red light hit him square in the chest. His wand flew out of his hand as he was blasted off of his feet, sliding all the way down the length of the hallway and crashing into a suit of armor in the corner.

"Wow" Mirra whispered softly.

"What's this!" he heard from behind him.

Albus turned and saw Neville hurrying towards them, a look of complete shock on his face.

"I- wha- Albus! And Mirra! Teaming up on an older student! I can't believe this!"

"It's not like that Professor!" Albus called out as Neville ran towards Cooper's unconscious body.

"*Rennervate*" he said, pointing his wand at him. Cooper began stirring. Neville turned back around and ran back towards Albus and Mirra.

"Well then what happened?" he asked. "I saw two disarming spells mixed together."

"It was just one" Albus said. "I swear it was. He was arguing with Mirra and he pulled out his wand and I- I fired the disarming spell at him."

Neville looked from Cooper-who was now standing, despite looking rather confused-to Mirra, who was trying to look as natural as possible. Then he turned back to Albus.

"You did that by yourself?" he asked, in a tone that suggested he was more impressed than he was letting on.

"Yeah" Albus replied, his eyes to the floor, trying not to look too pleased with himself.

"Well...if it was in defense I suppose...but regardless, I'm going to have to take ten points from Slytherin. There's still ten minutes left before your next class, I strongly suggest you hurry and get prepared. Albus, perhaps you should walk Mirra back to her dormitory while I straighten this out" he added, jerking his head towards Cooper, who was now staring at them fiercely.

Albus tucked his wand back into his robes and began walking side by side with Mirra, passing Cooper with a slight grin on his face. They turned to enter the staircase silently, Albus growing increasingly uncomfortable with each passing second. Finally, he heard Mirra initiate a conversation.

"That was really wrong what they did to you" she said.

"What?" Albus replied, caught completely off guard by her comment.

"In class. The way they were making fun of you. It's not your fault they had nothing better to do."

"Weren't you right there laughing with them?" he asked her.

"Me? No, I was at the other end of the room. I was partnered with Scorpius" she said.

Albus considering asking her if he was much of a talker, but disregarded his interest in favor of a different question.

"What happened after I left?" he asked.

"Oh nothing much, we were just told to continue. Rose was really upset though. Professor Handit excused her to the bathroom and she didn't come back."

"Oh."

For some reason, hearing that Rose was upset wasn't nearly as comforting as it would have been before he had calmed down. A guilty sensation flooded through him. Perhaps he had been a bit too harsh. He didn't feel *that* bad, however; she *did* provoke him. Deciding it was best to change the subject, he rattled off a basic statement.

"You're really smart" he told her.

"Am I?" she responded back, a peculiar expression on her face.

"Well...erm..I mean you seem to know every thing we're asked about in class."

"Oh..well I read a lot. Everything in fact."

"That explains why you're friends with Rose" he grinned.

"I suppose so. I just love reading. I've read all of my textbooks, the bulletins in the common room, the plaques that they have hanging up, the descriptions under the tapestries..." she trailed off, leaving Albus to initiate another topic. He didn't have to however, as it was apparently her turn to compliment him.

"That was some pretty impressive stuff back there. Have you practiced that spell before?" she asked.

"Oh yeah. Loads of times. My dad taught it to me before I came to Hogwarts" he told her.

"Oh, is your dad a talented wizard?" she asked politely.

Albus gave her a blank stare.

"Erm you- you mean you don't know him?"

She raised her eyebrows at him. "No, should I? Does he teach here?"

"No- he just...a lot of people know him, that's all."

"Why, what did he do?"

"Oh well...it's not important. It's no big deal really..."

Though Albus couldn't explain it, he felt better knowing that Mirra didn't know about his dad.

"Well I grew up outside of the wizarding world. Both of my parents are wizards, but they never told me much about Hogwarts until I got my letter. That might be why."

"Yeah I guess. Hey what's with the necklace?" he said, in a rather blatant attempt to change the subject. He had just now noticed that she had been touching it gently.

She squeezed the necklace tightly and turned a bright red before saying "Oh...it was my mother's. She gave it to me before I came to Hogwarts. I take it with me everywhere."

"Does it have a charm on it or something? Or like an ornament?"

"No. It's just solid gold. Goblin made." she said. "Well...here we are."

Though it was quite hard for him to believe, he had been so immersed in his conversation that he didn't even know where his feet were taking him. They had reached the portrait of a rather obese lady, who was eyeing him suspiciously.

"Minerva" Mirra said to the portrait. It swung open to allow her access. Right as she had walked and turned to say goodbye though, Albus felt an arm pull his own violently through.

"What the-"

"Al!" he heard his brother say. "What are you doing in the Gryffindor common room?"

"Erm...you pulled me in here. I was just walking her back before class."

His brother gave him a very wide grin and a rather obvious wink before clapping him on the back and steering him through the common room.

"Hey, he can't be in here!" Albus heard someone yell from near the fire.

"Shut it Berkins!" his brother retorted. "I only wanna' show him something, he'll be gone in a sec."

Albus looked around the common room as his brother steered him towards the wall opposite the fire. It was much cozier than the Slytherin common room, yet for some reason Albus still preferred his own; maybe he was simply used to it.

"Take a look at that!" his brother said, pointing at a gold plaque on the wall.

Famous Gryffindors

Godric Gryffindor - Hogwarts Founder, Dueling Champion.

Artemus Yerez - Dueling Champion.

Peter Socrates - Dragon Slayer

On and on the list went, until James pointed to the name at the very bottom.

Harry Potter - Conqueror of Lord Voldemort, Accomplished Auror

"Pretty cool right?" he said.

"Yeah...yeah I guess" Albus replied, staring at his fathers name.

"He needs to leave now" said a loud voice. Apparently there was no arguing this time, as James steered Albus towards the portrait hole, pushed him out and said "Later bro."

"Good-bye" he heard Mirra say from inside the room.

"Right, bye...to both of you" he said as the portrait hole swung closed.

He hurried down to the dungeons the second after the portrait hole had closed. He needed to get his Transfiguration book from his dormitory before class started, and he had wasted a lot of time talking to Mirra.

He reached the wall leading to the common room, but skidded to a halt when he saw who was standing there; it was Rose. And she was looking very upset.

They stared at each other in silence for a few moments before Rose began speaking.

"Listen Al...I've...I've been a big prat" she said quietly.

"I know" he responded. He saw tears well up in her eyes.

"I just...I'm really sorry. I just hope you can forgive me. That's all."

It was weird. He had planned on her apology being much longer. For weeks he had waited for her to come to him, exactly as she was now, and he grinned at the thought of dangling her, making her feel like a complete fool, telling her he didn't care if she was sorry or not. But for some reason, now that she was here, upset, having only said a few words, he felt he couldn't do it. Not to his cousin. He knew how it felt to have someone you wanted to be friends with reject you.

"No it's- it's fine" he lied. "I said some bad stuff to you...I don't hate you...I just lost contro-"

"- I know, I'm so sorry for that. Charlie is such a pompous fool -"

He cut her off with a swift hug. "It's fine" he told her. "Let's just put it behind us eh?"

She wiped her tears away. "Thanks" she said. "I've got History of Magic now though."

"Yeah. I'm already late for Transfiguration" he said.

She gave him a quick smile before leaving the corridor to go to class.

Despite being scolded for being late to class five minutes later, Albus had the best day he'd had all year. He smiled through all of his classes and dinner, and when it was time for bed, he simply couldn't hide the grin on his face.

"For the last time, *what happened?*" Morrison asked him as they crawled into their beds.

"Nothing" he said, still smiling.

He covered himself in his blanket and began thinking to himself. The morning had been so terrible...but it had changed so quickly. Rose was his friend again. He had made a new friend in Mirra; someone who didn't even know about his parents. She was a lot like Rose when he thought about it. Always reading everything. *I guess she read the plaque in her common room too* he thought. But wait, that didn't make any sense. If she read everything, she would have recognized "Potter" from the plaque, wouldn't she? And she had read all of her textbooks too...he knew his father was in a lot of those. So how on Earth could she have not heard of him?

Then it dawned on him. She *had* heard of his father. In fact, she probably knew more about him than he did. She had just said that to keep the conversation going. Albus smiled into his pillow. Making friends was easy. All you had to do was knock someone unconscious.

Chapter 7 : The Diary Of Rose Weasley

Albus found the two weeks leading up to the Holidays to be his best yet at Hogwarts. His teachers had become almost lazy with their teaching, refusing to teach anything new that would be forgotten over the break, and they completely abandoned the concept of homework as a whole. The snow outside had made for some very interesting snowball fights between Albus and James, and various decorations scattered throughout the halls made it almost impossible not to be cheery. But what Albus welcomed most, however, was his new found friendship with Rose.

Because Herbology, Potions, and Defense Against the Dark Arts were the best classes to have a discussion while doing their work (with the only possible exception being Charms), Albus was able to talk to his cousin much more. He, Morrison, and Rose would frequently partner into groups in their classes. They would have conversations ranging everywhere from Quidditch to the weather, enjoying each other's company as they did so. This came with a rather unfortunate price, however. He began to feel so attached to them that in the event that they couldn't be partnered together, Albus would be left quite alone. This proved true on the Friday before break was to start, in Double Potions.

Both Morrison and Rose were sick (no doubt from the intense snowball fight they had had the previous day), and Albus was left sitting in Professor Darvy's class at the front table alone.

Professor Darvy entered from his office wearing his usual smile. He had not made mention of seeing Albus at the Headmaster's office, and Albus was intent on doing the same. He had seemed much more serious then, and Albus found that unnerving considering his usual personality.

"Okay class, as this is the last day before the Holidays, we're going to do a bit of a recap on the Calming Drought. I know we haven't studied this potion quite as thoroughly as I would have liked, but as long as you partner with someone we should make good time."

Albus squirmed in his chair. Professor Darvy had said the word he had been dreading; *partner*.

The Professor began walking around to see who needed a partner, and was immediately met with Albus. "Mr. Vincent isn't here today?" he asked.

"No sir" Albus said, face going red. Having no one to partner with was probably the most embarrassing thing that could happen during class. He could here a few people sniggering behind him; no doubt the same ones who had been laughing at him the day he had argued with Rose.

"I'll partner with him" came a loud voice from the back of the room.

Albus turned and saw Mirra walking towards him, carrying her cauldron and bag with her. She took a seat next to Albus and smiled at him. Feeling extremely grateful, he returned the expression.

Professor Darvy waved his wand towards the cupboard. "Ingredients, as always, are available in the cupboard to your right. The instructions are on the board. If you need any assistance, feel free to come and see me. I will be marking papers at my desk."

It felt weird to be having a Potions lesson where there was no twist to making the actual potion. Albus could only assume Professor Darvy had gotten just as lazy as his students before break. Even more strange, however, was being partnered with Mirra. Other than the occasional greeting in the halls, he hadn't had a real conversation with her since he had walked her back to her Common Room. To his pleasant surprise, he found that she was just as easy to talk to as ever.

"So what are your plans for the Holidays?" she asked as she began cutting up caterpillars.

"Nothing really. Just going home to hang with my family. There's a lot of us though. My dad married into a really big family. I have a bunch of cousins."

"Well I think I know a few of them actually. I know you're related to Rose, so I guess you must be related to Victoire too? And I know James is your brother obviously. There's more?"

Albus spent about a full hour telling her all about his cousins, from his uncles and grandparents to his father's godson, Teddy. Mirra seemed to be quite interested; Albus had the feeling that she didn't have that big of a family.

"So...erm...what are you doing this Holiday? Going home to see your family I'm guessing?" he asked her as he tossed porcupine quills into their cauldron.

"Well...I was actually planning on staying here, but my parents decided it would be best if I came home for a week. They're still a bit uneasy about me spending so much time away from home."

Her tone was casual, but Albus had the feeling she wasn't being entirely truthful. It was almost as if she secretly dreaded going home, and was simply trying to find a way to make it seem like she was fine with it.

Class ended with Albus and Mirra filling a flask of their potion and leaving it in Professor Darvy's crate. He waved goodbye to his students, wished them a happy holiday, and closed the door, heaving a tremendous sigh before he did so. Albus had the impression that he was happy to be able to take a break from teaching, and Albus couldn't blame him; he too was ready for a vacation.

The next day he got on the train fully packed, excited about the upcoming week off and the prospect of seeing his family again. He had one question in particular that he wanted to ask his father. He had not forgotten Neville's cryptic conversation with the Headmaster, and was still very curious as to what "EP" stood for.

He found a compartment on the train with Rose, Mirra, and Morrison, and spent most of his time swapping chocolate frog cards with them, all of whom seemed to be avid collectors. Rose, he knew for a fact, had developed this habit from her father, who had proudly given her his entire collection as one of her presents for her tenth birthday.

After roughly five hours, the train came to a halt at King's Cross Station. Albus and Rose bade farewell to their friends and walked towards a man with bright red hair and a mischievous smirk on his face. His Uncle Ron was leaning against one of the columns picking at his fingernails.

Albus had always enjoyed his Uncle Ron's company more so than any of his other cousins. He was very laid back and very funny, with a sarcastic edge to him not unlike James'. What Albus liked most about him though, was that he gave him much more freedom than his parents did.

"You kids ready to go?" he asked them.

"Yes" they both replied simultaneously.

They followed him through the barrier and out onto the muggle side of the station, where he led them to a very official looking black car.

"Compliments of the Ministry" he told them. He whipped out his wand (in plain view of muggles) and levitated their large bags into the trunk of the car, despite it looking as though they wouldn't fit. Then he opened the door to the back seats and let them both slide in.

He entered the passenger side, said "drive" to the driver, and they began speeding down the road.

"Uncle George is picking up Fred, and Victoire is going to apparate" he told them. "We're having a *big party* this year. Entire family is coming" he said.

"How come my dad didn't come pick us up?" Albus asked, peering out the window and noticing that their car seemed to be traveling a lot faster than the other cars on the road.

"Ahh...he was on special Auror business. Got called into the office...something happened...no big deal really. He should be back by the time we reach the house. So you guys enjoying school so far?"

Rose took over at this point. "Yes. I've gotten an "O" on all of my Charms homeworks daddy!"

"That's great sweetie! I knew you had your mother's brains. Any good at wizard's chess?"

"Not exactly. Dad, can we stop and get ice cream?"

Albus could tell from the moment's silence that his uncle was contemplating her request. If he denied his daughter ice cream, he would undoubtedly feel guilty over it later. But if he got her some, they would be way behind schedule in getting home...

After having stopped for ice cream (much to the dismay of the ministry driver, who seemed obliged to meet every ridiculous demand that Uncle Ron made), they arrived at the Potter Mansion roughly an hour after they had intended to. The driver pulled up on the road, opened the doors for his passengers, and helped remove the luggage from the trunk before speeding off, no doubt praying he would never be so unfortunate as to be forced to drive Uncle Ron around anywhere again.

The Potter Mansion was located just outside of Ottery St. Catchpole, built close to his mum's former house for easy access to their grandparents, who still resided there. The Mansion was large and white, with over thirty rooms in it, though Albus knew that this was more for their usual amount of guests than it was anything else. His mother had done most of the decorating, though he knew his father had made very unusual requests when it was being built. He happened to know for a fact that there had originally been a storage cupboard under the stairs, which was later magically expanded into a second basement.

The three of them entered the mansion and saw that the living room was completely deserted. They left their luggage by the door (Albus had the feeling that Kreacher would be there to pick it up in due time), and ran into the kitchen, where they saw a large group of people sitting at the table having tea.

The first was his father, with his black untidy hair, large glasses, and beaming smile. He was sitting next his mother, whose fiery red hair dangled in front of her face as she read the newspaper. Across from the table was his Aunt Hermione, whose curly brown hair was doing the same as she too read her own newspaper, gently stirring her tea with a spoon. On either side of her was Granddad and Grandma Weasley, who seemed to be bickering over something (it was quite clear that Grandma was winning) and finally, in the corner, Teddy Lupin, who was always welcome in the family despite not actually being blood related.

They all turned to Albus and Rose, smiling politely. "Hello there, son" his dad said, grinning at the both of them. "Where's your Uncle?"

"Right here" came a voice from behind him. Uncle Ron was standing in the doorway. "I was welcoming our guests."

He stood aside and Albus watched as two people shuffled in through the door. The first Albus knew to be Luna Scamander, a friend of his parents. Albus could tell it was her not only by her dirty blonde hair and kind smile, but by her apple core earrings and bottle cap necklace. The man following her, clean shaven and blonde with a very vague look on his face, was undoubtedly her husband, Rolf. Albus had never met Rolf before, but one look at the the bracelet on his wrist (which looked like it was made from a collection of very exotic bugs) told him who it was.

Albus took his things up to room, deciding it was better to keep moving than be stuck in a room with the large amount of people that would soon be joining them for the following day.

He entered through the door to his room and looked around. It was exactly as it had been before he had left. The blanket was still stretched across the bed, there were magazines and books scattered across the floor, along with several articles of clothing, and a desk in the corner covered entirely by pictures of him and his various family members. Just as he was examining his room more thoroughly, he heard a voice from the door.

"Mum wants you to come down and greet everyone" he heard his brother say.

"James! When did you get here? I was wondering why Uncle Ron didn't pick you up..."

"I stayed at the platform a bit later and waited for Uncle George to come pick me up."

"Why'd you stay?" Albus asked.

He shrugged. "Some girl wanted me to meet her parents...I forget her name." He turned around and began walking down the hall, motioning for his brother to follow.

It was quite tedious shaking hands with people who he had last seen almost a year ago. Uncle Bill and Aunt Fleur, with their children Dominique and Louis (Victorie having apparated to the mansion earlier), Uncle Charlie, Uncle Percy and Aunt Audrey, with their children Molly and Lucy, and Uncle George and Aunt Angelina, who were already there with their children Fred and Roxanne.

Albus enjoyed spending time with his cousins very much, despite the fact that most of them were younger than him. Immediately after he greeted them, Molly, Dominique, Fred and Roxanne approached him excitedly, rattling off questions faster than he could give answers.

"Is Hogwarts fun-"

"Is it hard- "

"Have you been in the Forbidden Forest-"

"Did you fight the Giant Squid- "

Albus, unsure of who had asked what, simply took out his wand and let them pass it around, whispering to each other as they did so.

Albus decided to let them play with it while he entered the kitchen in search of his mother. He had seen all of his family except for his little sister, Lily. His mother was in the kitchen alone, scrubbing what looked like tar from the floor.

"Mum, have you seen -"

"Just a second Albus. How could your father have possibly tracked so much mud into the house? He would have had to stray away from the pavement on purpose!"

"Erm...why don't you just use you wand?"

"I don't have it on me" she said bitterly. "I left it upstairs and I can't leave the chicken alone" she added as she nodded her head towards a large pot on top of the stove.

"Mum, Christmas isn't until tomorrow."

"Well seeing as how I'm cooking for more than twenty, I'd say it would be nice to be a little prepared wouldn't you? Can I borrow your wand by the way?" she asked, still scrubbing the floor vigorously.

"Sorry, but I don't have it on me. I let the kids play with it."

His mother raised her head up from the floor and gave him a bewildered look. "You let the - what?"

Before he could reply, there was a large crash and screams from the living room. Albus rushed back in and saw a terrible sight. The curtains were on fire, and the large table in the middle of the room was turned over. Granddad Weasley was blowing on the curtains, until being roughly pushed aside by his wife, who brandished her wand and yelled "*Aguamenti!*"

The curtains became doused in water, eventually turning charcoal black. Albus looked over to the corner and saw Louis holding the wand in his hands, looking terrified.

Albus ran over to him and attempted to surreptitiously take the wand from him, in the hopes that no one had seen who had done it. His plan had failed however. Many of his cousins were gawking at him in disbelief. Albus attempted to stammer an apology, but was cut off by his father, who had just entered from the dining room.

"Albus it's alright, we'll fix this. Why don't you go up to your room for a little while? So we can clear this up?"

Albus didn't need to be told twice. He ran up the stairs, tucking his wand away in his back pocket as he did so. Thoroughly embarrassed by what had just happened, he ran into the first room that he came across.

Plopping himself down on the bed, he looked around at the room. It was clearly a guest room; there were no decorations of any kind in it. He turned around and saw a trunk stashed away in the corner. Figuring he might as well know whose room he was in, he walked towards it and opened it up.

He immediately recognized it to be Rose's. There were books crammed into every corner, some textbooks, other notebooks that looked like they were completely full. In the corner however, he noticed a book that he couldn't identify as either. It was small and red, with gold designs on the

cover. He curiously picked it up and opened it to the first page. On the inside cover, in Rose's immaculate handwriting, it read *Property of Rose Ginerva Weasley*.

Albus closed the book and instinctively looked around the room. He was still alone. As he had no idea where Rose or his sister were, he could only assume that they were together, possibly with Rose's brother Hugo. How long would it be before she came back?

He told himself not to look. But he was curious about its contents. Very curious, in fact. He wasn't friends with Rose for the first two and a half months of school. He knew what he had been thinking, but what about her? His better judgment told him not to open it, not even to read the first entry. But yet...how could it really hurt as long as he wasn't caught? He opened the diary to the first page and began reading.

September 1st,

I was sorted into Gryffindor of course, just as I knew I would. Mum and Dad will be proud. But Albus was sorted into Slytherin! I can't believe it. Dad always said that Slytherins were the worst of our kind. But I doubt Al would change at all would he? He would still be my cousin, wouldn't he?

The girls in my dormitory are nice. I got to talk to some of them at dinner, and they seem like the type that will be very entertaining to share a room with. Class starts the third! I can't wait to start Transfiguration!

Albus looked down at the page in surprise. Nothing too bad. She even seemed to be a little defensive of him. What had changed? He began skimming through the pages, looking for signs of his name. He found one a few pages later.

September 28th,

Mirra and Zoey introduced me to a few of the Gryffindor guys. They told me I needed to get my nose out of the books and start having a bit more fun. I played Gobstones with their friends Donovan and Charles, who's super cute, and we had a lot of fun, even if I always lost.

I've noticed that Al's been giving me a lot of ugly stares lately. I can't really blame him, as I'm the one who's not talking. But he's in Slytherin! Can he really blame me? Charles and them were joking about it and I couldn't help but laugh. He had a good point. He said that he was doing a rather poor job of following in Uncle Harry's footsteps.

Mirra reckons I should just be his friend. She thinks he's nice, regardless of what house he's in. I don't think she gets it though. She doesn't have a family house.

Albus felt two different feelings simultaneously rise up in his stomach. The first was absolute disgust at Rose for laughing at him behind his back, though, he thought bitterly, he had long since suspected it anyway. And the second, unsurprisingly, was a rush of gratitude towards

Mirra. Her opinion was impartial. She judged him solely on his character, and had befriended him instead of turning away. He let these feelings comfort him as he skimmed through more pages, eventually getting halfway through the book.

November 5th,

I'm starting to feel really bad about this whole situation with Albus. James has started giving me these really terrible looks, and he said some pretty hurtful things to me too. Then he started ignoring me. Most of my friends said not to worry about it. Mirra said it was a sign though.

But Mirra's been acting very strange as well. I'm beginning to worry about my friend. She's seemed really upset for the last week, and she was very angry over a letter her parents sent her. I read the letter when she wasn't looking, and it seems like her parents are urging her to do something. They kept mentioning a "key" and unlocking the "dungeon" to carry on "Merlin's" work. I don't know much about Mer-

Albus was stopped in his reading by the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. He quickly closed the diary and stowed it back in Rose's trunk, hoping that he hadn't placed it too far from its usual place. He hopped on the bed just in time to see Rose and his sister enter.

It was weird looking at her in a new light. He knew a bit more about why she had treated him so badly, but he couldn't let on to that. He and Rose were now friends, but he knew that if she found out that he had read her diary that they would soon be as far apart as they were on the first day of school.

"Al, what are you doing in here?" Rose asked. "Your mum said we have to go decorate the tree."

"Oh...well they sent me up here because I made a bit of a mess downstairs. Is it all cleaned up?"

"I guess so...other than the curtains. They look irreparable."

Albus woke up early the next morning, having had a terrible dream in which Morrison was re-sorted into Gryffindor, leaving him completely alone in Slytherin. He quietly crept down the stairs to get some water, completely forgetting that today was Christmas. It wasn't until seeing the tree, completely decorated with what looked like a thousand presents under it, that he remembered. Just as he was turning to go back upstairs, he heard a calm voice say "Hello Albus. You're up a bit early, aren't you?"

He turned around and saw his Aunt Hermione smiling at him. "It's almost five. Everyone should be up at around six. Care to join me and Kreacher for tea?"

He followed her into the kitchen, where he saw two mugs of tea on the table. At one end of the table, he saw an extremely old, skinny, and grey house elf, whom he knew to be Kreacher.

Despite having lived with him his entire life, he barely communicated with his house elf. Though he knew that he frequently helped his mom cook and clean, he was told that he spent most of his time in the attic, where he preferred to stay. Weirdly enough, the only times he ever saw him leave his room were when Aunt Hermione was visiting.

"So what's on your mind Al?" his aunt asked him.

"Erm nothing really - just excited about later."

"Really?" she said while pouring him a cup of tea. "So then what kept you up?"

"Nothing. Just a bad dream. Can't remember what it was" he lied.

She gave him a very knowing look, before taking a seat at the table and opening up her newspaper. Truth be told however, he did have something he wanted to ask her. Rose's diary entry had intrigued him. He was curious as to what Mirra's parents could have possibly written to her that involved Merlin.

"Aunt Hermione" he said, and she looked up from her paper. "Who was Merlin?"

She gave him a very curious look and took a large sip of tea. "Why do you ask Al?"

"Well I know that you know a lot about history...and I hear the name so much...what with *Merlin's beard* and *Order of Merlin*. I was just curious as to who he was."

"Well, Merlin is considered to be the most powerful-well-*accomplished* wizard of all time" she said.

"So he was definitely real?" Albus asked. He saw Kreacher look at him from the corner of his eye.

"Oh yes, he was definitely real. He lived to be over one hundred I believe. He's responsible for a lot of magical discoveries, discoveries that would later become imperative to our kind. The wand, Apparation, all sorts of things. That's why he's so popular. "

"Whatever happened to him?"

"Oh he died from old age. He never sought after immortality or anything like that. A lot of people think he was more than willing to simply become one with nature."

"One with nature?" Albus asked her, now absolutely brimming with curiosity.

"Well, Merlin's big thing, or at least, this is what has been recorded in history...is that Merlin loved nature. The animals, the wind, the plants...everything about it. A lot of people seem to think that he just...obliterated himself. Just decided to become one with what he loved."

"Did he have any dungeons?" Albus asked. He could tell from the look on his aunt's face that he had taken it way too far. There was no way he could have randomly guessed about a dungeon being involved with Merlin. She did not, however, press him for details.

"Well, he had a lot of dungeons. Dungeons were where he used to hide his belongings. Very few of them have been found. They needed to be built on magical foundations. There's been a lot of research done on the location of some of them...but no leads on one in partic -"

She was interrupted by the entrance of Rose and Lily, both of whom looked like they were more than ready to open presents.

"Well I suppose that ends this conversation Al" his aunt said. "I guess I should go wake up your parents."

Albus had a very typical Christmas morning. He and his cousins opened their presents without hesitation. Albus received numerous things that he hadn't even planned on getting. Loads of candy ranging from Chocolate Frogs to Bertie Botts Every Flavor Beans, his typical sweater from Grandma Weasley (though this year it was emerald instead of scarlett), a variety of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes products, and several other things of that nature. He went to reach for his last present, which was rather deep under the tree, when a hand on his arm stopped him.

"Later" his mother told him.

His Christmas dinner was also more of the same. He and his family spent most of it conversing in divided sections. His father, brother, and most of his uncles were in a heated conversation about Quidditch, James having obnoxiously claimed that he was already a better than his father had been. His mother and aunts were discussing politics. He himself didn't talk much. Not that he wasn't in a happy mood, he was simply occupied with his dinner. His mother had made ham, turkey, baked potatoes, steak and kidney pie, corn, and a number of other things that reminded Albus of the feast he had enjoyed his first night as Hogwarts. The talking stopped however, when there was a sudden knock on the door.

"Albus could you get that?" his father asked. "It's probably Neville, he said he might stop by."

Albus raised himself from his seat and walked over to the door. There was another knock and Albus opened it. "Hi Nev-" he stopped mid sentence. It was not Neville. It was Headmaster Ares.

He did not smile at Albus, but he did greet him. "Good evening, Albus" he said very curtly. "Is your father home? It's rather import-"

"-I'm right here Red" came a voice from the hall. His father was casually leaning in the door frame, wearing a look of curiosity. "Will you be joining us for dinner?"

"I'm afraid not Mr. Potter, I'm here on business" he replied.

Albus looked from the headmaster to his father in complete bewilderment. What business could they possibly have together?

"Albus, go finish your dinner and tell your mother I'll be right in. I'm just going to chat with an old friend."

Albus knew that there was no point in arguing the matter. His father's face had turned just as serious as the Headmaster's. Albus side stepped his father and walked back into the kitchen, which was now silent, full of people waiting to hear who had arrived.

"Who was it?" Uncle Ron asked.

"The Headmaster" Albus replied.

"*What?* Reginald Ares? Here? That bas-"

"Ronald!" his aunt yelled.

They waited at the dinner table, no one touching their food. There was no sound from outside the kitchen, his father and the Headmaster were definitely having a hushed conversation. After five minutes though, his dad walked back in, wearing an extremely false smile.

"Why aren't you all eating? The stuffing's delicious!" he said in a jolly, but demanding tone. There was an immediate rush to the pan of stuffing, and dinner proceeded as normal.

Albus sat in his room that night very full, and very ready for bed. Dinner had been delicious, and he was more than ready to get to work on the seemingly endless supply of candy he had received. Just as he was drifting off however, he heard a knock on his door.

"Come in" he said.

To his surprise, his mother entered, carrying the very thin package he recognized as his own from earlier. "I've got another present for you" she said with a smile.

Curious as to what was so secretive it couldn't have been opened earlier, he raised the blanket off of him and sat on his bed. He took the package and opened it. To his shock, a silk-like silvery cloak came out.

"Dad's Invisibility Cloak!" he exclaimed.

"Shhh" his mother said. "I don't want anyone to know you have it."

"Shouldn't it be given to James though?" he asked.

"Well, we did think about it" she said. "But we figured he didn't have much use for it, as he already stole a very useful map from your father."

Albus had no clue what she meant by map, but didn't care either. He had already stood up and slid the cloak over his shoulders. He saw his body vanish beneath him.

"Take good care of it" she told him. "Happy Christmas Albus."

She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before turning off his lights and leaving. Albus crawled back into bed, but found that he wasn't quite as tired as he had been before his mum had entered. An Invisibility Cloak...he now had the freedom to wander Hogwarts for as long as he wanted. All he needed now was somewhere to go.

Chapter 8 : Scorpius Malfoy

Though even Albus had to admit it was weird, he found that the more time he spent at home, the more homesick he got. He had only been away from Hogwarts for a few days, but he was already longing to enter the castle and do magic; to talk to his friends and visit Hagrid, and he even missed sitting next to the fire and doing his homework.

Not that his vacation was bad, though. He thoroughly enjoyed lounging around his large house, eating more sweets than he could count and being entertained by the various antics of his younger cousins. He had also taken to spending a large amount of his time thinking about what he had read in Rose's diary. The part about Mirra and Merlin was particularly interesting to him. He tried to wonder in what possible way they could be connected, but truth be told, he didn't try very hard. The way he saw it, if it was anything important, he and Mirra were good enough friends that she would have told him by now anyway.

But despite enjoying his period of relaxation, he was itching to get on the train, and more importantly, try out his new cloak. So by the time the day of their departure came, Albus was quite enthusiastic.

As was now typical in the Potter house, the morning that they were to board the Hogwarts Express was calm for some, hectic for others.

"Mum" James sleepily moaned at eight thirty in the morning. "I can't find my Transfiguration textbook."

"Did you check your trunk, where you left it?" his mother asked while buttering more toast for Lily, who would once again be seeing her brothers leave for Hogwarts.

"Oh right" he replied brightly before hurrying upstairs.

Albus, who had been smart enough to pack the previous night, was helping himself to ham and eggs while watching his brother scrounge around for his belongings. It was quite an amusing sight. He was so sleepy that he was more likely to check the couch cushions for something before checking his bedroom floor.

"I think I may have forgotten to tell you dear, but it will only be me taking you to the platform today" his mother told him while adding more eggs to his plate.

Albus nearly choked on his food. "Wha - what? Why?" he asked, trying not to sound too upset. "I haven't seen dad in two days, and he said he was definitely going to take us!"

His mother gave him a small frown. "I know, but he was called into the office last night, there was an attack in Bristol and the Minister asked him to help out. He wasn't planning on going at all."

Disappointed though he was, Albus couldn't help but be a little intrigued. Kingsley Shacklebolt, the Minister of Magic, was an old friend of the family, and was generally very good when it came to sorting things out with dark wizards, having once been an Auror himself. The fact that he needed his dad's help was most unusual indeed.

And now that Albus really thought about it...wasn't there something that he had wanted to ask his father before the break had started? Something that involved...or at least he *thought* that it involved Aurors. What was it? Unfortunately, his train of thought was interrupted by a loud yell from the second floor.

"Mum! I can't find my wand!" James had hollered down.

"Did you check your back pocket!" she yelled back up.

"Oh right" they heard him mumble.

"So anyway" his mother started, turning back to Albus. "How's the Room of Requirement?" she said with a smirk.

"The Room of what? Oh, the room dad mentioned. Wasn't there" he told her while stuffing his mouth with more ham.

"What?" she asked. "Did he give you the right directions? It's the seventh floor, right near the tapestry of Barn-"

"Mum I know what he said" he answered. "Believe me I tried it a few times. I don't think it's there anymore. I think it either moved or got destroyed during the Battle of Hogwarts. What was the big deal about it anyway?" he asked.

His mother stared up at the ceiling, deep in thought, apparently pondering what he had said.

"Well I suppose it *could* have vanished or moved...but that's doubtful. It's not in the nature of the room. I'm trying to think of a reason why it wou-"

"Mum!" came another yell from the second floor.

"What!" she hollered back up, clearly annoyed this time.

"Never mind, I found it" he heard his brother yell back.

They were not able to continue their conversation however, as seconds later a jet black ministry car pulled up out front of the house. Albus went upstairs to get his trunk while his mother cleared their plates and left to go talk to the driver. In a matter of minutes, Albus, Lily, and a very disheveled looking James were in the back of the car, their luggage magically placed in the trunk.

"Okay, it's about nine now, a two hour ride, and the train leaves at eleven" his mother told them from the front seat. "Do you think you could-ya' know-speed this up?" she asked the the driver.

He gave her a large grin, hit a small red button under the steering wheel, and within seconds they were speeding off, swerving in between cars whose occupants seemed completely oblivious to the fact that a car was squeezing between them going about one hundred miles an hour.

Thanks to the driver's willingness to "speed it up", they arrived at King's Cross station roughly forty five minutes earlier then they had planned, meaning Albus would have plenty of time to seek out his friends. He casually walked towards the platform and, making sure that no muggles were looking, passed through the barrier after James had done so.

He had expected to need to search the platform for his friends, but had barely gotten through when he heard his name called.

"Oy! Albus!" he turned and saw Morrison speeding towards him, Mirra just a few feet behind him. Morrison gave him a quick slap on the back, followed by a brief hug from Mirra.

"Friends of yours, Al?" his mom asked.

"Yeah" Albus replied absentmindedly. He was looking at Morrison, who looked as though he was quite close to fainting. It took a few moments for Albus to realize what he was so dumbfounded by; he was a Holyhead Harpies fan.

His mother gave Morrison a very perplexed look, unsure as to why he was staring at her so intently. They were saved however, by the arrival of Uncle Ron and Rose.

They spent several minutes chatting with each other absently before students started boarding the train. Albus' mother gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and told him to write to her as he approached the train, Rose, Mirra, and Morrison right behind him. James had already gotten on the train, no doubt anxious to meet with one of his many girlfriends. Albus could hear Lily whimpering next to her mother.

"It's not *fair*" she was saying. "I can do magic and everything!"

His mother gave Albus a nod telling him to board, then rolled her eyes as if to say "Just go, I'll sort this out."

Albus did as he was told and began searching for a compartment, feeling rather strange as he did so. The last time he had been here, he was worrying about being sorted, trying to fit in, and searching for a place to sit. Now however, things were different. He settled into a compartment in the middle of the train with his friends and watched as they immediately started talking about their holidays. Rose was quick to mention the piles of books she had received, and Morrison was talking about a rather unfortunate incident in which his clumsy uncle had somehow managed to get a fork stuck in his eye.

"Yeah it was terrible. Christmas dinner ruined and everything. We had to take him to a muggle hospital and all, as it was closest. The second they saw him they rushed him straight to the ER" he said.

ER...ER...the phrase rang a bell to Albus for some reason. "Of course!" he exclaimed, smacking himself on the forehead. The conversation around him stopped, all three of his friends looking at him in shock. "Erm...it's nothing" he told them. "I just remembered something" he told them.

They continued to gaze at him for a few more seconds before Morrison began talking again. But Albus wasn't listening this time. *EP*. That was the phrase he had heard Neville use, and that was what he had wanted to ask his dad about. He had completely forgotten to do so, he had been busy thinking of Rose's diary...and what it had said about Mirra.

And as soon as he had thought that, he instinctively glanced up at her. She looked the same. She was listening to Morrison very intently, but she seemed fine. Albus remembered what he had thought just a few days ago. If something was wrong, certainly she would have told someone.

The trip to Hogwarts went by much quicker than Albus had thought it would, and soon enough, they were making their way up to their dormitories, satisfied by a fantastic feast and more than ready to drift into sleep. As Albus pulled the hangings around his bed, he saw Scorpius Malfoy laying on his own, staring up at the ceiling. Albus opened up his mouth for a split second to say anything, to ask him how his holiday was or to even ask what he had gotten-but ended up deciding against it. Instead he pushed the thought from his mind and rolled over, thinking that Scorpius Malfoy was just one mystery he would never solve.

If the students had expected the teachers to allow them some time to recover from their vacation before beginning to get back to work, they were quite wrong. The amount of work teachers were now issuing had made it almost impossible for them to have any free time at all. Professor Bellinger had explained to them that now that exams were officially coming (despite being six months away), it was the teacher's job to teach new things every week, as well as completely review what they already knew.

Albus had to admit that he was worried about exams. Based on their essay and test results, both he and Morrison were only scrapping "A's" in Transfiguration and Charms, and Albus was almost positive that he was below average in Astronomy. He continued to do well in Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts however, and Professor Longbottom had proudly exclaimed that all of the student's Assyrian Alert Plants (which were now fully active and twice as vicious) were coming along nicely.

The result of the increase in work was that Albus found himself, once again, in the company of Morrison at midnight on the Thursday the week after they had come back. Professor Darvy had

been kind enough to not issue them homework the week before, so they only had Transfiguration to worry about. The essay was still one of the toughest of the year however, and Albus found himself staring blankly at his paper, desperately trying to remember why switching an object was more efficient than simply vanishing one.

The familiar slamming of books told Albus that Morrison had completely given up on his essay, something which Albus had become rather accustomed to. He muttered a "goodnight" and stomped his way up to the dormitories, leaving Albus alone in the dark, the fire providing his only source of light. Half an hour later though, this was not the case.

Just as it had happened weeks ago, a small ray of light had begun flashing around the room. Ducking behind the table he was working at, he saw Scorpius flashing the light from his wand around in the corners. He took a quick glance around and left the common room. Albus sat motionless, just as he had done the first time. He was still quite curious as to where Scorpius needed to be this late, but just like last time, he wasn't ready to spy on someone-

Or was he?

Albus rushed up the stairs to his dormitory and began searching through his trunk quickly.

"Whassamatter?" Morrison whispered groggily.

"Nothing" Albus replied, finding the Invisibility Cloak and pulling it out of the trunk. "Just go back to bed" he told him as he made his way down the stairs.

Pulling the Cloak around him and making sure he was securely inside of it, he hurried through the doorway and out into the dungeons. Scorpius was nowhere in sight. He hurried along through the labyrinth, hoping that he would catch him before he reached the stairs. He was successful. He saw Scorpius walking slowly towards the set of stairs that would lead them out of the dungeons.

Once again making sure he was completely covered by the cloak, he followed after him, careful not to make any noisy footsteps. He stayed about six feet away from him as he followed him up the stairs, hoping that his heavy breathing wouldn't give him away. On more than one occasion, Scorpius stopped dead in his tracks and spun around, forcing Albus to stop moving midstep and keep as still as possible.

They continued going up the stairs until they reached a floor; Albus wasn't sure which one, he hadn't been counting. Scorpius began walking down the long corridor, Albus quietly following after him. He tried figuring out what floor they were on by trying to recognize the portraits around him, but soon enough it became very clear where they were.

Scorpius had stopped, and was now staring at a blank stretch of wall-right across from the tapestry of Barnabus the Barmy. He then began pacing in front of the blank wall, and after a few seconds, a large door appeared right in the center. Albus' jaw dropped. Something had clicked in

his brain. The room was never gone. Albus couldn't have entered all of those months ago because it had been occupied...by Scorpius. And now that he thought about it, hadn't he seen Scorpius on the seventh floor that day? Just moments before he had attempted to enter the room? He had bumped into him, hadn't he?

Before his brain had more time to register what had happened that day, Scorpius had entered the room, the door now closing behind him. Knowing he only had a few precious seconds before the room would be sealed again, he quickly slid his way in before the door slammed shut behind him. As it did so, he felt a tremendous tugging from around his shoulders. The cloak was stuck in the door and had been pulled off of him.

He made a large gasp and took a dive for the cloak, but it was far too late. Scorpius had turned around and drawn his wand, now pointing it directly at Albus' chest.

"How did you-" he started. But a second later his own eyes answered it for him. He saw the cloak in Albus' hands. "An Invisibility Cloak" he said. "Of course. I knew that I had heard someone behind me."

He still had his wand pointed at Albus, who now had his hands up as if he were being arrested. He wanted to say something, but wasn't sure what. What do you say to someone once they catch you following them?

After a few moments of silence, he managed to stammer a question. "How- how do you know about this room?"

Scorpius had a very intense look on his face, but had begun backing up. His wand, however, was still pointing directly at him. "My dad told me about it. Before the year started. He used to use it a lot back in his day. I'm guessing yours told you the same?" he asked.

His voice was still meant to be intimidating, but Albus was a little more comfortable now that he had been addressed. Scorpius was still willing to talk, not duel.

"Yeah he did. Said it would come in handy for when I needed to be alone" he said. "I'm not really sure what's so great about it though."

He was being completely honest. The room wasn't very spectacular. It had a single chair, comfortable looking for sure, but still only one of them. Next to it was a rather large table, but that was it. The rest of the room was empty. They were surrounded by nothing else but blank walls. Albus did notice that some parts of the wall were blackened, and appeared as if they had been blasted by fire at some point, but before he could think anymore on the matter Scorpius had began speaking.

"This place is called the Room of Requirement" he told him. "Not too many people know about. I heard it was popular back in my dad's day, but as far as I know no one else has entered it all

year. I guess not everyone has parents that remember Hogwarts as clearly as ours. And what's *so great* about it is that you can spend all of your time in here, alone. No one and nothing to worry about."

He said the last part with fierce determination, as if it was a code to live by.

"But erm...what do you do in here?" Albus asked.

Scorpius lowered his wand at this point, apparently having realized that Albus wasn't a threat. "I read. And study. Alone." he said simply.

"Read?"

Scorpius took a seat in the single chair and put his feet up at the table. "It's this new thing" he said. "They put words on pages, and you learn from them. Some people think it will be big in a few years" he said with a sarcastic smirk.

"I know what reading is" Albus said coolly. Scorpius was obviously very sarcastic, something he didn't expect based on his generally shy nature. "I only asked because you don't even have any books" he replied with a smirk of his own. *That will shut him up*, he told himself.

"I don't?" he replied confidently, with a smirk that very much resembled the one on Albus' face. He jerked his head towards the corner, and Albus saw, to his amazement, a large shelf of books that had certainly not been there seconds before.

"How did- " he started.

"Another thing that makes the Room of Requirement so great" Scorpius said. "But now I have a question for *you*."

Albus braced himself for the question that he knew was coming.

"Why were you following me?" he asked.

Albus tried to formulate words, but couldn't quite do it. He honestly didn't know what had compelled him to run and get his Cloak, other than pure curiosity that is. But he had a funny feeling that that answer wouldn't suffice.

"Never mind. Don't even bother answering" Scorpius said coldly. "I already know why. "

"You- you do?" Albus had not been expecting that. Even he didn't know why.

"You think I'm up to no good. I can't blame you. Any other Malfoy and you'd be right" he said scathingly.

"What makes you say that?"

Scorpius snorted. "Don't pretend like you don't know my family. I certainly know yours, and I'm willing to bet that you've heard some rather dark stories about my dad. And I'm also willing to bet that they're all true" he added bitterly, more so to himself than to Albus.

"That's not true" Albus half lied. He hadn't heard terrible things from his father, but his uncle did say some rather mean things about the Malfoy family. He took a seat in the chair across from Scorpius (a chair that, like the bookshelf, had not been there seconds before) and tried to relax himself, thinking of what to say. "My dad once told me that it doesn't matter who came before you. It matters who you become. And I mean- I guess he's right isn't he? If all that we are is the person that came before us, then no one would ever change. It would just be an endless cycle, wouldn't it? And maybe your dad isn't all that bad. He's not in Azkaban is he?"

He desperately hoped that he had made sense, but in the event that he had failed to do so he wanted to have asked a question to fall back on. Scorpius leaned up against his chair, apparently in deep thought. After about half a minute, he leaned forward.

"No, he's not in Azkaban. And you make a good point."

Albus was happy to note that he didn't sound as cocky or sardonic as he previously had. On the contrary, he sounded as though he was impressed. Albus tried to hide his smile. For some reason he felt as though Scorpius Malfoy was the type of person you didn't want to show signs of weakness too.

"But then why were you following me?" he asked, snapping Albus out of his concentration.

"Huh? Oh- right. I was just curious" he said with a shrug, kicking himself mentally. Hadn't he just told himself not to say that?

He saw Scorpius survey him, eyes narrowed, apparently trying to deduce whether or not that was a sufficient enough answer. After a minute, he said "Okay. That makes sense. It's not often someone just wanders the castle at night."

Albus breathed a sigh of relief. Suddenly, he felt very comfortable. At this point, he felt that he was as ready as he would ever be in asking Scorpius what he was most curious about.

"How come you don't really talk to anyone?" he blurted out.

Scorpius gave him a shocked look, but didn't seem bothered by the question at all. "My family isn't as popular as yours. A lot of people...a lot of people know what my dad was. I'm in no hurry to make friends with anyone who has so much as heard my last name before. And besides, I'm always studying anyway. My mom told me that as my social life was wrecked from the start, my education had to take center stage."

Albus looked at him, appalled. "But- you can't just give up on friends because of what your dad was like! Because of what the people *around you* are like! Look at me! I'm in Slytherin, and I made friends regardless!"

"Good point. Why *are you* in Slytherin?"

"Because-" Albus started. But he didn't really know how to finish. Why was he in Slytherin? It had seemed so logical at the time...the Sorting Hat had let him pick anywhere. "Because I just knew it was where I was meant to be" he finished cryptically.

Scorpius continued to survey him with, but now more so with interest than to see if he was lying.

"Just try and make friends. Trust me, it's easy. People will judge you for who you are. Not for who you're supposed to be" he told him. It felt weird saying it, but he was confident that he was right nonetheless. Isn't that how Mirra had judged him?

"I suppose so" Scorpius said. Albus gave him a shocked look. He hadn't counted on what he had said actually working, but apparently it had.

Deciding it was best to start up a conversation other than whether or not Scorpius should be compared to his father, Albus began by mentioning what he knew was the only fool proof conversation starter for a wizard to use.

"So do you like Quidditch?" he asked.

Scorpius gave him a beaming smile, and within seconds they were launched into a full argument as to whether or not the Wimbourne Wasps had any chance of making the playoffs when their star Seeker was injured. Albus decided to hold off mentioning how terrible he was at flying, as Scorpius seemed rather enthusiastic in describing the various techniques that his father had taught him when he was younger.

The conversation lasted for almost an hour, at which point Albus began feeling drowsy. He realized that it must have been at least three in the morning, and he begrudgingly told Scorpius that he had to go back to the common room to finish his Transfiguration essay.

"Oh you mean the one on why switching an object is better than vanishing it?" he asked.

"Erm...yeah that's the one."

"Oh that was easy" Scorpius said. "Just write about how an object that's switched can be switched back with the same spell, but a vanished object needs to be conjured back, using a different one."

Albus thought about it for a few seconds before realizing that his answer had made perfect sense. Grinning at the thought of how easy the essay would be now, he grabbed his Invisibility Cloak and threw it around his shoulders, leaving only his head visible.

"You coming?" he asked him.

"No, I'm good. I'll go back later, there's still a few hours before breakfast."

"Okay well...see ya' later then" he said with a grin.

"Right...see ya' later. And by the way, you won't tell anyone else about this room will you?" Scorpius asked him with a very tense look on his face.

"Nah...I won't" Albus replied.

And to Albus' very great surprise, Scorpius extended his hand. Albus stared at it for a second before reaching out and shaking it, then left the room and watched as the door behind him dissolved back into the wall.

He entered his dormitory a few minutes later, grinning from ear to ear. He stowed the Cloak back in his trunk and crawled into bed, deciding he would simply finish the essay tomorrow during breakfast. As he rolled on his side, he found himself with the same feeling that he had the day he became friends with Mirra. In fact, unless Albus was very much mistaken, he had just made friends with one of his uncle's biggest enemies.

Chapter 9 : The Centaur Gathering

Albus quickly learned that being friends with Scorpius Malfoy would change his remaining years at Hogwarts a great deal. Scorpius was a natural genius, and was always willing to help with homework, though he would not actually do it for him. At first, Albus couldn't see why he refused to do so, as it took him half the time it would take anyone else, but Scorpius claimed that the professors were seeing their budding friendship, and that if they handed in near identical papers, they would start to suspect something.

In addition to being a tremendous help with schoolwork, he also found that class was a bit more enjoyable now. Scorpius had a quick, dry, sarcastic wit to him, and Albus realized that if he was attentive enough, he would surely be laughing by the time Scorpius had finished a sentence.

The other friends in his "group" seemed to be split right down the middle when it came to him. Mirra welcomed Scorpius into the fold cheerfully, glad that he now worked with them in their classes together, and had actually thanked Albus for reaching out to him. Morrison didn't seem to mind him either, as his grades were also soaring with his help, though he didn't fully understand Scorpius' sense of humor, and seemed to think that some of the things he said were downright strange. Rose, on the other hand, flat out rejected him.

"He's a *Malfoy*, Albus!" she whispered to him one day during Herbology. Scorpius had been permitted to go use the bathroom, and Rose was using this time without his presence to thoroughly bash him, much to the dismay of Mirra.

"I don't see what's so bad about him" she chipped in. "He's really nice, and really funny. You just have to get used to his sense of humor."

Rose threw her a dirty look. "You wouldn't get it, you don't know our families history. My dad hates his dad, and his grandfather, and just about anyone in that bloodline. They were all terrible people, and I'd bet my entire chocolate frog card collection that he's no different!"

"You barely see him. You only share three classes with us anyway" Albus told her. "And besides, judging someone by someone else's mistakes is hardly fair."

She gave him an equally nasty look, but turned around to her group of poisonous dandelions that she was supposed to be picking and began snatching at the cluster furiously; Scorpius had returned from the bathroom.

"Now hurry up class, we only have five minutes left" Professor Longbottom was saying. "And I'd also like to congratulate all of you on a job well done with your Alert Plants!"

He turned to his left to show the now bright red plants moving their vines around rapidly. They were sitting far away from the class, near the window where the most sunlight was coming in through the greenhouse.

"They should be able to produce seeds in early June, and will only need to be watered once a week until then" he shouted towards the class, who were craning their necks to see what had changed about the plants.

They left five minutes later for History of Magic, Scorpius looking slightly down. "What does she have against me?" he asked Albus. "You said it doesn't matter who my dad was. "

Albus gave him a slight frown as they made their way back to the castle. "Some people just don't warm up to others that well. You'll grow on her mate, trust me" he told him.

Albus had not expected to be correct, and he was quite right to assume so. For the entirety of the next week, Rose continued to throw dirty glances at Scorpius in class, but by this time he had finally started ignoring them. Albus was happy to note that he was, for the most part, maintaining his comedic and quick remarks despite being rather upset with the idea that he wasn't fully welcomed into the group.

"Honestly, I can't remember using half of these ingredients. Darvy is insane, he's just ran out of lesson plans" he said scathingly during Potions the following week.

Their lesson today was to create a Baldness Solution using ingredients that they had used in previous classes. The problem, of course, was that they had made so many and taken so many guesses that they ended up having to use just about everything in the cupboard.

"Yeah, I don't recall using sliced up ladybugs or shrivelfig skin either" Morrison said as he tossed them into his potion lazily.

They were in groups of three, with Albus, Scorpius, and Morrison at one table while Mirra, Rose, and a Gryffindor boy named Donovan-whom Albus wasn't particularly fond of-were at the table right behind them. They still, however, managed to work together.

"What would happen if I tossed some rotten doxy eggs into this thing?" Albus asked Scorpius.

"Our potion would probably explode" he said grimly, while cutting up caterpillars.

"What about dragonfly wings?" Morrison asked, holding them high above the bubbling cauldron.

"Then this entire dungeon would be filled with mist" Scorpius replied absentmindedly, still slicing up caterpillars.

Clang!

The cauldron behind them tipped over the second Scorpius had finished speaking. Donovan yelled "Oi!" and Rose stood up on her chair shrieking as the cauldron's purple contents spilled out over the floor. Mirra however, remained frozen in her seat, a look of absolute horror on her face.

"What did you say?" she asked in a hoarse whisper to Scorpius. He glanced around at Albus and Morrison, both of whom gave him a bewildered expression.

"I- I said that this entire dungeon would be filled with mist" he said cautiously.

She almost laughed in relief. "Oh...oh okay" she added with a bright smile on her face. It was quite a dramatic change. Seconds before she appeared to have been on the verge of tears, but now she seemed absolutely jubilant.

"No, it's not okay!" Donovan yelled at her. "I've got potion spilled down my front, and now we have nothing to hand in!" he said, pulling his robes out to reveal a large stain on them.

"I don't think you have anything to worry about" Scorpius told him. "Your robes were already dirty, and your potion wasn't going to get a passing mark anyway. Purple? It was supposed to be a light green" he said with a smirk.

The class around him laughed, and before Donovan could retaliate, Professor Darvy had made his way over to the mess on the floor. "What happened" he asked calmly.

"I accidentally knocked over my potion, sir" Mirra told him, looking down at her feet.

"There is no need to make a big deal about it" he told her. He drew his wand and made a sharp swinging movement with it. The spilled potion on the floor vanished in an instant, and the cauldron on the floor disappeared and reappeared on the table. "We still have ten minutes left, I suggest you start a new one and I can grade it's contents based on how much time you had. I will not deduct points from Miss Weasley or Mr. Hornsbrook of course" he said with a faint smile, before returning to his desk.

Mirra breathed a sigh of relief, and continued to smile throughout the remainder of the class. Albus, however, continued to stare at her in wonder. He knew exactly what had happened. She thought that she had heard "Merlin's Mist" and had become so scared that she had inadvertently knocked over her cauldron. Why was she so frightened of these words?

The bell rang a few minutes later, and the class quickly packed up their things to leave as Professor Darvy called out "Homework tonight class! Kindly write eight inches of parchment on the difference between a solution and a cure, shouldn't be too much trouble!"

The class groaned and began throwing their books into their cauldrons much more fiercely. "Oh come on!" he said. "That's not very fair, this is the first homework assignment I've given you all year!"

The class strode out of the dungeons to return to their common rooms before dinner, Rose waving good-bye to Morrison and Albus as they did so.

"Blimey, what was Mirra's problem?" Morrison asked as they began walking through the labyrinth of the dungeons. "She got kind of careless there towards the end, didn't she?"

"I'll tell you when we get back to the common room" Albus told them both. They cast him quizzical looks, but he didn't speak until they reached the solid wall that separated them from their dormitories. Parselmouth" he said, and the doorway was revealed at once.

They walked into the near empty common room and went into their dormitory, which was very fortunately cleared of their fellow room mates. Albus closed the door behind them, took another look around, and said "I know what's up with Mirra."

Morrison sat down on his bed, intrigued, whilst Scorpius plopped down on his own, looking rather bored.

"And what would that be?" he asked.

"She thought that you had something else. She thought that you had said the Dungeon of *Merlin's Mist*."

He had been expecting Scorpius to stand up and provide useful information on whom Merlin was, and for Morrison to take in every word in awe, but he was disappointed with both. They both remained in the same spot, with the same looks on their face.

"So?" Scorpius said with a shrug.

"Well... Merlin was a powerful bloke wasn't he? And I think that there's more. Because I read in Rose's diary that her parents wrote her a letter telling her to open the dungeon or something, and they seemed really angry about why it wasn't opened yet" he finished dramatically.

Scorpius sat up straight at once. "Hold on a second" he said. Albus braced himself for a crucial piece of information. "You read Rose's diary?" he asked.

Albus let a groan escape him. "Yes, and that's why I can't mention this to either of them, I don't want her to find out. But I'm really worried. What could her parents possibly be pressuring her to do that involved a dungeon? And she seemed really freaked out about it when she misheard you today."

"Well," Morrison started, "maybe her parents were using a code or something, so that only Mirra would know what they were talking about. In the event that someone read her mail."

"And they were right to do so weren't they?" Scorpius said with a smirk. "If her friends are reading her mail, and their cousins are reading their diaries."

"No, I don't think that-" Albus started.

"I do. I completely agree" Scorpius interrupted. "I seriously doubt that her parents are pressuring her into something dangerous. And you know how girls are, what they talk about. That could have been code for *anything*. Makeup- or doing the dishes or someth-"

"No!" Albus shouted, having repaid the favor by interrupting Scorpius. "It wasn't a code at all, or anything like that."

Why wouldn't they believe him? Was it so hard for them to believe that Mirra could be in danger? That there was something truly wrong?

"But how do you know?" Morrison asked him.

"I don't know...I just do" he finished, though he knew that he hadn't convinced anyone.

Scorpius gave Morrison a knowing look and said, after a few seconds of silence "I think I know what this is about."

"You do?" Albus asked, hopeful.

"Yeah I do. You're looking for a bit of an adventure of sorts, aren't you? A mystery to solve."

Albus could have punched him. "That's not what it is at all! Why can't you-" but he was cut off by the entrance of Bartleby, who insisted that they join him for dinner.

Albus didn't mention Mirra and the mysterious dungeon that she seemed to be connected with for the next week, not that it would have mattered if he had. The entirety of Slytherin house was now focused on only one thing-the upcoming Quidditch match.

Gryffindor had lost to Hufflepuff by a small margin two weeks previously, but they had still lost. This meant that if Slytherin could beat Ravenclaw by a rather large amount, and if both Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw played a very poor game the next month, Slytherin would have a shot at the finals, where they would get their rematch against Gryffindor.

Albus had seen the team captain, Frederick Roth, yelling at his team everyday for the past week, but he was glad to see that they were flying much better. He had recruited a seventh year named Sheldon Wiley as a Seeker, and he was flying circles around the rest of the team, though they too had improved. The Beaters were no longer knocking themselves out with their own bats, Atticus had switched from Seeker to Chaser to allow Sheldon room, and ended up being quite good with the Quaffle. Albus had seen Hufflepuff's narrow victory over Gryffindor, which was almost entirely luck, and personally thought that the two teams would be quite evenly matched.

They walked down to the Quidditch pitch together on a chilly Saturday morning and took their usual seats in the middle of the the stands. Albus could see Mirra and Rose from across the

stands, sitting next to Charles Eckley, the one who had ridiculed him the day he had fought with Rose. He wondered vaguely if any of the Gryffindors would cheer for Slytherin when they came out onto the pitch, as they would not be playing, and was disappointed with the result. As he should have expected, three fourths of the crowd cheered for Ravenclaw, whereas the Slytherin team only received cheers from one house-their own.

The two captains shook hands, and the entire crowd roared with applause as both teams kicked off from the ground at Mr. Wood's whistle. Albus did his best to follow the match with Scorpius and Morrison, but unlike the match against Gryffindor, there was no clearly superior team. Both sets of Chasers managed to take possession of the Quaffle long enough to take shots, and every shot was blocked by the opposing side's Keeper.

"And it seems like it's a completely even match" the Hufflepuff commentator was saying with his magnified voice. "Nice bludger there from that Ravenclaw-might of been Chang "

There was a loud murmur of "Ohhs" as Olivia Watson, a Slytherin Chaser, was knocked off of her broom by a well aimed Bludger to the head. "And now we have Sanders-former Seeker-speeding away towards the Ravenclaw goalpost-ducks a bludger from Motley-and ahhh he's scored."

One fourth of the audience clapped as Atticus circled around the pitch with his fist raised in the air.

"Hmm...Slytherin seems to have some luck on their side...of course, there's always a good chance he cheated as well. That Quaffle looked like it went against the wind" the commentator said. The remainder of the audience cheered with approval of his statement, but Albus didn't think that was very fair. It looked like a perfectly natural goal to him.

The match continued without anymore scoring for the next several minutes, Slytherin maintaining its ten to nothing lead. It seemed however, that every time the Slytherin Keeper saved a shot, or a Slytherin beater made contact with a Bludger, some sort of foul play was involved.

"Now how on Earth did Thompson fly from the right hoop to the left so quickly to block that one?" the commentator was saying. "I suspect someone placed an accelerating charm on his broom."

The Ravenclaws below roared with more approval, which quickly turned to groans when Atticus scored again, making it twenty to nil.

The commentator started up again. "And that's Sanders second goal, looked like Patricks was confunded though, he wasn't ready for that shot either. I suggest that the officials check to see if Sanders has his wand on him, he wasn't playing this good during his last match."

"I don't know, maybe he's *practiced* since then!" yelled Scorpius, and several Slytherins around them laughed. Albus could hardly blame Scorpius for his outburst, he too was infuriated. Neither team, he was sure, had done anything illegal. The Slytherin team was simply out flying the Ravenclaws.

Twenty minutes and several more scathing remarks later, and the game was tied up fifty to fifty, much to the annoyance of the Ravenclaws, who seemed to believe that the match should have long since been over. "Perhaps the Slytherins have casted a Dissillusionment Charm on the Snitch" the commentator was suggesting. It had not been seen for the entire game.

Almost immediately after he said this though, the stands erupted into cheers and stood on their feet as Wiley went into a spectacular dive in the middle of the pitch, a tiny golden glimmer just feet away. The Ravenclaw Seeker, Alvin Oddleton, flew into his direction with a sudden burst of speed that, unlike Thompson's, was not accused of having a charm placed onto it.

The burst of speed mattered not however, as within moments Wiley was flying around the pitch triumphantly, the tiny golden snitch fluttering in between his fingers. Albus let loose a yell of excitement, while Scorpius and Morrison jumped up and down next to him; they had won by a full one hundred and fifty points. If both Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw performed poorly against each other next game, Slytherin had a very good at chance of entering the finals.

"Party in the common room!" a Slytherin sixth year yelled as they trudged their way across the grounds and back to the castle to celebrate. Albus was stopped in his journey by a sudden hand clasped onto his back.

"Nice game eh?" his brother said to him.

Albus had not had a full conversation with his brother since Christmas, and was happy to see that he had not forgotten about him. He walked alongside him towards the castle, striking up a conversation that Albus happily approved of.

"That commentator was bang out of order" his brother told him. "I didn't see a single illegal play."

"Yeah, why is that?" Albus asked him. "I know everyone has something against Slytherin, but those accusations were straight up out of line."

James shrugged. "Slytherins have always been seen as the ones who don't play fair. That's how it is bro, sorry."

"Yeah, but no one stopped him or anything..."

James shrugged again. "Ehh, that was Dimitrius Parks commentating. He's a sixth year and a prefect, he can pretty much get away with anything unfortunately. I heard that Teddy hexed him

once back when they were both younger-apparently he favors Hufflepuff enough to even put Gryffindor down. I wouldn't worry about it too much."

"But I guess we should worry about playing you in the finals though right?" Albus asked with a smile.

"No point in worrying, we already know the outcome" James replied, a smirk curling on his lips. "Later Al" he said as he hurried forwards towards a group of third year Ravenclaw girls that looked rather disheartened at the outcome of the game.

Albus smiled and hurried towards Scorpius and Morrison, who were both running towards the castle as well. Before he caught up with them however, he looked over his shoulder to see if the other Ravenclaws were looking just as depressed. He was astonished at what he saw. There, standing right next to Hagrid's cabin, was a centaur.

It was peering through the window of the cabin, looking very confused indeed. It had long black hair and a rather long black beard to match. Albus called out to Morrison and Scorpius to follow him, who obliged looking just as confused as the centaur. He hurried towards it, but right when he was within feet of him, another centaur emerged from the Forbidden Forest, this one with a reddish mane and beard.

"Patriklus!" he said. "What brings you to this cabin?"

The centaur with the black hair turned to him and said, unsmiling "The same thing that has undoubtedly brought you here, Ronan."

Albus moved closer to the both of them, Scorpius and Morrison standing just a few feet away as well. Suddenly there was a sound of more hooves, and no less than twenty centaurs had hurried out of the forest, all of them with curious looks on their face.

Albus saw the cabin door bust open, and Hagrid emerged in anger. "Now was' goin on here!" he yelled. "There's nothin' ter' see in me cabin!"

The centaurs all turned to him, but only one of them spoke. "We are very sorry to disturb you Hagrid, we know that you cannot feel it. But it is of utmost importance that we meet here. We are merely curious, we will not stay long."

This was a rather poorly told lie, however. The centaurs formed a circle around the cabin sniffing at it and stamping their feet hard. More than one of them let out a growl of disapproval.

"What are yeh' on about Firenze?" Hagrid said gruffly, though he too now looked curious. As soon as he had said it, the centaurs all turned, shaking their heads and starting to walk back into the Forest. Only two centaurs remained, the blonde haired one known as Firenze, and a rather larger one, who had no hair but a short blonde beard.

"What does it mean, Boris?" Firenze asked him.

The other centaur, whom Albus could only assume was Boris, turned to him with a very grave expression on his face. "You know exactly what it means. Even the stars could not predict this though."

"But why so sudden? Why was it opened now?"

"It wasn't. The mist has been seeping for some time. It has just now began to reach the surface."

The centaur known as Boris turned away, he too shaking his head as he descended into the Forest. Firenze stayed for just a bit longer, before turning around as well. Hagrid had entered his cabin moments previously, muttering to himself.

"Ruddy centaurs ar' hypocrites, can't enter their forest but no, its fine to come 'round me cabin!"

"Hey! Hey Firenze!" Albus called out, hoping that the centaur would hear him.

He did. He turned around before entering the Forest and yelled back, an intrigued look on his face, "Harry Potter?"

Albus ran forward to meet him, Scorpius and Morrison running along beside him. Once Albus was in talking range, he noticed that the centaur had a very distinct mark on his chest-it looked like a bruise that had never fully healed.

"No, you are not Harry. You're much too small and have no scar. But the resemblance is uncanny" Firenze said gently.

"Yeah...yeah I'm his son" he said.

"Well it is a pleasure to meet you, son of Harry Potter. Is your father well?"

"Yeah he's fine, but I wanted to ask -"

"And what is your name, dear boy?"

"Albus" he replied quickly. "And I wanted to ask you, what's going on? Why were you all gathered around Hagrid's cabin?"

Firenze stared at him intently, and seemed to struggle with his words. "I should not tell you, but I am good friends with you father, and feel it is only proper to be kind to his son."

Albus waited nervously, with Scorpius and Morrison next to him wearing similar looks on their faces. Firenze's face had suddenly hardened.

"It has been opened. Partially at least. I fear that the mist has reached the surface."

"What mist?" Albus asked, though he thought he knew the answer.

"Merlin's Mist. The Dungeon of Merlin's Mist has been opened. We haven't much time" he added, fear etched into his kind face.

Chapter 10 : Learning From The King Himself

"Okay...so who was right" Albus said, smiling on Monday afternoon, as he levitating a notebook during Charms. He hadn't had the chance to discuss what Firenze had told him yesterday, as both Mirra and Rose had drug Albus and his fellow Slytherins into the library for the entire day. Now however, with the noise of Charms to conceal their conversation, he could brag all that he wanted.

"You were" Morrison and Scorpius chorused together, both looking very gloomy indeed.

"Am I only out for an adventure?" he sneered. "A mystery to solve?"

"No" they chorused once again.

"But what I don't get" Scorpius started, "is that if this whole thing is so dangerous, why haven't the teachers been alerted? If the centaurs know what's going on, shouldn't they tell someone? I mean, it's their school too, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but I don't think they like helping people with only two legs. Firenze wasn't even willing to give us any information at all was he?" Albus replied, now switching from a notebook to a textbook.

"Are you going to tell anyone about it?" Morrison asked, red in the face. He was trying to levitate a feather, something that he had never gotten the hang of, and he was concentrating to the point where he looked like he was going to burst.

Albus had given the idea a great deal of thought the previous day, and had come to the conclusion that he knew was in the best interest of everyone.

"Nope" he said. "They would know that I found out about it from reading Rose's diary, and that would cause more trouble for me than any dungeon ever could."

The other boys laughed at his comment, but were quickly reprimanded by Professor Flitwick.

"Now boys, your exams are hardly a laughing matter!" he squeaked from atop his pile of books. "Mr. Vincent, I have yet to see you levitate anything in my class! You had better get the hang of it within twelve weeks! Remember, swish and flick!"

Albus felt his insides squirm at what the Professor had said. Twelve weeks. It was only February, and yet Albus was already dreading his exams, which he knew would take place from late May to June. He had certainly improved, but he still felt as though he was going to perform very poorly in Transfiguration.

They left Charms twenty minutes later, Morrison still red in the face, Albus and Scorpius still discussing how Mirra could possibly be related to something that had caused the centaurs so

much fear. He knew that he had not misheard Firenze; both Mirra's dungeon and the one that the centaurs had been gathered for were most definitely the same. What he didn't understand, however, was what he had meant by the mist reaching the surface. He figured that it could simply be a metaphor, but he was not really close to understanding its purpose.

"Do you think that they were more worried about the dungeon, or whatever that mist stuff was?" Scorpius asked.

"I don't know, but I think that both of them are bad" Albus answered as they walked through the hallways. "But what does Mirra have to do with it? Why would she want to open something like that? Do you think that she knows-"

He was cut off, however, by the sudden appearance of the person whom he most feared would hear their conversation. Mirra had turned the corner of the corridor, with Rose right behind her.

Albus' insides squirmed once again. Had she heard him? Had they both? She had a large smile on her face as she walked towards him. It didn't seem like a nasty or bad smile though, but rather a relatively pleasant one.

"So" she said as she approached them.

"So what!" said Morrison rather defensively. Apparently he also thought that she had heard them talking.

She cast Morrison an incredulous look before saying "So...I'm looking forward to meeting your dad Albus."

Albus breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh! Wait- what?"

"Your dad is coming to Hogwarts this week. It might even be tomorrow. To lecture in Defence Against the Dark Arts. You didn't know?"

"No. When did you find that out?" he asked. He racked his brains for a time when his father may have told him that he would be visiting Hogwarts, but couldn't think of any.

"It was on the bulletin board in my common room. You should go check yours before your next class. Got to go" she said, waving good-bye. Rose also waved goodbye to two of the three as they hurried off to their class.

Albus rushed off to the Slytherin common room, elated. "Hey- where are you going!" Scorpius called after him. Albus didn't answer, but instead turned the corner to the corridor with the stairs leading to the dungeons. He dipped past Peeves the Poltergeist, who was throwing dungbombs off the wall, and hurried down to the common room entrance.

"Emerald" he said to the blank stretch of wall, nearly out of breath. The stone door revealed itself in a flash of light, and Albus marched in and went straight to the bulletin board.

Dear Students,

During a scheduled Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson this week, Hogwarts is proud to welcome Harry "The Boy Who Lived" Potter, famed Auror and conqueror of Lord Voldemort, to our school. He will be giving a lecture to all classes, and will be happy to take questions associated with the dark arts, and the many practical defences required to defeat them. Please treat him with the utmost respect, and welcome him to our school.

Albus stared at the bulletin, a huge grin spread out across his face. He hadn't gotten to see his father since Christmas, and he had not had the opportunity to ask him about EP's. Now however, with the thoughts of Merlin's dungeon pushed out of his head, he had time to focus on what it was he had been waiting to hear an answer to for some time now.

The next day was easily one of the slowest that Albus had endured during his time at Hogwarts. To pass the time, he, Morrison, and Scorpius sat in the library pouring over books, not for their exams, but for any information that they could gather on Merlin.

"Ahh here's something" Scorpius said as they sat huddled around a stack of books. "Merlin, after deciding that his relics were not meant to be in the hands of inferior wizards, locked his possessions in the many dungeons that he had built in his lifetime. Everything from his hat to his spellbooks were sealed within these labyrinths, and given enchantments that were meant to withstand the test of time" he read.

Albus stared at him blankly. "Do you think that's what her parents are pressuring her into? Opening one of these dungeons and getting whatever he's locked in there? Seems like a pretty big task for an eleven year old girl..."

"Unless of course Mirra has some sort of advantage in opening the dungeon" Scorpius replied. "Maybe she knows a certain spell or something?"

"None of this makes any sense at all!" Morrison spat, slamming the book he was reading shut. "Let's just say that she could open this dungeon and find-whatever it is she plans on finding- where the heck would it *be*?"

Albus sat quietly, pondering. He had made a good point. His father had told him that the only secret part of the school was the Chamber of Secrets, and that it required someone in particular to open it. And the school had been searched prior to its opening, so it was extremely unlikely that someone missed a dungeon, particularly one that was so dangerous.

"Well I guess...it could be out in the Forest somewhere?" he said, though he knew that was just as unlikely. The Forest was huge and filled with dangerous creatures, and there was no way that someone could expect a child to enter it and search for something.

Morrison groaned. "Now we're just being stupid. Look, whatever Mirra is trying to do, it isn't happening. If it were, it would have happened by now."

"But it *did* happen" Scorpius reminded him. "Or at least its started to."

"How on Earth do you *start* to open a dungeon?" Albus asked.

"You're the one who thought of this whole thing!" they both reminded him.

"Oh..oh yeah" Albus said sheepishly.

Despite being no closer to discovering what it was Mirra was up to, let alone anything on her connection to the Dungeon of Merlin's Mist, Albus woke up the next morning ecstatic. He helped himself to kippers and toast for breakfast, then proceeded to rush through all of his work in Transfiguration and Charms, as if that would somehow make time elapse faster.

After scarfing down lunch, he rushed up the stairs to the first floor for his Defence Against the Dark Arts class, sure that if he got there early enough he would have time to chat with his dad first. He burst in through the door, and gasped "Dad!"

But his father was not in there. There was only one person in the classroom, and he was using his wand to trace letters across the blackboard. Tall, dark, and bald, he turned to Albus with a smile. "Hello, Albus" he said in a deep voice.

"King- Kingsley?" Albus managed to stammer back. "But where's my d-"

He was interrupted by the shuffling of students behind him. His classmates had now lined up behind him, most of them whispering enthusiastically. They had seen Kingsley in the doorway, and were now saying things like "Isn't that the Minister?" and "Wow, he's much taller in person".

"Come in, come in" Kingsley said while still writing on the board.

The class took their seats, many of them fighting for the front row as they still whispered about being in the presence of the Minister of Magic. Maybe it was because he was used to his presence, having once went to his house for the holidays even, or maybe it was because he had been expecting his father, but either way Albus was rather disappointed with the Minister's arrival. After a few moments of silence, someone in the back row raised their hand and asked the question that Albus was burning to ask.

"Excuse me, erm...Mr. Minister...sir...where's Mr. Potter?"

Kingsley turned around and smiled at the boy, who immediately seemed to shrink in his seat. "First," he started in his slow deep voice "you can feel free to call me Mr. Shackbolt, I daresay that being called Minister all of the time becomes quite tiresome. And Mr. Potter could not be here today, as he was placed on a very important mission in Bristol. He regrets not being in attendance, and especially regrets being forced to back out with next to no notice. Luckily, I wasn't quite as busy, and am happy to be here to teach you a practical lesson today."

The class looked around at each other nervously, exchanging glances of mingled anxiety and delight. They had been expecting a lesson, not to learn actual spells from the Minister of Magic himself, whom most of the class knew had been an Auror prior. Kingsley stepped aside from the board and let the class read what was on it.

Practical Defensive Magic. Shielding, taking cover, and stunning.

"Now" he said, clapping his hands together. "Does anybody have any questions before we begin? I believe we have more than an hour in this class, if anybody wishes to ask something or give their opinion before we start."

No one raised their hands. They all looked terrified at the idea of the Minister of Magic asking their opinion.

"No?" he asked. "Okay then, let's get started. A dark wizard fires a stunning spell at you, and you haven't much room. What do you do?"

The class continued to stare. Albus personally thought that this may have been Kingsley's first time teaching. Learning disarming was one thing, but bringing about a situation in which you're under attack from dark wizards didn't seem like a very good idea. They were all only eleven, maybe twelve. Albus doubted if any of them even knew what "stunning" even was.

Finally, after about a minute, Scorpius raised his hand. "Erm...you duck?" he said.

"Well...okay" Kingsley responded. "But let's focus a bit more on actual wandwork. Assume that you cannot possibly duck or dodge, you're far too confined. Does anyone know what spell you could use?"

Rose raised her hand immediately. It shot into the air so fast that many of the surrounding students almost fell out of their chairs. "*Protego*" she said matter of factly.

"Excellent" he said. "Now *Protego*-the shield charm-is generally thought to be a little advanced for wizards your age, but with a sufficient amount of practice, we should be able to make you good enough to block minor jinxes. Now why don't you all sort into pairs while we try this out?"

As Albus partnered himself with Morrison, he was forcibly reminded of what had happened the last time they were partnered to practice spells. He casted a disdainful look over at Charles Eckley, who was smirking next to his partner.

"Now, on three, I want one person to fire a spell- ne that isn't too dangerous-at your partner. The person defending will have to concentrate completely on defending themselves, pull back with their wand, and trust that their shield is powerful enough. Confidence is essential. If done correctly, you may even reflect the jinx back. Now on three. One..two...three!"

There was a cry of different spells throughout the room. "*Expelliarmus!*" Morrison yelled.

"*Protego!*" chorused Albus and other students. There was a loud "*Bang!*", a scream of terror, and a crash as someone flew into the wall. The class turned their heads to see who the unfortunate victim was. Albus' spell had not even registered; he was now embarrassingly picking up his disarmed wand from the ground. Next to him, however, Scorpius was standing, wand outstretched, peering over other people's shoulders.

Bartleby got back up from the floor and felt his back. "Ouch...dammit" he muttered. The class laughed. Scorpius had not only successfully blocked his spell, but had reflected it back perfectly, twice as strong, sending Bartleby flying.

"Very well done!" Kingsley shouted over the laughter. "And what is your name young man?"

Scorpius turned to him. "Scorpius" he said. "Scorpius Malfoy."

"Oh" Kingsley said, looking surprised. "Well, keep up the good work then Malfoy." He looked as though he hated his mouth for having said "Good work" and "Malfoy" in the same sentence.

Class progressed as one of the hardest classes that Albus had ever experienced. Despite trying as hard as he could, he only managed to create a shield once, and even then it flickered out before he was hit by Morrison's Jelly-Legs Jinx. In fact, other than Scorpius, no one, not even Rose, had managed to successfully block an oncoming spell.

Kingsley walked amongst them, giving tips and murmuring words of confidence. Eventually, after Bartleby had gotten sick from being thrown against the wall so much, Scorpius was told to patrol alongside him, helping his fellow students out.

"No" he heard Scorpius tell Rose nervously. "You can't push your wand forward, it's a defensive spell remember?"

He saw Rose throw him a furious look, her face red from concentrating so hard. Albus was sure that she was biting back a bitter remark. Mirra had her wand out and was preparing to fire a jinx at her.

"Okay" Scorpius said, grabbing Rose around the wrist. "I'm going to guide your hand. Your wrist is supposed to recoil, and the shield is supposed to go back with you" he told her.

She threw him another hateful glare before Mirra yelled "*Expelliarmus!*"

"*Protego!*" Rose yelled back as the spell came inches away from her. Scorpius pulled her wrist back and flung it vertically. The proper wand movements and incantation combined to form a small circular ring of energy at the tip of her wand, sending the disarming spell into the ceiling.

"Excellent!" Scorpius said, beaming. He quickly turned his head away however, as Rose threw him another furious look that clearly said *I didn't need your help*.

At the end of the hour and a half, the class packed up their books and bade farewell to Kingsley, all shaking his hand enthusiastically, thanking him. After three or four students had gotten his autograph, they set off from the classroom, leaving him to gather his things.

"Pretty good lesson" Scorpius said as they made their way down the staircase leading to the dungeons.

"Easy for you to say" Morrison said grumpily. He, like Albus, had not managed to create a single successful shield charm.

Albus didn't take part in the argument going on next to him, as Scorpius had made a rather egotistical remark about how easy the spell was. Instead, he was thinking about his father, and where he could be. Why was he always on special Auror assignments? He couldn't remember the last time his father had been called away to work so frequently. He had been looking forward to asking his dad about EP's, but was once again robbed of the chance. And it seemed as though it was only his father being called away. Kingsley could still visit the castle. And he had been an Auror too hadn't he...

Albus stopped dead in his tracks, Morrison bumping in to him. "Oww...why'd you stop?" he said, but Albus was already moving back up the staircase.

"Have to go talk to someone!" he called back to them. He ran down the corridor, hoping to catch the Minister before he left. Certainly, he would not be leaving right away, would he? He had more class to teach tomorrow, didn't he?"

"Kingsley!" he called out to the hulking figure ahead of him on the second floor.

The tall man turned around, and Albus breathed a sigh of relief. It was Kingsley.

"Oh, hello Albus. Did you have a question?" he asked. They continued walking down the corridor, and Albus had the feeling that Kingsley would be staying in an office on this floor, as he was walking very slowly to allow Albus to catch up with him.

"Well...yes, I did".

"Ask away" he said politely.

"Erm...Kingsley, do you know what EP's are?"

The Minister tripped over his cloak. "What?" he asked, sounding as though he was checking to see if he had heard correctly.

"EP's" Albus repeated.

"Where- where did you hear that term?"

"My dad mentioned it" Albus quickly lied.

Kingsley gave him a very calculated stare. "Did he really? That's...quite odd. We very rarely use it outside of the office. But I suppose that would be the only place you could have had heard it. And there's no point in keeping you curious."

Albus continued walking next to him, waiting patiently.

"EP is the term we at the ministry use to classify supporters of the dark arts. It stands for *Ever Present*."

Albus gave him a quizzical look. "Ever Present?"

"Well, we call them that because they are supporting, not a leader, but the dark arts themselves. An EP can be anyone that has followed any dark wizard with intent on supporting dark magic. Lord Voldemort...Grindelwald... Nevin the Tyrannic...dark wizards have existed throughout the ages. An EP is someone who may have openly supported them, even if they were not charged for it."

"And they've been gathering?" Albus asked.

Kingsley looked absolutely shocked at this statement. He clearly did not expect Albus to know this particular piece of information. "Well...yes. Known supporters of the dark arts have been seen meeting in various locations. They have been getting steadily closer to Hogwarts in fact...if you must know. You are very safe of course!" he added hastily.

Kingsley's deep, slow voice had suddenly turned into a rather nervous one. He clearly regretted ever telling Albus anything.

"But...if they're just supporters, then we have nothing to fear right? I mean, they don't have a leader right?" he asked the Minister.

"Well that's the problem isn't it? There has been very little dark activity for twenty years now. Twenty years of absolute peace. So when known dark wizards are gathering...it's certainly worth an investigation isn't it? We think-that is to say, your father, me, and a small group of my handpicked Aurors-that they may be searching for a leader. An election of sorts."

"So that's why my dad is never around anymore? He's in charge of finding out who they're trying to get as a leader, and to stop them before they do?"

"Exactly" Kingsley said. "I'm glad that you're keeping up. But I believe that you have nothing to worry about, Albus. Every time a threat emerges, we are always caught by surprise. Now however, with your father in charge, we have time to stop that threat before it can even form. It's very likely that the EP's are simply gathering to discuss old times...maybe even share stories. We have no concrete proof of any illicit activity. Our primary concern is why they seem to be moving around so much. We've heard of their gatherings taking place in several different areas."

"Maybe they're just looking for more of them" Albus suggested. "Seeing who else may be a supporter."

"That's certainly possible. And hardly a threat. Most problems only occur when there is someone to rally behind. We simply think it best to investigate further. I'm sorry that this is detracting from your time with your father. I can only assume that you were looking forward to seeing him today."

"Yeah...I was" Albus said.

"Well this should all be over soon. I would not lie to you Albus. I advise you to simply put the thought from your head."

"Okay Kingsley" he said, though he had the strange feeling that the Minister knew that he was going to be thinking about it until he learned more. "Well I might see you around the castle, then. Good-bye." He turned and walked in the opposite direction, down the corridor that led back to the dungeons, looking back only to see Kingsley continue forward, a bit faster, as if he was hoping he could avoid another awkward conversation.

Albus rushed back to the Slytherin common room, mulling over what he had just heard. It certainly explained why his father wasn't here today...and why he was so busy. He thought of what Headmaster Ares had said months ago, that they weren't a threat. Was he right? Was his father, and the Minister himself, simply paranoid?

"Emerald" he said to the stone wall. The door revealed itself and Albus slid in, finding Morrison and Scorpius immediately. They were huddled over one of the tables deep in discussion. They looked worried.

"Hey- what's going on?" Albus said as he walked up to them.

They exchanged glances. "Well" Scorpius started. "We met up with Mirra on our way to the bathroom...and she tripped over her robes."

"Okay...well...is she hurt?" Albus replied, unsure of why they were so nervous.

"Well, ya' see, when she fell...we saw something."

Albus stared at him blankly. He didn't see what the big deal was, and he wanted to tell them about what Kingsley had told him. "So, what did you see?" he asked.

Morrison spoke up next. "Well, we got to see the gold chain she always wears... you know the one?"

"Yeah...so?"

"It's not just a chain mate" Scorpius said grimly. "There's a bright silver key on the end of it."

Chapter 11: The Dungeon of Merlin's Mist

Albus found himself living a double life of sorts over the next several weeks, the first of which consisted of long stretches of time in the library with Morrison, Scorpius, Mirra, and Rose, all of whom were studying for their now fast approaching exams.

Though three of them could say that they were well prepared, both Albus and Morrison were struggling with Transfiguration. Scorpius, who seemingly succeeded at everything he attempted, had started tutoring them both, with good results for the most part. While Rose and Mirra were quizzing each other on magic that Albus was almost positive wouldn't be used until at least his third year, Scorpius was spending more time helping him than he was himself.

At first, Albus had felt bad about this. If Scorpius were to do badly on his exams, Albus and Morrison would take part of the blame. Scorpius assured them, however, that he had done more than enough studying for the first half of the school year, and took pride in watching them improve.

Despite feeling slightly guilty, he was happy to note that his group of friends seemed to get more friendly and comfortable with each other in the classes they shared; their increased studying no doubt the reason. They frequently partnered together, and had begun sharing personal stories about their families as well. And even during one particular Potions lesson, Scorpius had sneezed, resulting in a barely inaudible, but certainly real, "Bless you" from Rose.

The second part of this double life seemed to spit on his first and stomp it into the ground. This too involved spending time in the library, but it was generally done in the later hours of the night, or during lunch or dinner when they were less likely to be disturbed.

Ever since Albus had heard of the key that Mirra was carrying around, he had taken to pouring over thick leather bound books about Merlin with Scorpius and Morrison. They had decided that Mirra needed three things to do whatever it is she planned on doing; a motive, the location of the dungeon, and a way to get in.

She certainly had the motive, angry letters from her parents had proved that. And she had a way to get in, one which she constantly kept around her neck. The only problem now was the location of the dungeon itself. Albus was positive that Mirra did not know it. If she did, she certainly would have done whatever it was she was planning on doing by now. And Albus knew that if he could discover its location first, he may very well be able to prevent her from doing it.

Scorpius was the first to note that this raised many more questions than it did answers. If she truly did not know the location, than how was the mist within it already seeping to ground level? The centaurs knew, but Albus could not possibly hope for another encounter with Firenze, and was stuck reading the most useless of books, everything from *Magical Locations of Myth to Places That Are There, Whether You Know It Or Not*.

The rest of the school, however, was far more interested in the upcoming Quidditch Final. Hufflepuff had very narrowly defeated Ravenclaw, but their scores were so low that Slytherin still had the second most points, putting them against their arch rivals in the finals.

"Now, I don't want you to go and be *too disappointed* when your team gets blown out by mine" Mirra joked to Albus during Herbology.

"Yeah well don't count on it. I saw Atticus practicing yesterday, and Gryffindor won't even *touch* the Quaffle as long as he's got it" Albus replied, which was very true. He had been watching the Slytherins practice and had to admit that they were much better than they had been during their previous game against Gryffindor.

And yet of all the people who were focused on the upcoming game, none seemed more confident in its result than James. Despite sitting farthest away from him in the Great Hall, sleeping in the dormitory farthest from his, and having no classes with him, Albus was still hearing more of James bragging than anyone else. It was almost as if he knew where Albus was at all times, and would rush to meet him there and pester him.

"Now, I'm not trying to be cocky or anything-really-but I could *probably* score half of our goals with one hand behind my back. Blindfolded. With no Broomstick" he jeered at Albus as he was leaving the boys bathroom.

"I can't wait for you to eat your words" he smiled back.

"I'll tell you what, every goal I score, I'll fly an extra victory lap around the pitch, just for my little brother."

"Don't expect too many victory laps, then."

With the Quidditch Final taking place on the weekend, Albus found that even his teachers-especially Darvy and Neville-seemed to grow less interested in their classes and more interested in making sure that their team won.

"Okay" Darvy started during their last potions lesson before the Final. "Is anybody here on their house team?"

There was a murmur of "no's". Bartleby raised his hand. "Well, my sister plays-"

"Are you your sister?" Professor Darvy cut him off.

"Erm...no, but -"

"Then I don't care!" he spat. "Slytherin hasn't won the Quidditch cup in ten years. I haven't even been teaching here that long. *Ten*. Slytherins, no homework tonight. Your job is to help those on your house team relax, get them whatever they ask for, and make sure that they are comfortable."

"But what about us Gryffindors!" Albus heard Eckley say from behind him.

"You can write a foot of parchment on how potion making relates to Quidditch" Darvy said with a smile.

The excitement on the Sunday morning of the game was palpable. Albus sat next to Scorpius and Morrison eating strips of bacon while trying, and probably failing, to convince Atticus that they had their full confidences in him.

"I know you'll win" Albus told him as he pushed a plate of toast across the table. "Your team's been getting better all year, Gryffindor's has stayed the same."

He muttered something that sounded like "thanks" and picked up a piece of buttered toast. He took a miniscule bite, held his hand to his mouth as if he was forcing back vomit, and left in a hurry.

Scorpius frowned and turned to Albus. "Let's just hope he doesn't do that on the field. Want to dip in the library and look for more info on Merlin before the game starts?"

Albus shrugged. "There's no point. We're not going to find what we're looking for. We don't even know *what* we're looking for."

"Well I'm sure that there's at least one book in this school that has the information that we need. It's probably somewhere no one would ever look." Scorpius's face suddenly froze. "That's it" he muttered under his breath.

"What's it?" Albus asked him. But the words had barely left his mouth before Scorpius got up from his seat and took off without looking back.

Albus and his fellow Slytherins, with the exception of Scorpius, trotted down to the Quidditch pitch at noon, all of them muttering anxiously. He took his usual seat in the middle of the stands next to Morrison, feeling very odd as he did so. Where had Scorpius gone? It was not like him to miss a Quidditch game...

He was broken out of his train of thought by thunderous applause from three corners of the pitch. The Gryffindor team had made its way out onto the playing field and was circling around in the air and greeting the audience as they did so. He could see Mirra and Rose clapping across from them.

Now it was Slytherin's turn to enter the pitch. As Albus had grown accustomed to by now, the loud clapping from beside him was easily smothered out by the "boos" of the rest of the school. He could see Atticus on the field, glancing around nervously as Mr. Wood flew towards both of the teams.

"Hey, where's Scorpius?" Morrison asked him.

"Huh?"

"Scorpius? Have you see him?"

"Oh right...no I haven't. I was just wondering the same thing"

Their conversation ended abruptly at the sound of Wood's whistle. Within seconds, both of the teams had taken to the skies.

It was easily the most brutal match of the year. The Beaters were swatting at the Bludgers so ferociously that Albus thought that they might crack, and indeed, several bones were broken in the opening minutes of match. The Chasers were colliding with each other in an attempt to slow their opposition down, and the Seekers were trapped in the middle of it all, circling the pitch for signs of a tiny golden glimmer.

To make matters worse, it was now pouring worse than it had been during the first game of the season. Albus had no idea how the players could see clearly through the rain and lightning, but they seemed to be doing a good job for the most part. He couldn't hear the commentary due to the rain (which he was thankful for) but he could here which part of the crowd was clapping, and could tell that it was a very close score.

He finally turned to Morrison after ten minutes. "Any idea what the score is?" he asked him.

"Ninety to seventy, Gryffindor. Your brother has six of their goals."

Albus groaned. If James ended up giving a spectacular performance in addition to a Gryffindor victory, he would never hear the end of it.

The rain stopped briefly, allowing the commentator to confirm the score Morrison had given him.

"And Finnigan gets knocked off of his broom by Golgomoth! Quaffle drops to Watson-who passes to Sanders- Sanders ducks under that Bludger-and he...scores! And a penalty as well! Golgomoth got clobbered by that Beater's bat. Blimey, that was hardly his fault though, he should have looked where he was going..."

Atticus took a penalty shot for Slytherin, scoring and receiving many "boos" for doing so.

"And it's all tied up now!" the commentator's voice rang out. "Sanders makes a penalty shot that was rather *unusually* straight...now I'm not saying it was cheating but it most certainly didn't look very fair...and what's this! Wiley has seen the Snitch!"

There was no mistaking it-Sheldon had indeed went into a spectacular dive directly in the middle of the pitch. And yet, at the same time, Hawthin, the Gryffindor Seeker, was speeding towards it from the left, completely oblivious to Sheldon gaining speed directly above him.

Albus knew what was going to happen the second before it did. Sheldon had went headfirst directly into Hawthain's back - there was a sickening crash as both players collided in mid-air. They both fell to the ground from fifty feet up, and there was a sudden sharp intake of breath from everyone in the crowd.

Both players had fallen off of their brooms and were now rolling along the pitch. The Snitch was not hovering above them, someone had definitely caught it. But before it could be determined who had won, Werth, a Gryffindor Beater, had sent a Bludger directly to the ground, hoping to at least separate the Snitch from Wiley if had he caught it.

To protect his Seeker, Albus saw Atticus bolt towards the now motionless pair on the ground and take the Bludger for him-right in the face. There was another sharp intake of breath as a Slytherin Beater came up directly behind Werth and smacked him across the back of the head with his bat, sending him crashing down to the pitch alongside the Seekers and Atticus.

The scene played out before Albus as though it were soundless; he was only focused on the mayhem on the field. Both teams had evidently suspected each other of foul play, and their fans were doing something about it. All fourteen players on the field were now involved in a fist fight down on the pitch, and the spectators from Gryffindor and Slytherin had climbed down the stands to support their players.

"Yes! Yes! Go Gryffindor!" he heard the commentator say from what sounded like very far away. There was a large "BANG!" and a flash of purple light from the crowd below-someone had obviously came to their senses and pulled out their wand.

He saw Professors Bellinger and Handit run out on to the field brandishing their wands, yelling at the group of students to stop. Mr. Wood was standing with his mouth wide open in the corner of the pitch, apparently too appalled to do so much as move.

Despite the teacher's interference, the fight had not stopped. He could see James in the center of the crowd, firing red jinxes wildly as many students, some even seventh years, fell to the floor unconscious. Mirra and Rose were not in the crowd, though he noticed that there were plenty of other first years joining in. Even Bartleby had ran down to join the fray, but he too was laying on the ground unmoving, no doubt from a random stunning spell.

The Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs in the stands had not moved at all, they were merely cheering, egging the fighters on. There was now no less than sixty students at the center of the pitch, dueling with both fists and wands as more teachers joined the pitch in an attempt to stop the rumble without harming the participants.

Albus looked around wildly and realized, to his horror, that he was one of only four or five who had stayed in the stands, Morrison included. The Gryffindor stands were completely empty; all of them had now entered the fray.

The rumble continued for several more minutes before he saw Headmaster Ares run down to the field. He had apparently not been watching the game, and was only receiving the message of the fighting now. He dashed to the center of the crowd, where most of the fighting was going on, and the next thing that Albus knew there was a flash of bright light, several more "BANGS!" and a cloud of black smoke.

When the smoke had cleared, Albus could clearly see all of the students-and even some teachers who must have been accidently hit-tied up in thick black ropes, sitting down and struggling against the binds. It was to no avail however. Despite some of them still having wands, none of the students-or teachers for that matter-could escape their imprisonment.

Headmaster Ares pointed his wand at his throat and muttered something. Seconds later, his loud voice echoed throughout the pitch.

"Despicable!" he spat. It was not his usual calm bored voice, but a very irritated and angry one, closely resembling the voice he had used when Albus was sent to his office. "Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, return to your dormitories at once!"

His voice was so loud that many of the students nearest to him had screamed. He ignored them and continued. "And any Slytherins or Gryffindors still in the stands, you return as well!"

Albus and the small group of Slytherins in the stands descended down to ground level and left for the Great Hall. He turned to look at the students who were tied up-the teachers were now free of their binds. He could see James struggling against his ropes, in between Bartleby and Charles Eckley.

Just as he was turning around to leave the pitch, he heard a menacing voice spit out, "Didn't even help your housemates out did you!"

Albus turned around abruptly and saw that it had been Eckley who had said it. "I knew it! Don't deny it now, you coward!"

Albus stared at him, lost for words. He was saved the embarrassment of having nothing to retaliate with by the Headmaster, who had pointed his wand at the crowd and shouted "*Silencio Maximus!*"

The group of struggling students instantly fell silent, though many of their mouths, including Eckley's, were still moving.

"Back to you dormitories!" Headmaster Ares spat at Albus and the other Slytherins, before turning back to the tied up students with malice etched on his face.

Albus and Morrison practically ran down the stairs leading to the dungeons, the other Slytherins following after them. "Phineas!" Morrison said to the blank wall.

The wall opened up and Albus and the others burst into the room. The other students were chatting about what had happened, but Albus didn't feel much like talking. What he had both seen and heard had sickened him.

"I'll be right back" he heard Morrison say. "Got to go send a letter my mom and tell her about this!" He sounded almost excited about it. He ran up to his dormitory, while the other Slytherins all went to their own, leaving Albus quite alone.

What was happening to the students who had been involved in the fight? Had Headmaster Ares lost control? Had the fight resumed? He thought of what the Headmaster had said. *Despicable*. Albus had to agree with him there. He had never known any of his fellow housemates to lose control like that. Was there really *that much* bad blood between the two houses? And he, Albus, had done nothing but stand there and watch...

He didn't know how long he sat there staring at the fireplace, but the next thing he knew the Common Room door had burst open, with a very happy looking Scorpius running up to him. He was holding an extremely large, black book.

"You're not going to believe what I found!" he exclaimed. But the excited look on his face faltered when he saw the sad look on his friend's. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"You mean you didn't hear?"

"Hear what? I've been in the Room of Requirement. Why, did Gryffindor win?"

"I don't know" he replied truthfully. As far as he could tell, the victor had not been decided yet.

Scorpius tilted his head to the side in confusion. "Albus a- a game of Quidditch has to end, there's no ties. First team to catch the Sn-"

"I know how it's played!" Albus spat out, and though he wasn't quite sure why, he was suddenly very mad at Scorpius. "There was this huge fight out on the pitch. Everyone got involved, from both houses. The Headmaster had to come out and separate it."

Scorpius' jaw dropped. "*I missed it?*" he said after a moment.

Albus frowned at him. He wished that he had been lucky enough to not witness it. Why Scorpius was disappointed, he did not understand.

"Well wait- he already let you off?"

"Huh?"

"Well you're here!"

Albus felt as though he'd swallowed his heart. Scorpius thought that he had been part of the fight.

"Scorpius, we-me and Morrison-we didn't take part in the fight."

"Why not?"

Albus gave him the most pitiful look he could produce. "I chickened out" he said. All three words seemed to have beaten him over the head as he had said them. He was suddenly dizzy.

"Oh."

Scorpius pretended like it was no big deal, but Albus knew the truth. Had *he* been at the game, he would have been the first to jump in. "Well...maybe I'll show you this later" he said as went to stuff the black book in his bag.

"No!" Albus yelled. "Show me what it is! Is it about the Dungeon?"

"Well...sort of. But maybe I should wait a while to show you. You might not like it" he said cautiously.

"No, I want to see it" Albus replied, holding out his hand to take the book. "Where did you find it?"

"Room of Requirement" Scorpius muttered as he handed the book over. "It took me ages to find it though. You have to be real specific with what you want in that room. I actually had to say *I need to find a book with information about the Dungeon of Merlin's Mist*. And even then, the place had been mentioned a few times, so it was hard finding the exact book."

Albus flipped through the pages of the enormous book. He saw that it was entitled *List of Potential Wizarding Epidemics*. After skimming through many pages, he came to a page halfway through the book that was headed, in big black letters,

Merlin's Mist

Despite many potential wizarding epidemics having backup plans or potential cures, some are simply best to be prevented at all costs. One of the of the biggest examples of said epidemic is that of Merlin's Mist.

The exact creation of the mist is unknown (indeed, some claim it was merely an empty threat) but most sources have narrowed its creation down to one of two possibilities. The first is that Merlin created the powerful Mist himself, as means of a safeguard for his many treasures. Others say that it is his very essence; that he refused to succumb to death and simply transformed himself into a whirl of magical energy. Either way, Merlin was quite keen on mentioning it in his last days.

Merlin claimed that the Mist would have many abilities. Like himself, it would be drawn to nature, and nature would be drawn to it, resulting in what he deemed would be "acts of

unprecedented magic". The Mist itself is quite deadly to humans, however. He claimed that simply inhaling the Mist could put one in a very deep sleep, and if left untreated, they could die within hours. He also claimed that the Mist was meant to both guard and to destroy-and that all of those who were "unworthy" would not be given the luxury of a deep sleep, but only of near instant death if they were to inhale the Mist.

"Unworthy?" Albus asked.

"It means muggles" Scorpius told him.

"Why would muggles be unworthy of searching for his treasures?"

Scorpius frowned at him. "Mate, blood purity's been around for a while. Back then anyone who wasn't a wizard was considered unworthy. By wizarding standards, that is. I'm willing to bet that this Merlin bloke planned it like that so someone would *want* to release it. To kill all of the muggles."

Albus stared at him for a second, pondering how he could possibly have figured that out, but soon resumed reading.

The location of the Mist is the most mysterious of all. It is almost incontrovertible that the Mist was placed within a dungeon, as dungeons are where he kept his treasures. Unfortunately, Merlin was known to have innumerable priceless artifacts, and created hundreds of hidden dungeons to conceal them. The careful concealment of the Mist is considered to be a strong sign of Merlin's genius. If one was to search for the artifact hidden (which many people believe may have been his very own staff) they would almost definitely have to both encounter and release the deadly mist - killing both the seeker and many others who would be considered "unworthy" by Merlin's standards.

Do to its near impossible to discover location, as well as its ability to affect those closest to it immediately and kill millions if it were to reach the air, Merlin's Mist is considered one of the most lethal potential epidemics in the world, despite muggles having no clue of its existence.

"It ends there" Scorpius told him. "Next page is on *Mutating Magic Syndrome*."

Albus looked up from the book, completely at a loss for words. Is this what Mirra was planning? The destruction of the entire muggle world? Was she really planning on releasing this terrible Mist into the air? And for what? Whatever useless artifact was within it?

He sank into the chair by the fire, a look of utter disgust on his face. Scorpius closed the book and muttered something that sounded like "Told you not to read it" before rushing upstairs to the dormitory. But Albus couldn't move. Today had been one of the worst days of his life. He was a coward. And Mirra...Mirra was a potential mass murderer.

Chapter 12: The Vanishing Step

Albus hated Hogwarts. Or at least he did now, anyway. The only talk throughout the entire school was of the "Battle of Broomsticks", a title that Albus absolutely despised, not only because of how incredibly cheesy it was, but because very little fighting had actually taken place on broomsticks.

Both Gryffindor and Slytherin had lost three hundred points as a result of the riot, practically securing first and second place for Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, regardless of the order. What's more, as both Wiley and Hawkins had claimed to have caught the Snitch first, it was the first time in recorded Hogwarts history that a game of Quidditch was considered to be a draw. The Snitch had been shattered to pieces during the war on the field, and as such, not even its flesh memory would have been able to decide who had been the first to catch it.

And while many students excitedly recounted the events that had transpired, whether it be by sending letters home or discussing it amongst themselves, Albus felt absolutely repulsed, and wished nothing more than to be able to forget it.

I knew it! Don't deny it now, you coward!

Those were the words that had plagued Albus for several nights in a row now. It was not who had said it—he honestly didn't give a damn what Charles Eckley thought of him. It was that he knew that he had been right. Several students had been seriously injured, but he, Albus, was not one of them. He had stood there, motionless, watching the mayhem on the field.

He could not even claim that he was frozen with shock, or that he had been smart enough to avoid getting into trouble. He had been absolutely terrified. He didn't want to be in danger. He had left his friends to fight without him, just as the Slytherins had done to their fellow schoolmates during the Battle of Hogwarts.

It was to a lesser extent of course, but that didn't make it any less shameful. He had vaguely wondered from time to time if the Sorting Hat had placed him correctly, and now saw that it most certainly had. He thought bitterly of the tapestry of the hooked nose man in the common room. *A Slytherin, and a hero.* Well here he was. A Slytherin, and a coward.

"Al, are you okay?" Morrison asked during breakfast on a particularly bad morning. Albus had had a terrible nightmare of himself flying around the Quidditch Pitch while his brother yelled his name, not in admiration, but in anger.

"Yes" he replied dryly, looking down at his empty plate.

"You want some toast?"

"No."

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yes."

"How bout a bagel with cre-"

"No."

He pushed his plate away from him in an attempt to make Morrison realize that he was not hungry, but no sooner had he given it a gentle nudge when Scorpius grabbed it and pulled it back, throwing large pieces of bacon onto it as he did so.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself" he said coldly. "Eat. Starvation is hardly a cure for depression. Especially when you're depressed for a stupid reason."

Albus threw him a furious look as he stuffed a strip of delicious bacon down his throat. He continued to throw contemptuous looks all throughout breakfast, and didn't break his concentration once until he heard Morrison speak up again.

"Cheer up mate. Double Herbology this morning. You'll get to talk to Rose and Mirra."

Albus almost threw up. He had momentarily forgotten about what else had been bothering him, but at the sound of Mirra's name he felt his stomach churn.

How do you confront someone about something that you're not supposed to know? The very few times that he had interacted with Mirra since the day he read about Merlin's Mist had brought nothing more than passing "hellos". Even in the classes that they had together, he barely talked to her. He supposed that he was being rather unfair about his near silence towards her, but couldn't possibly work up the courage to confront her about what he knew. He played out the scene in his head and cringed as he did so.

"Hi Mirra" he would say nonchalantly.

"Oh hi Albus! Did you finish your Defence Against the Dark Arts essay?" she would say.

"No, I didn't. I was too busy reading something else."

"Oh really? I didn't know reading was a hobby of yours! Was it a school book?"

"No, it was Rose's diary, and now I know that your parents are pressuring you into doing something. Then I searched tirelessly for what it could be, and discovered that you plan on releasing a deadly mist into the air, sure to kill thousands, all so that you can get something that is probably of very little importance."

And then she would stare at him blankly.

"Are you ready to go? We're going to be late" Scorpius said loudly, knocking him out of his dream conversation.

"Huh?"

"Are you ready for Herbology!" he snapped.

"Oh...oh right." He wolfed down the rest of his bacon and slung his bag over his back while listening to Scorpius mutter under his breath about "Day dreaming."

They crossed the grounds down to the greenhouses, all the while enjoying the pleasant breeze that the outdoors gave them. It had rained the night before, leaving a small chill in the air, and the sun was completely hidden by the clouds above. They walked through the glass doors to Greenhouse Two once more, and found Neville watering some extremely ugly plants that appeared to be emitting a very low rumbling sound, as if they were showing their thanks.

"Gather 'round, gather 'round" Neville called out calmly as the students took their usual places in front of twenty small circular tables. "As you know, your exams are coming up in just two weeks."

Almost the entire class groaned. Albus knew that they, like him, were dreading taking exams. It had only occurred to Albus that with just two weeks left before exams, the school year was soon to be over. He wasn't even sure if he wanted to return next year. The past few days had been so horrid, he doubted very much if he would ever resume being as cheerful as he was when he had returned from the holidays.

"Now there's no point in groaning about it" Neville continued. "I trust that everyone here will do fine. You've all proven to me what excellent Herbologists you can be, and there's no doubt in my mind that you will do fine in your other classes as well. But as I still need to prepare you for your exams, we will be working on a new plant. The Snatchelsteal!" he exclaimed excitedly, dragging one of the plants that he had been watering towards him.

They were even uglier than the Alert Plants, charcoal black with thick leaves, all of which seemed to have a tiny white eye in the center. Also, to Albus' very great horror, each of the thick leaves seemed to open up slightly, rather like a mouth. From within each leaf, he could see what looked like a milky white tongue.

"Now they are called Snatchelsteals" he started again, as half of the class backed away, repulsed, "because they tend to use their tongues to try and steal the possessions of their caretakers."

As if on cue, the topmost leave on the plant he had pulled forward shot out a long, thin, white tongue, which reached for the quill on one of the student's tables. The student, a girl from Gryffindor, gave a loud shriek and snatched at her quill to protect it. She needn't have done so

however, as Neville, almost as if he had been expecting it, caught the tongue in his fist and carefully placed it back into the Snatchelsteal's mouth.

"Partner up and begin feeding and watering them. They will show their recognition by the noises they make. And be careful. They have a lot of mouths. You may want to stash your valuables away now."

The class did as they were told, putting away their watches and necklaces. Albus could see Mirra stashing the gold chain around her neck tightly into her robes. Albus frowned. He was hoping that one of the plants might swallow her key. Rose placed the books that she had out on her table back into her bag and motioned towards Albus to come join her and Mirra in their group.

Morrison grabbed his bag and began walking towards the pair of Gryffindor girls, but Albus grabbed him by the scruff of his robes and pulled him back. "I don't want to work with them" he muttered under his breath.

Morrison gave a loud sigh and put his bag back down. He threw an apologetic look at Rose as Albus pulled him and Scorpius to a table in the back of the greenhouse-the one farthest from where Mirra and Rose were working.

"You're being a real prat, you know that?" Scorpius said as he poured water over the Snatchelsteal they were working on.

"Huh?" Albus had not been listening, he was watching Mirra water her plant as well, one hand still on the gold chain around her neck.

"I said you're being a real prat! Look, whatever she is planning she hasn't done yet, and she's not going to! There's like a month of school left! She's hit a roadblock, she can't get in there. And there's nothing you could do about it if you wanted to, you don't even know where the bloody thing is!" he snapped.

Albus tried throwing him another furious look, but couldn't bring himself to do it. He knew that Scorpius was right. He cast another glance over at Mirra, and she caught his eye and gave him a slight smile. He did not return it. By the time class was over, he had failed to return more than five of her smiles, and she was beginning to look quite upset.

"Look, if it's really bothering you *that much*, then just go talk to her about it!" Scorpius told him as they walked up the lawn to the castle for lunch.

"I can't do that, she'll know I read Rose's diary, and she'll know that I've been looking stuff up behind her back!"

"But Scorpius has a good point though" Morrison said.

Albus gave him a look of fury that was oddly reminiscent of the one that he had given Scorpius at lunch.

"Not you too!" he groaned.

"Yeah, me too!" Morrison spat back. "You've been moping all this time about something ridiculous, and you're treating your friends like crap too."

"Whatever. I don't need this" Albus fought back as he stormed ahead of them to the castle. Instead of entering the Great Hall for lunch however, he entered the cold and dark dungeons, the icy chill of the windless atmosphere doing nothing to alter his mood. He skulked to his dormitory and seconds later found himself spread eagle on his bed, staring at the ceiling.

How could so much have happened in so little time? He remembered the last time that he had been so upset. It was the day that he had yelled at Rose. But a series of very fortunate events had taken place in both the minutes and weeks following. With a slight sinking feeling in his stomach, he realized that he had befriended Mirra shortly afterwards. And almost immediately after that, he became friends with Rose again! And not too long after...he had befriended Scorpius.

Something clicked in his brain so fast that he actually heard it. It was his friends who made him happy, and he was treating them like garbage. He stood up, determined. He was going to go apologize to his friends, especially Mirra.

He hurried out of his common room and ran up the stairs that led him back to the Great Hall. He earned himself many looks as he burst in through the doors and ran towards the Gryffindor table, including a loud chorus of "boos" that made realize that he, like his brother so many months prior, was receiving a very unenthusiastic greeting from his rival house.

"Hey, hey, shut up that's my brother!" he heard James call out from the end of the table. Most of the noise subsided, but Albus could still hear a few taunts as he skidded to a halt near Rose.

"Rose" he started quickly. She had a very thick brown book propped up against her empty plate. She did not look at him when he said her name.

"Rose, do you know where Mirra is?" he asked as he scanned the table looking for her.

She turned a page in her book and began reading. She appeared to have not heard him.

"Rose!" he practically yelled.

She gave an extremely large sigh, put her book down, and gave him a cold stare. "Are you going to apologize to her for being a complete prat these last few days?"

"Yeah I- wait what? Yeah, yeah I am" he said hastily.

She picked her book back up, rolled her eyes, and said "She told me that she was going to the owlery, she had a letter to send."

"Thanks" he said, before turning on his heel and running out of the Great Hall. Right as he was leaving he heard Scorpius call out "Are you done being an idiot!" loud enough for everyone to hear him.

He ran up the stairs, trying to remember where the owlery was. It had to be near the top. He had only sent one letter this entire year, and that was a long time ago. Was it the west tower? He didn't have to search much further however. He turned right and went up a marble staircase, and was met with a sight that he was sure was fate's way of giving him a break.

Mirra was running down the stairs holding a thin piece of parchment in her hand. She had evidently not sent her letter, regardless of whatever its contents were.

"Albus, why aren't you at lunch?" she asked him as she walked down the steps towards him.

He stood still on the spot, unsure of what to say, but with a sinking feeling realized what staircase they were standing on. He stared at the steps that Mirra was walking down. "Mirra wait!" he gasped.

But she was not focusing on the stairs, she was too curious as to why he had come to see her. The step that she was right about to step on disappeared beneath her-this was the staircase that held a vanishing step. Her foot crashed down where the step was supposed to be, but instead of getting stuck, she tripped over it. She gave a scream of terror as she did a flip in mid-air from the momentum of running to meet him.

Albus felt a sharp pain in the right side of his face as her foot connected with his ear. There was a sickening thud as he fell back onto the floor, Mirra on top of him as they rolled down two flights of stairs. He could feel a searing pain in his leg when the tumbling had stopped. He looked to his side and saw Mirra laying next to him, groaning in pain.

He made an attempt to stand up and barely succeeded. Leaning against the railing of the stairs, he looked down at the sight before him. Mirra was laying face down on the ground, trying to get up, but her knees were shaky. A few feet away from her was the piece of parchment that was in her hand. She could not see it.

Now was his time to choose. He could help her up, but his curiosity was coming very close to getting the better of him. Was she sending a letter to her parents? About the Dungeon of Merlin's Mist, perhaps? He knew that he had only a second to pick.

As surreptitiously as possible, he inched himself towards the letter and scooped it up. Turning it over, he read:

Stop hounding me! I have a plan. It'll be open in June.

- M

Completely forgetting that Mirra was just feet away, he stared at the paper in shock. Then a voice from what seemed like very far away came to him.

"I'll have my letter back, *thank you*."

The letter was snatched out of his hand by a furious looking Mirra. Her hair was messy from the fall, and her eyes absolutely livid, doing nothing to make her look any more welcoming.

"So that's why you came after me. To read a stupid letter. What's it to you anyway?" she asked scathingly.

Albus ignored her question. "What will be open?" he asked firmly. The conversation was not going as he had planned, but he had already started it and there was no point in ending it when he might get at least *some* information from it.

"Nothing that concerns you" she said. Her voice had not changed; it was just as angry as it had been. "I don't go off reading your mail. Maybe you should stay out of my business. I should have sent this stupid thing when I was up there, but I came back to add something, and there you are. Of course. Spying on me?"

"No!" Albus said defiantly. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"I see the hateful looks you throw at me. And I saw you staring at my necklace in Herbology too. I don't know what you think you know about me, but whatever it is, keep it to yourself! Honestly Albus, not everything is a mystery to solve, you can stop trying to be your dad!"

"I thought you didn't know who my dad was!" he shot back sarcastically, red in the face.

"Well I know that you're *not him*, no matter how much you want to be!"

Albus froze to let her words sink in. They were now stinging his eardrums as he played them over in his head. He opened his mouth to speak, but couldn't formulate words. Instead, a low moan came from his mouth.

"Yeah, that's right" Mirra said, still in her furious tone. "Don't answer back, I knew that you would be too *cowardly* to."

And with that, she turned and stormed off in the opposite direction, not bothering to look back at the look of anguish on Albus' face.

When Albus found himself banging his head on his pillow hours later, he let the events that had transpired that day sink in. He had wanted to simply apologize to her. He knew that he had been absolutely wrong in the way that he had treated her, and he had been willing to fix it. Mirra was one of his first friends at Hogwarts. But not anymore. And now, he didn't care what she was up

to. He didn't care about the Dungeon of Merlin's Mist, or whatever it was her parents were making her do. The epiphany that had come to him earlier had seemingly crashed down upon him, leaving him in an even worse state than he had been before. He didn't even hear the dormitory door open or close.

"You ok?"

Albus looked up. It was Morrison. He shook his head.

"You missed History of Magic" Morrison told him quietly.

"I know."

"So...what happened?"

Albus took a deep breath. He didn't want to talk about it. And yet, Morrison had done nothing wrong. He wouldn't side with Mirra like Rose, and he wouldn't be sarcastic about it like Scorpius would. He could tell Morrison.

"I ran into Mirra on my way to the owlery. She fell down the stairs, bumped into me, we both went crashing down. When I got up I read the letter she had. Then we got into an argument. She accused me of trying to be like my dad, and said that she knew I was too cowardly to talk back to her."

He only now noticed his voice. It was dry and expressionless, completely flat, almost bored. It was almost identical to the Headmasters.

"You're not a coward mate" Morrison said soothingly. "You probably just didn't want it to go further. And I don't know much about your dad, but you're you, Albus, no one else. And it's not your fault she's up to something. You were just looking out for her. What did the note say, by the way?"

Albus searched his head for what the note had said. He knew it was short, but he couldn't get the words exactly right. "I think that is said something about something being opened in June."

"The Dungeon?"

Albus shrugged. "If it is, I don't care. She probably won't succeed in whatever it is she's trying to do anyway."

"But *she* could be in danger!"

Albus gave another shrug. "Well I'm too cowardly to do something about it, aren't I?" he said smartly.

Morrison opened his mouth to say something, but seemed to decide against it. Instead, he sat quietly for a few moments before saying, "You want to go to dinner?"

Albus gave yet another shrug. "Yeah I guess."

He stood up and walked with Morrison out of the Slytherin common room, feeling ten times worse than he had earlier, and simply praying that he would be able to focus on his exams.

Chapter 13 : Tonight

Albus made no further attempts to talk to Mirra over the next few days, not that he would have had the chance anyway. Exams were going to officially begin within the week, and tension in the entire school was running high.

Though only the fifth and seventh years had actual "Wizards Examinations" to worry about, the first years had to deal with the anxiety of having no idea of how the testing would be done. Even Scorpius, who had thus far been very beneficial to ensuring that Albus did well, had no idea exactly what to study for.

James, who appeared to care very little about his own examinations, had very uncharacteristically decided to help Albus and his friends.

"Okay...you guys know how to tell when a hinkypunk is lying to you right?" he told them at the library days before their first examination.

"Erm...a what?" Morrison asked.

"Wait wait...we learned that this year...wow that was a while ago" James said, scratching his head. "Okay wait, this was definitely first year, you guys know the difference between hexes, curses, and charms right?"

They all nodded.

"Okay good. Do you guys know what to use against a lethifold?" he inquired, looking as though he may be pushing his luck.

Morrison answered once again. "A *what?*"

"Okay, okay" Scorpius snapped. "That's enough Defence Against the Dark Arts. What will the Charms test be like?"

"Blimey, Flitwick's test was easy, I remember that. Well the practical was, anyway. You lot can make a pineapple tap dance right?"

Albus groaned. He could do no such thing. Almost as if he had sensed Albus being uncomfortable, Morrison interrupted once more.

"Okay, let's focus on something with no practical. What do you remember about History of Magic?"

James gave a loud laugh that earned him an equally loud "Shhh!" from the librarian. After a few moments, he stopped and raised his finger to his lips, obviously deep in thought.

"Well let's see...let's see...History of Magic...I don't quite recall...wait!" he shouted, suddenly very excited, earning him yet another "Shhh!"

"Okay, I remember one thing we were quizzed on. You lot know about the Goblin Rebellion right?"

Scorpius skimmed through his notebook, combing over the tiny words he had scribbled on every page. "Which one?" he asked.

James grinned sheepishly. "There was more than one?"

Despite his brother being of little to no help, Albus found that he had plenty of family members eager to help him with his examinations, with the exception of Rose, who was no closer to aiding him in his studies than she was dropping out of Hogwarts.

"No I will not help you!" she shot scathingly at him when he had approached her at breakfast.

"Why not, I need your help!"

"Well maybe you should have thought of *that*, before you started spying on one of my best friends!"

And she refused to talk to him after that.

With both Rose and James giving him just about the same amount of help, Albus was looking for anything that could be of assistance in helping him prepare. It was weird, everyone insisted that exams for first years were no big deal, yet they certainly seemed to make one out of it. Scorpius had received a letter from his grandmother insisting that he block out all contact with his "new friends" and told him to study until he was well prepared for even his N.E.W.T's. According to her, the Malfoy name was all but ruined, and they could not possibly afford to have a dropout in the family. Despite what she wrote however, his mother had been decent enough to send him an enormous basket of chocolate chip cookies (which he willingly shared with Albus and Morrison) and a note telling him not to worry about his "delusional grandma Malfoy."

Indeed, many students seemed to be receiving letters from home in anticipation for their exams, Albus included. It had been quite a shock when the day before his exams were set to start he had received a letter from a very official looking Ministry owl, which flew off at once after delivering its letter.

"Why'd your parents use a Ministry owl?" Morrison asked him through a mouthful of scrambled eggs.

He turned the envelope over and gave a tremendous groan. "It's not from my parents" he said. "It's from my Uncle Percy."

"Why the groan?" Scorpius asked him from behind an enormous textbook entitled *Standard Book of Spells Grade 3*.

Albus tried choosing his words carefully. The truth was that as much as he loved his Uncle Percy, he had the tendency to ramble about rules and regulations. He also seemed to think that he alone understood the very complex Ministry of Magic, and always gave advice that was "Certain to get you where you're needed, in the Department for the Regulation of Wizarding Code and Law!"

"He's just a little overenthusiastic about helping his nephews out" Albus told them flatly.

He turned the envelope back over and peeled it open, ripping off the official Ministry seal that bound it together. He opened up the envelope and read the letter quietly to himself.

Albus,

I have already sent an identical letter to Rose, but I figured that as I have so many Ministry owls at my disposal, I might as well make some use of them! I am simply writing to inform that it would be in your best interest to study much harder for your upcoming examinations than your Uncle Ron did, and for that matter, more so than your brother James as well.

Here at the Ministry of Magic, we believe that one's test results from Hogwarts show who someone is far more than any choice they could make, or unique ability that they might possess. After all, everyone gets lucky sometimes! So I urge you to ignore this pish posh "Examinations aren't important in your first year" that you may be hearing and get the truth from me, someone who is not only both extremely successful in one of the Ministry's top branches, but is also proud to be able to claim that they received twelve O.W.L's and N.E.W.T's in his later years at Hogwarts!

Obviously, your place as a high ranking employee in the Ministry of Magic is almost guaranteed (what with two members of your family being Aurors) but I would simply like to comment that being an Auror or a "Quidditch Star" or even a member of the Department of Mysteries isn't all that it's cracked up to be. You can find true excitement in doing something beneficial to the Wizarding World, like helping pass laws against overly thin cauldrons (No one will listen to me!) and making sure that young wizards can't endanger themselves by passing a law against flying too high on broomsticks.

And of course, it all begins with doing well here. This is a crucial point in your life Albus. Doing well on these examinations will show that even from a young age you are very devoted to your studies, and are well on your way to becoming a responsible and mature wizard.

Best of wishes,

Uncle Percy and Aunt Audrey

Albus stared at the letter blankly, reading it through once more and letting out a small laugh. He noticed that his Aunt Audrey had apparently attempted to scratch out her name, as if she was keen on making it quite clear that she couldn't agree less with her husband. Still shaking with silent laughter, he passed the note over to Morrison and Scorpius, who read it silently.

"Erm...what does your Uncle even do in the Ministry?" Scorpius asked him with a very disturbed look on his face.

"He makes sure that underage wizards don't fly their broomsticks into muggle areas" Albus said plainly, well aware of how stupid it sounded.

Scorpius looked horrified. "He must've had a field day with my dad then. I remember he was telling me about this one time when he flew really close to a helicopter-" but he was cut off when another letter appeared right next to Albus, this one looking as though it came from a school owl.

Albus picked up the letter curiously and turned it over, this time seeing a much more welcome signature.

"It's from Hagrid!" he exclaimed as he peeled the letter open.

"Hagrid? The Gamekeeper?" Scorpius asked, amused.

"Albus is friends with him" Morrison told him. "I think he's a bit scary to be honest, but he seems harmless enough..."

Albus wasn't listening however. He had just opened the note and was now reading Hagrid's untidy scrawl, imagining his gruff voice as he did so.

Albus,

I know that yer probably studying for yer exams an' all, but I jus' wanted to know if you'd like ter join me for some tea later today, whenever you can. Yer welcome to bring anyone you'd like, I just wanted to show yer summin'.

- Hagrid

Albus borrowed a quill from a skinny second year named Jared and scribbled a "yes" on the back of the letter. He gave it to the owl to return to Hagrid and turned to Scorpius and Morrison hopefully.

"Nope, no way" Morrison told him before Albus could even open his mouth to speak. "There's no way we're visiting him with you, if that's what you're about to ask."

Scorpius, however, seemed to be all for it. "I don't know, I'd like to meet him."

"Really?" Albus asked, excited. He hadn't been down to visit Hagrid since the first month of school, and he didn't want Hagrid to think that he had made no friends since then. "Well that's two to one!" he said happily.

Morrison gave a reluctant "fine" and began munching on his bacon.

As it was now the last Sunday before exams were set to start for the whole school, most students were shut up in their common rooms studying as much as they could instead of enjoying the fine summer day outside. Albus, Morrison, and Scorpius however, who had officially decided against overworking themselves, instead spent the day outside enjoying the breeze, stretching out on the lawn, and playing with the very loveable (if not slightly intimidating) Giant Squid, that resided in the lake.

At around half past noon, when all three of them were tired of being soaked from the intense splashing of the Squid, they decided to walk towards Hagrid's cabin, Morrison looking very scared as they did so.

Albus gave two large knocks at the door to Hagrid's and waited. A minute passed by before the cabin door was swung open, revealing a smiling Hagrid, wearing a large pink apron around him.

"Come in, come in" he said excitedly.

Albus walked in with Scorpius right behind him, though they both had to motion to Morrison to follow them. He walked up to them, a horrified look on his face, until Scorpius muttered "How bad could he be, he's wearing a pink apron!"

Albus took a seat at the round table in the kitchen, followed by his friends as Hagrid busied himself with making tea. Scorpius and Morrison looked around the cabin, apparently agreed that it wasn't a torture chamber, and soon began examining the large mugs that Hagrid had laid out.

"So who are yer friends, Al?" Hagrid asked him as he began pouring tea in their mugs.

"This is Morrison and Scorpius" he said, indicating both of them with his fingers. "Both from Slytherin."

Hagrid took a seat across from the three of them and pulled out a humongous tin of treacle fudge. "Help yourselves" he told them, after seeing Morrison lick his lips at the sight of it. "So you ready for your exams Al? Start tomorrow don' they?"

Albus shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not really fussed about it" he lied.

But Hagrid had not heard him, he was eyeing Scorpius very intently. Scorpius had just taken a large sip of tea before he too noticed it. He raised his eyebrows.

"Do I know your dad?" Hagrid asked suddenly.

"Erm...you might" Scorpius said nervously. "Draco Malfoy?"

Hagrid turned very red, though it was rather hard to notice with his bushy beard in the way. "Oh yeah...Draco Malfoy...I 'member him" he said quietly.

"Erm...were you friends?" Scorpius asked hopefully.

"Well if by friends you mean making me give up me dragon, and trying ter get me hippogriff beheaded, then yeah, I'd say we were very good friends" he spat.

Scorpius turned a very pale shade of pink and looked at Albus. Albus gave Hagrid a stare that clearly said "Don't go there", which Hagrid seemed to understand, as he didn't push the topic further.

"So what did you want to show me?" Albus asked him quickly.

"Huh?" Hagrid looked like he had just gotten out of some sort of trance. "Oh right, right." He suddenly looked very excited. "Follow me" he said, rising out of his chair very quickly.

Albus got up, confused, while Scorpius and Morrison (who was still holding his plate of treacle fudge) joined him. They followed Hagrid out into his vast garden where he lead them near the edge.

"Isn't this where the golden tulips where, Hagrid?" Albus asked him.

"Mhm" Hagrid answered, still smiling. "But look here."

Albus stopped right behind him and was met with the most beautiful sight that he had ever seen. The golden tulips that had been growing there months before had turned from a bright gold to a crystal clear diamond. Albus crouched down to touch one and saw that it was hard as rock. He turned around to look at the garden, and upon closer inspection, saw the stems of many other flowers, and even the petals of a few, had turned the same clear color.

"Blimey, I've never seen flowers like these" he heard Scorpius say.

"When did you notice these Hagrid?" Albus asked him.

"Jus' yesterday. I haven't been out here in months, not since the trees near me cabin caught fire. I jus' thought I'd come out here and check up on everything, and saw em'. I knew you'd like them, you seemed real interested when they were gold."

"What have you been doing to them?" he heard Morrison ask through a mouthful of thick fudge.

"Nothin" Hagrid replied. "It jus' started happening. Guess I'm jus' good at raisin' flowers."

They entered his cabin once more and began trading stories, the most popular of which seemed to be the riot that had occurred on the Quidditch field. Hagrid was apparently very pleased that Albus didn't take part in it—he claimed that it was the smart thing to do. Albus hadn't bothered telling him what Eckley had said afterwards, but at the same time he felt slightly better. At least there was one person who didn't think he was a coward.

Morrison didn't talk much, he seemed to be too occupied with the sweets that Hagrid kept supplying him with, but Hagrid and Scorpius had managed to get a very nice conversation going. Hagrid was quick to realize that Scorpius wasn't his father. Scorpius had told Hagrid that it was his dream to own and tame a Welsh Green, a type of dragon, which Hagrid enthusiastically approved of. The conversation steered in Scorpius' favor even further when he mentioned that his uncle Aster, brother of his mother, was a dragon breeder out in Amsterdam. All in all, the conversation went quite well, and when they left his cabin a few hours later for lunch they were quite cheery.

"Well that wasn't too bad" Scorpius said as they entered the Great Hall. They both looked at Morrison to see if he agreed.

He gave a slight shrug. "And he has good fudge."

The next morning came far too quickly, and before Albus knew it, he was taking his first exam, Herbology. He entered the Greenhouse with the other Slytherins promptly and saw that Mirra was deep in conversation with Neville about something. He gave her a slight smile, said "Yes, they're ready" and told her to take a seat with the rest of the class.

The exam went way better than Albus thought that it would. It was all practical, and a great deal of it involved simply nurturing the plants that he had provided them with. He managed to plant all of his aconite correctly, and other than a spotted seedling running away across the floor, he thought that he had done quite well.

Their next exam was Transfiguration, which Albus had feared most. The written exam was hard enough in the sweltering heat of the classroom, but Albus found that everything that he had studied had simply removed itself from his brain. During the practical, he managed to at least transfigure his paper cup into a plastic one, and had managed to make a noticeable difference on his shoebox, which he meant to completely change into an actual pair of shoes. After ten minutes, the box had grown laces and soles, but was still a single box. He had done far better than Morrison however, who managed to change his box into...a bigger box.

Charms went by similarly on Wednesday morning, the written exam going much better than the practical. He knew all of the incantations and wand movements, and he figured that he had definitely done well on the written portion. He couldn't *quite* make his pineapple tap dance, but

at least managed to levitate it, and he did a fantastic job on his color switching charms, making every article of clothing on Professor Flitwick change to a different color. He felt he may have lost points during his shrinking charm though. The chair that he was supposed to make smaller had blown up as soon as he had pointed his wand at it, which Flitwick called "an impressive bit of magic" but said that he could not possibly give him any marks for it.

History of Magic was partly laughable, partly easy. He simply wrote random numbers for the dates of all the activities that had occurred throughout the centuries, and had fun making up names for the goblins in the several rebellions that had occurred. He was positive, however, that he done more than satisfactory in the "Recent Wizarding Achievements" portion of the test. He could answer every question about "S.P.E.W" (how many times had he heard his Uncle Ron complaining about it?) and took particular satisfaction in answering questions like "What did the Death Eaters consider to be Harry Potters signature spell?" and "On what day did the Battle of Hogwarts occur?".

Astronomy was entirely practical, and a bit of a breeze. All you really had to do was recognize the planets and their movements, which was easy enough after having studied the chart that Scorpius had drawn for him and Morrison. Defence Against the Dark Arts was similar to Charms, in which Albus had answered every question perfectly and done well on the practical, minus a few errors. He still could not perform a successful shield charm, but Professor Handit had claimed that he had the best disarming spell in the class.

Finally, on Friday afternoon, they were set to take their last exam, Potions. Albus had felt better after every exam since Herbology, having come to the realization that they weren't very hard at all. He had made mistakes, sure, but there was no denying that he had been far too worried about it. By the time that he had reached the dungeons for his final exam, he was in a positively fantastic mood.

He had arrived slightly later than most however, and his mood took a sharp downward spiral as a result. The only seats available for him and Morrison (Scorpius most likely having been the first one there) were the seats in front of Mirra and Rose.

He took his seat in front of Mirra, hoping that he would be able to concentrate on the exam as he did so. Professor Darvy entered from his office seconds later and began passing around test sheets to all of the students.

"Now I know that you are all in a hurry to get these examinations over with" he said with a smile. "But please do at least *try* on your Potions exams? They're really not that hard. You will have forty five minutes, and then we will begin the practical. No cheating, obviously, unless you're good enough to get away with it. If that's the case, then by all means, feel free to cheat" he added.

Albus turned his paper over and began writing instantly. It was quite easy, for him anyway. He could see Morrison struggling next to him, sucking on his quill and scratching his chin with it.

Albus finished around the same time that Scorpius did, which was well before everyone else. He had answered every question in detail, and had even went a bit overboard by adding the ingredients to some.

Next, they were told to bring out their cauldrons and open their Potion books to concoct a potion from scratch. To ensure that no cheating took place, each student was randomly assigned a different potion to make. Professor Darvy lazily pulled slips of parchment out of a small brown bag and began reading them off.

"Okay, Potter" he said as he rifled through the bag. He took out a small slip of parchment and read off "Essence of Sound". He gave a small frown. "That's a tough one, but I'm sure you can do it. I have faith in you".

Professor Darvy was right, as it turned out. Even though Albus was very good at Potions, he found this particular one rather difficult to make. It required very precise stirring, excellent timing, and screwing up a single ingredient would emit fumes that would completely block up your ear drums. He looked up hopefully at his Professor while attempting to make the potion, in the hopes that he would at least comment on it, but he had fallen fast asleep in his chair. Albus could hardly blame him; it must be boring watching students struggle.

"I told you I can't" came a loud voice from behind him.

Albus eyes opened. Mirra had just said something. He looked around, but no one else seemed to have heard her.

"It's the only chance we'll get" he heard Rose groan.

Once more, it seemed as though no one but Albus had heard the loud talking behind him. It didn't take him long to realize why. The fumes from his potion were small, but he could definitely inhale them. They were giving him extra sensitive hearing.

Albus smiled as he added more peppermint to his potion, partially because it felt great to be able to hear what they were saying, and partially because he knew that he must be making his potion correctly. Then he heard Mirra speak again, in what he knew was a whisper to everyone else, but loud and clear to him alone.

"I have to send a letter to my mum right after this, and then I'm going to be kind of- occupied the rest of the night" she said nervously.

There was a very loud silence before Rose said "Is it that you're scared? Because Donovan said that he sneaks down to the kitchens a lot, and he's never been caught. There's this portrait in the basem-"

"I'm not scared!" Mirra practically yelled. "I'll just be busy later."

There was a loud hissing noise from Albus' potion, and he could hear them no longer. "Damn!" Albus muttered as purple smoke began to rise from his cauldron. He had been too busy paying attention to the conversation happening behind him to add knarl quills, and he was certainly paying for it now.

Albus handed in a flask of his near perfect potion as the exam ended, disheartened that he had not been able to fully hear Mirra and Rose's conversation. He knew, however, that Mirra was going to send a letter to her parents right now. If only he could see what was in it...

The idea came to him so quickly that he didn't even have time to tell it to Morrison and Scorpius.

"Where are you going!" Scorpius called after him as he ran down the dungeon corridor to the Common Room. "You're going to miss dinner!"

But Albus didn't care about dinner. He entered the Slytherin common room and ran straight up to his dormitory, not even bothering to answer the questions of the many students who seemed keen on knowing why he was in such a hurry.

When he returned down the stairs, they didn't even bother trying to ask him. Not because they didn't want to, but because he was invisible. He had to wait for someone to leave the room before he could go through the exit, as it would have looked extremely odd if he opened the door himself.

Immediately after leaving the Common Room, he rushed through the corridors, careful of his pace and his surroundings. Wearing the Invisibility Cloak was different during the day than it was at night, when there was no one around to bump into. He had to dodge many students as he raced to the owlery, and when he finally got there, he had the strange feeling that the owls in the room could sense him, whether he was invisible or not.

He stood in the room full of owls, the only person there, waiting. Owls were swooping in and out of the windows, and Albus knew that if Mirra didn't come soon, he would be forced to leave from the smell alone. Any second now-

The door opened with a bang as Mirra entered the room, believing herself to be completely alone. She hurried over to the window and pulled out a slip of parchment from her robes. Albus inched his way towards her, and she grabbed an envelope from her pocket and made to place the note in it. Just a second before she did so, when he was certain that she must be able to hear his breathing as he was so close, he saw a single word on the paper.

Tonight.

She put the paper in the envelope and tied it to the owl's leg, as Albus backed up to give her room. She had been angry enough with him for reading her note when he was right next to her,

and he knew that she would simply explode if she bumped into him and found that he was spying on her without even being visible.

She turned around just as the owl was flying away and stared right at the spot where Albus was standing. Though she could not see him, something much worse happened. Albus watched in horror as she picked her hand up to her eyes and wiped away a single tear. She left soon after, leaving Albus in the smelly, cramped owlery alone to his thoughts.

He returned to the Slytherin Common Room a few hours later, having wandered the entirety of the castle in deep thought, completely invisible to all whom he crossed paths with. Upon entering the common room he saw, to his delight, that it was completely empty with the exception of two people-Scorpius and Morrison.

He threw the Cloak off of himself in the middle of the room, earning a loud "Oy!" from Morrison and a bewildered look from Scorpius, who had dropped the book that he was holding.

"Where were you?" Morrison asked him. "And where did you get *one of those?*"

"It was my dad's. Long story" he said shortly. He rushed upstairs to put the Cloak back in his trunk and returned to them exasperated, finally choosing to collapse near the fire.

"So where were you?" Morrison asked once more.

"I followed Mirra to the owlery" he told them while staring up at the ceiling. "She was sending a letter."

He thought he saw Scorpius exchange a quick glance with Morrison before saying "How did you know?"

"I heard her talking to Rose earlier. And I think- I think that Mirra is going to open up the Dungeon of Merlin's Mist tonight" he finished in what he hoped wasn't too much of a dramatic voice.

This time there was no mistaking it, they definitely exchanged glances. "But she can't" Scorpius said after a moment. "That would mean that the Dungeon is somewhere here, in the castle. She wouldn't have the time to go anywhere else tonight."

Albus looked up and stared at the both of them. He had never been in a worse predicament. He knew that Mirra did not want to do what it was she was about to do-but he also knew that she was definitely going to do it. And no matter what he said, whether to himself or his friends, he didn't want her to be in danger. Where could the Dungeon possibly be?

"You want to go and help her, don't you?" Morrison said after a minute.

Albus nodded his head.

"Well if Al is right, we have to figure out where the Dungeon is now" Scorpius said. But even as he said it, Albus knew that their attempts would be fruitless. They were no closer to knowing the location of the Dungeon now than they were when they had first heard about it.

"Let's think" Scorpius continued. "There has to be a clue somewhere. We know that the Dungeon is hiding something, so it must be big and elaborate. It's obviously underground-being a Dungeon and all. And the Mist is already partially out in the air...what does the Mist do again?"

"It puts you in a deep sleep" answered Albus. "And it reacts weird to nature" he added dryly, knowing that this information would get them nowhere.

"Blimey, we should just ask Hagrid what he knows about it" Morrison said. "He's good with nature isn't he? Knew the centaurs...grew those flowers and everything."

The second that he had said it, something clicked in Albus' head. It was as though his brain had suddenly started laughing at how obvious everything was. "Hagrid" he whispered.

Scorpius raised his eyebrows. "What about him?"

"Hagrid! Hagrid and his cabin!" Albus practically shouted. "Don't you see it?"

Both of them, at the same time, opened their mouths in surprise, as though a sudden realization had just fallen upon them as well. After a moment or two, Morrison stood up. "I knew it! Hagrid is Merlin! I knew that there was something weird about him, I knew it!" he shouted.

"No you idiot!" Scorpius shot at him. "The Dungeon, it's in his garden! Or at least the entrance is anyway! It probably leads into the Forbidden Forest!"

"And that's why the tulips turned gold at the beginning of the year!" Albus said, excitement flooding through him. "And the trees-of course-they caught fire, because they reacted to the Mist, like the tulips! My brother said he had been framed by someone, but he wasn't. It wasn't someone, it was something! And the centaurs all gathered around Hagrid's cabin! And the tulips are like diamonds now...it all makes sense! The Mist has been seeping from the Dungeon all this time!"

But Scorpius had suddenly stopped smiling. "But wait, that doesn't make sense."

Albus looked at him with an odd expression. What was he talking about? It made perfect sense...

"When would Mirra have opened the Dungeon? She wasn't anywhere near it as far as I know. And the Dungeon must've been opened, to be releasing its Mist" he said.

Albus stared at the ground, deep in thought. When had Mirra been there? It must've been early in the year...the tulips started changing in his first month there...it might have even been the first day...

"The first day!" Albus exclaimed. "She was there the first day of school! I saw her coming back from Hagrid's! I bumped into her!"

"But then- why did she wait so long?" Scorpius asked. "Why now, if she opened it so long ago?"

Albus had certainly hit a roadblock with this one. He made a good point...why was it taking her so long?

"Maybe she couldn't get in" Morrison said. "She'd fall right asleep wouldn't she? She would need-

"- Assyrian Alert Seeds" Scorpius finished for him. And suddenly Albus understood.

"She couldn't get in the first day of school, when I saw her" he said. "So she asked Professor Longbottom for help. She convinced him to grow those plants, it was her idea, remember? And they're ready now...I heard them talking about it. She's probably just got done popping a few of those seeds now, and she's off to the Dungeon."

Albus leaned back against the wall, defeated. It must be too late by now. He looked up at the giant clock on the wall. It was nine thirty. She may even be in the Dungeon by now, searching for an object endlessly. But there was no way she understood what she was up against. What if the seeds wore off? What if she was left to die in the Dungeon, searching for something that simply couldn't be found? But he couldn't give up; there was still time.

"So...who do we tell?" Morrison asked. "Who could help? Darvy? The Headmaster?"

"We can't tell anyone" Albus answered him. "This is big, she could get in serious trouble for this. We have to stop her ourselves. I don't want her to get hurt...but I don't want her thrown in Azkaban either."

"But how?" Scorpius asked him. "How do we stop her?"

"We go pop a few of those seeds ourselves" Albus answered. "And we follow her in."

Chapter 14 : Within The Dungeon

Though Albus had no plan, no plausible way to do what he knew had to be done, and no courage to do it, he had one thing; hope. He bolted out of the Common Room five minutes later with Scorpius and Morrison behind him, both of them whispering things like "What are you going to do?" and "How are we supposed to get the seeds?"

Albus pretended to ignore them as he walked slowly through the labyrinth, doing his best to make no sound. The truth was, he knew that if he told them he had no clue what he was doing, they would abandon their attempt to help him.

"Shouldn't we have brought the Cloak?" he heard Scorpius say from behind him.

Albus froze on the spot and hung his head low. How could he have forgotten?

"Well there's no time to go back and get it now" he told them. They were approaching the stairs that led to the Great Hall, and Albus knew, instinctively, that if they went back to the Common Room, they would end up staying there in fear.

"Okay, now be quiet" he hissed at them as he walked up the stairs leading to the first floor.

An eerie silence followed his words, as though the many noises that plagued Hogwarts had vanished at his command. He could only hope that they didn't run into any teachers, or even the caretaker, Peeves the Poltergeist.

He began creeping through the Main Hall, and Scorpius and Morrison had now stopped talking as they approached the corridor that led out to the grounds. If they could only make it to the greenhouses without being seen-the darkness of the night sky would protect them afterward.

"Boys!" came a loud yell from behind them.

All three of them turned around on the spot, a sinking feeling rising in Albus' chest as he did so. The dark corridor made it hard to spot who was behind them, but after moving into the light, Albus saw that it was Neville.

He was dressed in scarlet and gold pajamas, and was holding what looked like a small cup of tea. To complete the picture, he had an angry look on his face like none that Albus had ever seen him wear before.

"P- Professor Longbottom!" he heard Scorpius stammer from right behind him.

Of all the times Scorpius wanders the castle at night, he gets caught THIS time? Albus thought bitterly. Their chances of helping Mirra were ruined, Neville would never believe them.

"It's ten 'o clock!" he shouted. "First years have to be in their common rooms by half past eight! You *know that!*"

Albus had no way of getting out of this one. It would have to take a really spectacular lie...

"Professor, please" he heard Morrison start from behind him. "It's the Assyrian Alert Plants" he said.

Neville gave the three students a bemused look. "What about them?" he asked.

Albus could have kicked Morrison. What a stupid thing to say. He glanced sideways and saw Morrison trying to string together his next words carefully.

"We- wanted to go see them" he stammered. "You know the feeling right?"

Neville continued staring at him with an unreadable expression. Slowly, he raised his eyebrows, but did not speak. Morrison took this opportunity to continue.

"I mean, we've spent all year looking after them and raising them. Feeding and watering them, taking care of them. And I think that they're giving off seeds tonight...and we just wanted to be there. I know it sounds weird...but you start feeling attached after a while."

Albus spared another glance sideways and shot Morrison a look of disgust. He had heard many lame stories in his lifetime, but this one took the cake. He turned back to Neville, awaiting his punishment, but saw, to his utter surprise, a broad smile on the Herbology teacher's round face.

"Of, course! Of course!" he exclaimed. "I understand completely Mr. Vincent. You know," he added in an undertone, "very few people truly respect these plants for what they are. Herbologists understand that these things are just as alive as we are. It's like checking on an infant isn't it?"

Morrison made to speak, but this time it was Scorpius, who seemed to be catching on. "We knew you would understand sir. Seriously, how many times will we get to see something as interesting as an Assyrian Alert Plant give off its seeds?"

By now, Neville looked like he was close to tears of joy. "I always knew that there would be more students like me. I didn't think it would be you three, but you've got a real passion!"

Albus blinked stupidly. Never in his life did he think that a story that lame would work.

Neville looked around anxiously, and said, in a whisper, "I suppose you three can go and watch if you'd like. Some of them have already given off their seeds, but there should be a few late bloomers."

"Thanks Professor" the three of them said, before walking past him towards the grounds.

"Wait!" they heard him call after them. "Don't you boys get caught, or the Headmaster will have my head! And don't go *into the greenhouse*, just watch from the windows!"

"Okay, we will" they chorused back to him as they left through the gigantic doors leading out to the grounds.

"That," Scorpius said as they descended down the grassy slopes, "was the greatest lie ever told."

Morrison gave a small chuckle and said, "I had a feeling he would let us go if we mentioned those damn plants. So what now?" he added to Albus, who was walking five strides ahead of them.

"Well, we get those seeds and go to the vegetable patch outside of Hagrid's cabin" Albus said firmly.

They walked down the grassy slopes of the grounds and towards the greenhouses, finally finding themselves staring at the very place where the seeds were located. Neville needn't have bothered to tell them not to enter the greenhouses; the doors were bound together with thick heavy locks that twisted themselves around the handles.

Albus kicked at the chains and let out a small groan. "Well now we're stuck" he said.

Scorpius strode towards the greenhouse with a smirk on his face.

"What are you smiling at!" asked Morrison, who was now attempting to pry the lock open with his fingers.

Scorpius gently pushed him out of the way and pulled out his wand. "Trust me, this will work" he said. He tapped the silver lock twice and said "*Alohamora!*"

For a split second, Albus thought that it had worked, for the chains had moved slightly. The next second however, he was met with much disappointment. The chains had simply coiled themselves tighter, as if they now knew that someone was trying to unlock them. "There must be some sort of anti-lock breaker charm on them" Scorpius said with a frown.

"Oh look at me, I'm Scorpius Malfoy, I read a lot and know useless spells, trust me, *this will work*" Albus heard Morrison say, in a rather accurate impression of Scorpius' sarcastic drawl.

Scorpius gave him an ugly glare. "Well, there has to be some way in, if Mirra could do it."

But Albus was prepared to answer this. He had just spotted a window, wide open at the top of the right side of the greenhouse. He pointed at it.

"She got in by climbing through a window?" Morrison asked incredulously.

"No" Albus replied. "She didn't get in. She got the seeds to come out. She magicked the window open, and levitated the seeds out to her. We need to do the same."

He knew that with each passing second, their chances were getting slimmer. But he was not going to quit now. He would not be cowardly enough to abandon one of his friends this time...

"So what do we levitate?" Scorpius asked, now standing directly under the window.

Albus peered through the dirty glass and saw a small, clear, glass cup filled with tiny black seeds. They were right next to the plants; it wasn't hard to make the connection.

"That tiny glass cup" he said, pointing at it.

Scorpius raised his wand and pointed it through the glass, then said "*Wingardium Leviosa*."

To Albus' immense relief, the spell worked. The tiny glass cup raised itself off of the table and began rising up in the air.

"Don't let it topple over" both Morrison and Albus said at the same time.

Scorpius cautiously moved the cup through the window, and lowered it into his hands. He stuffed his wand back in his robes and bent down to smell the seeds. "Bleh" he said, before giving a look like he was going to gag. "You sure you want to do this mate?" he asked.

Albus walked forward and took a miniscule seed from within the cup. He held it up in his fingers and examined it further.

"Yes, I'm sure. Just- just imagine that it's a Bertie Bott Bean. One that tastes like an Assyrian Alert Seed" he said.

He gave a shrug and motioned for Morrison to take a seed as well.

Both Morrison and Scorpius took out a seed and began examining them as well. "So do we chew it?" Morrison asked.

"I think that we just swallow it whole" Scorpius said. The three of them exchanged glances with each other, and then, simultaneously, popped the tiny black seeds into their mouths.

The terrible taste of the seed as it slid down his tongue made Albus want to throw up, but he held it back in fear of having to take another one. He could hear both of his friends spluttering next to him, and knew that they too were not fond of the taste. The second he had swallowed it however, he found that he had all of the energy in the world; felt like he would never be tired again. It was as though he had just slept for years, and was suddenly woken up by an ear splitting noise, making it quite impossible for him to resume his slumber.

"Does anyone else suddenly feel...awake?" Morrison asked a few seconds later.

Both Scorpius and Albus nodded. "Guess that means that they work" Albus muttered. "Now c'mon, we don't have much time."

They walked to Hagrid's cabin and maneuvered their way around it, reaching the vast vegetable patch a few minutes later. They crept through it silently, taking care not to tread on the flowers in it. For a moment, Albus considered waking Hagrid and asking for his help, but he realized that Hagrid would more than likely attempt to stop them instead. He frowned at the thought. He was certainly breaking a lot of rules tonight.

"Where would the entrance be?" Morrison asked. "This vegetable patch is huge!"

"Shh!" Scorpius hissed at him. "Keep your voice down, you idiot. Hagrid's inside sleeping."

Morrison opened his mouth to shoot back a remark, but fell silent at the look on Albus' face. Albus led them to the edge of the patch, right where the tulips had started turning gold all of those months ago.

"Look around here" he muttered through the darkness.

"*Lumos!*" the three of them muttered. Two of the wands shot out beads of light, but Albus' flickered for an instant before going dim. He still didn't have the hang of it. He could hear Scorpius sniggering behind him, but ignored it.

Instead, he followed Morrison around as the two lights scanned the area for a trapdoor, or anything suspicious for that matter. It seemed as though it was a lost cause though. Everything looked the same. There were clear, hard as rock tulips scattered all across the patch, and the few vegetables that Hagrid had managed to grow covered the remaining areas. Just as he was losing hope however, he heard a low "Aha."

Albus turned around and looked a few yards away. He could see Scorpius standing near the edge of the patch, at an extremely dense clump of darkness close to the forest. He had his lit wand pointing at the ground, and a small smile on his face.

Albus and Morrison hurried towards him and looked down on the ground. There was a small, square trapdoor, covered in moss and various other forms of nature. It looked extremely thin and was very well camouflaged; Albus could hardly blame someone for not having seen it before. The only reason that it was visible to him was because it was slightly open.

"She left it open so that she'd have a way to come back" Scorpius said. "I'm pretty sure she's still down there."

Albus swallowed loudly. "Okay...well...there's no turning back now." He slid the small door over and saw an entranceway that looked like it could only fit one person. There were deep engravings in the side, as though it was a ladder, meant to be climbed down. Albus slid himself down onto the ladder-like wall and began climbing down. "Follow after me, I'm not sure how deep this thing goes" he told them.

He began the climb down the trapdoor, a feeling of foreboding accompanying him as he went. It was very chilly, which was saying a lot considering it was June. What's more, it was even more dark in the vertical passage way than it was outside, meaning he had to feel the deep engravings meant to be ladder rungs rather than see them.

"Shine your wands down here!" he called up after two full minutes of descent.

Morrison and Scorpius obliged and aimed their wands downward, giving Albus a chance to see the dusty floor a few feet below him. "Hey it's not too far down!" he called up.

He jumped down the last few feet and found himself on solid ground. He could hear Scorpius groaning behind him as he too climbed down. After a few minutes, the three of them stood in a patch of darkness, shining the two wands around. About a few feet ahead of them, they could see a large stone door, held slightly ajar. There was a lock in it, with a small shiny silver key protruding from it.

"Okay, you guys ready?" Albus asked them.

They both gave him a glance that he knew meant "no" but still reluctantly followed him as he went towards the door. He gave a huge push and watched as the door flung open. The second he did so, he found himself nearly blinded.

It was a large room, far too wide to walk to the edge of and far too long to walk to the end as well. It was completely filled with a silver Mist that was so thick Albus could feel it engulfing him. For the first time this night, the amount of danger that he was in truly dawned on him. He was standing in the Dungeon of Merlin's Mist, a place never before found by any living witch or wizard, and was surrounded by the very substance that would be able to cause a global epidemic if it left the very dungeon he was standing in. Albus had the very strange feeling that had it not been for the seed that he had just taken, he would have fainted.

"O- o- okay, this shouldn't be too hard" Albus quickly lied. "Mirra has to be in here somewhere."

Scorpius turned to him, and through the thick fog he could see the horrified look on his face as he said "Are you kidding? This dungeon probably spans the entire Forbidden Forest! I can't do this!"

"Me neither" Morrison squeaked.

No sooner had they both said it than they both fell to the floor with a sickening thud.

"No!" Albus shouted, and he crouched down beside them, shaking them, hoping, praying that everything was alright. If something happened to them, it would be all his fault...

He continued shaking them, but their heads simply lulled to the side. Albus did not understand. Why did the seeds affect him, but not his friends? Why were they keeping him awake and alert, when both Scorpius and Morrison had fallen into a deep sleep?

They were both still breathing, but it was shallow and silent, as though in their sleep they were fighting a losing battle. He drug both of them through the gigantic stone door and left them near the stone ladder. But he could not leave yet...there was still one friend left to find.

He ran back through the door and into the great dungeon. Why the Mist didn't affect him, he did not know, but he had the strange feeling that Mirra was stranded in the giant stone room, unconscious or asleep or whatever it was, and yet so very close to death.

He began running through the dungeon, taking care to look back over his shoulder every few minutes. He did not want to lose sight of the door that he hoped would be his exit. He began slowing down his pace after a few minutes, the eerie Mist now becoming seemingly thicker. It was as though it had recognized his failure, and was now taking his life in return...

He knelt down on his knees and buried his face in his hands...he could not leave his friends here to die. He began inching forward on his knees, crawling forward on his hands, and suddenly, as though he had never taken a seed at all, he found himself very sleepy. It was as though the less hope he had, the more tired he became.

His knee slipped on something thin and he felt his face crash down onto the floor. What on Earth could he have slipped on in a stone dungeon? He looked down and peered through the thick mist and saw a flash of black on the floor beneath him. He picked up the strand of hair, and realized, with a pang, that he was inches away from Mirra's body.

He bent down low enough to feel her breath, and realized that she too was sleeping. It was much more faint than Scorpius and Morrison's had been, she had clearly been down here longer, and the Mist was certainly taking more of a toll on her.

"I'm going to get you out of here" he said to her unconscious body. She was lying face up, with her arms and legs in a position that made it seem as though she had randomly collapsed. He took a look around him and saw that the gigantic door was still in sight. She had not gotten very far when the Mist had affected her, and he doubted very much if she had actually found whatever it was she was looking for. Well, he certainly wasn't going to give her the chance to find it now.

It was as if his body had fought against the looming fatigue and won. He had all of his friends now, he could go. He picked her up by the shoulders and drug her along the stone floor, the chilly silver Mist surrounding him but doing nothing to him.

He drug her through the stone door and placed her next to his other two friends, both of whom were still fast asleep. He walked back to the gigantic door and gave it a tremendous push. The door slammed shut, sealing the Dungeon back up and stopping the seeping of its contents.

He looked up the stone ladder and saw the exit above him. They were so close...now if only he could find a way to get all four of them up there.

He knew that he would have to move their bodies by magic. As if he had planned on it all along, he pulled out his wand and pointed it at the sleeping group next to him. He made to say the incantation, and then realized that he didn't know it.

There was still Mist in the room, and the more he breathed it in the more panic rushed through him. What had Professor Handit told him? About creating spells using Latin etymology?

"*Mobilabodies!*" he said triumphantly with a wave of his wand. Nothing happened.

"Damn" he muttered. "*Mobilafriendus!*" he shouted. Once more, nothing happened.

He was now breathing in the Mist at an alarmingly fast rate. He could feel his heart beat accelerate, yet at the same time he felt himself go drowsy. "*Mobilacorpus!*" he cried in desperation.

All three bodies began levitating off the ground; the spell had miraculously worked. He jerked his wand upwards and all three of the bodies on the ground moved into a standing position. It was weird, having his movements control his friends', but Albus was far too excited to care. Now all that he had to do was concentrate, and climb.

He began climbing up the stone ladder rungs, peering down below him to see that the three levitating bodies were following him. Scorpius was first, followed by Morrison, and finally Mirra. On more than one occasion they began dropping, causing Albus to plunge his hand into his robes and pull out his wand to say the spell again.

They were approaching the surface...he could see the stars above. He crawled out into the open air and used the last bit of strength he could muster to to pull his hovering, sleeping friends to safety.

He let them lay flat on the ground of Hagrid's vegetable patch and stumbled over from fatigue. He closed the trapdoor over with a strong pull, and fell to the ground with a large thud, breathing in the sweet, sweet, fresh air.

Chapter 15: A Terrible Taste In Names

Albus did not know how long he had been laying there for, stomach pressed against the dirt of Hagrid's vast vegetable patch, breathing in the fresh air as he listened to the gentle breathing of his friends next to him. He rolled over and stared at the starry sky, still panting, and leaning over to check on his friends.

They were all still fast asleep, but it was a pleaaent sleep. The Assyrian Alert Seeds had evidently not worked, whatever the Mist was, it was far too powerful to be hoodwinked by the offspring of a plant. He could hear Scorpius and Morrison breathing heavily, and even saw their bodies twitch as though they were trying to get comfortable while laying in the dirt.

Mirra was a different matter however. Her breathing was no longer shallow, but her normally pale skin was cold and clammy. It was as if the Mist had sapped not only the energy from her body, but the very will to live.

He stared at the three of them, unsure of what to do, or who to alert, when he heard a great yell off in the distance. "Albus! Albus what's happened!"

Albus turned around and saw Neville, still in his golden and scarlet pajamas, running towards them. "Merlin's beard!" he yelled when he saw three more students laying in the dirt.

"No, his dungeon" Albus muttered through clenched teeth, very exhausted and having no idea what he was saying.

"Harry was right!" Neville gasped as he came over to the group of the students. He looked at the lid to the vertical passageway leading to the dungeon, which Albus had not managed to fully close. "What is this?" he asked.

"Long story" Albus muttered. "Professor, do you think you could -"

But he was answered before he had managed to finish his sentence. Neville had already pulled out his wand and conjured three stretchers out of mid-air. He flicked his wand once more and the bodies of Scorpius, Mirra, and Morrison were placed on each one, hovering slightly above the ground.

"Albus, you need to tell me what happened" Neville said pleadingly.

"Professor- I really- I need to know my friends are okay first" he said. This was partially true, their safety meant a great deal. But he was also postponing the inevitable interaction with an authority figure now. He would not be able to lie his way through a story. He would have to confess what Mirra had done.

"Right- right of course" Neville responded. "Hagrid!" he called out into the dark.

It took only a few seconds for Albus to hear the cabin door behind him burst open. The next thing he knew, Hagrid was standing next to him, wearing his own pair of gigantic scarlet pajamas, speaking very quickly to Neville.

"Professor Longbottom" he said. "Wha' happened? Albus!" he said once he saw the dirt on Albus' face from where he was lying down in the garden. "Albus are you okay!" he yelled loud enough for the entire castle to hear him.

"I'm- I'm fine" he managed to stammer out before Neville cut him off.

"Hagrid, I need you to take Albus to the Headmaster's office, he seems to be okay. I'm going to take these three to the hospital wing" he said quickly.

He waved his wand once more and the three stretchers that had been hovering raised a few feet, then began following him as he ran towards the castle entrance.

"Al, wha' happened?" Hagrid asked him.

"Sorry Hagrid" he replied, with his head down. "But I don't think you had anything to do with those golden tulips."

They walked back to the castle after Neville and the stretchers, and entered it in utter silence. Hagrid did not speak the entire way through the castle; he seemed to have several questions to ask, but did not know in which order to ask him. Instead, it was Albus who initiated conversation.

"Hagrid, Professor Longbottom mentioned my dad" he said. "Is he here?"

"Couldn't tell ya' Al, I've been asleep for the last few hours. Wha' were your friends doin' out in me vegetable patch? And who was the girl?" he asked.

"It's- a really long story" he said as they approached the stone gargoyles of the Headmaster's office. "Am I in trouble?" he asked, though he thought that he already knew the answer to his question.

"Ehh...I don' know. But good luck Al. Password's 'Mysteries'" he said gruffly, before turning to leave Albus facing the stone gargoyle.

Albus listened to Hagrid walk away as he continued staring at the stone gargoyle, fear rising in his chest. He hoped his friends were okay, and for a second thought of completely abandoning his trip to the Headmaster in favor of seeing them. The last time he had been in the Headmaster's office, he had just gotten done overhearing something he was not meant to hear, and Headmaster Ares had been very angry when he had seen him.

"Erm...mysteries?" he asked the gargoyle nervously after a moment.

The gargoyle slid open to reveal the staircase leading to the Headmaster's office. Albus stepped into it and watched as it began revolving towards a large door. For a fleeting moment, he wished that he was back in the Dungeon, where he needn't face the Headmaster and reveal everything that had happened, how they had snuck out, how Mirra could have been a murderer...

He knocked on the door. "Enter" came a gruff voice.

Albus opened the door and found himself standing in the Headmaster's office once again, but now with the dark sky behind it, giving off a very ominous feeling indeed.

"Sit" the Headmaster said. He looked very angry indeed. His jet black hair was ruffled in odd angles, as though he had just moved his hand through it, and his cold grey eyes were narrowed. He next spoke in his loud, booming voice, but the distaste in it was palpable. "I said *sit*" he repeated, the last word almost hissed.

Albus, who had been too terrified at his appearance to sit down the first time, took a seat in the small wooden chair across for the Headmaster's desk. He opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off.

"Tell me what you were doing out on the grounds near Hagrid's cabin at eleven o'clock at night. With three of your friends" he added.

"We- we were going to visit Hagrid. I'm friends with hi-"

"Liar!" the Headmaster practically yelled.

Albus froze in his chair. The Headmaster had said it with so much certainty that Albus had the shrewd suspicion that he had read his mind. Knowing that there was no way to fool him, Albus heaved a humongous sigh and prepared to tell the truth. He could only hope that Mirra wasn't locked away in Azkaban for it.

"We went down there to -"

But he was cut off once again, this time from a different voice.

"Don't speak until I can hear it from the beginning, Albus."

Albus spun around so fast that his leg connected with the wooden desk in front of him. He ignored the pain however, and managed to yell out "Dad!"

Harry Potter was standing in the office, a look of mingled relief and curiosity on his face. His voice had not seemed mad, but rather eager to hear some answers.

"You!" Headmaster Ares spat. "How did you get in? Who told you the password?"

"No one" Harry said. "The gargoyles downstairs let me in...I'm rather friendly with them. Do you have an extra chair? I'd like to hear my son's explanation too, if you don't mind."

The Headmaster looked as though he minded very much, but said through gritted teeth "Not at all. I'll get you one." He pulled his wand out so fast that Albus didn't even see his hand enter his robes. He waved it once and a small, dilapidated, wooden chair appeared right next to Albus. It was missing a front leg, making it slightly lopsided.

Albus saw his dad smile as he too pulled out his wand. He waved it once and the small wooden chair vanished. With another wave, a squishy armchair appeared a few feet behind Albus. "Very generous of you Reginald, but I've been having back problems recently...almost forty and all. I prefer to sit in comfort."

He sat down in the chair and stretched out, before saying, "If you'd mind starting from the beginning, Albus" he said.

"He was" the Headmaster spat. "Before you took it upon yourself to enter my castle and break into my office."

Albus' father ignored this statement and inclined his head towards Albus, signaling him to begin speaking.

Albus breathed a small sigh of relief. It would be way easier to talk with his father here than all alone. "Well...me and Morrison and Scorpius -"

"Scorpius? Scorpius Malfoy?" his father interjected.

"Yeah we're friends" Albus said, a bit defiantly.

His father eyed him for a moment before giving a small shrug. "Okay, continue" he said.

"I will tell him when he can continue!" the Headmaster spat at him. He turned to Albus. "Continue" he said quietly.

"Right...well, me, Scorpius, and Morrison found out about the Dungeon of Merlin's Mist -"

"Merlin's Mist? What rubbish is this?" the Headmaster interrupted.

Albus gave a tiny groan. Were either of them going to let him finish his story? Or at least speak two sentences before being interrupted?

"It is a very powerful substance located in a Dungeon, Reginald" Harry said. "It is a potential epidemic, a threat to the wizarding world. I'm willing to bet that the entrance to the Dungeon that houses the said Mist is out on the grounds somewhere."

Albus blinked. How had his father known that? It took them months to figure it out...

The Headmaster blinked. "You mean to tell me, that one of my students almost killed us all?"

Albus' father nodded his head and gave a weak smile. "Excuse my interruption Albus, but just out of curiosity, how did you discover this Dungeon?"

"Well...we researched it" he said, trying to dodge the question of where he had heard about it in the first place. His father continued staring at him however, evidently not satisfied with the answer.

"And we only found out about it because I read about it in Rose's diary" he continued, now staring at his sneakers, waiting for the reprimand he was sure would come.

He heard the Headmaster give a snort and mutter something that sounded like "Children". His father however, made no comment for several seconds, before saying, "A most unusual means of getting information, but an effective one. I will not tell Rose that you read her diary" he said.

Albus looked up, elated, before hearing "But you will."

He looked back down, the light feeling in his chest evaporating on the spot. His father stood up and turned to the Headmaster, who was leaning back in his chair, staring at the ceiling. He looked as though he was trying to tune out the conversation happening before him. He looked up, however, when Harry began speaking to him.

"It isn't very hard to figure out what happened from here" he said. "Miss Tunnels, one of the students who has recovered and is currently in the hospital wing, attempted to open the Dungeon of Merlin's Mist. Doing so would have resulted in the injury, and possible death, of many students in your school, and indeed, all that came in contact with it. You are very lucky my son was here to save the day, Reginald" he said with the tiniest shadow of a smirk.

At this, Headmaster Ares leapt out of his seat and pointed his finger at Harry. "Oh, oh I'm lucky am I?" he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "I'm lucky that I have students in my school, who instead of informing me when we are all in danger, choose to go about saving the day by themselves, trying to play hero?"

At this, Albus looked down at his feet in disgust. Though he didn't want to admit it, he knew that the Headmaster had a very good point. Had he only told someone about it when he first discovered the danger they were all in, this entire night could have been avoided.

His father seemed to be thinking along the same lines, as he didn't say anything, instead allowing the Headmaster to continue. "I am lucky, however, that he has managed to provide me with names! So now I know to deduct one hundred points from his house for him and his friends being out on the grounds, and I know to have Miss Tunnels expelled!"

"No!" Albus shouted out, picking up his head and staring at the Headmaster. He could not-he *would* not let his friends get in trouble for his mistakes.

"Now Reginald, that is extremely unfair of you" his father said.

"Oh? *Oh? Is it really*" the Headmaster said, once again his voice very sarcastic. "Well then by all means, *you* decide what to do, since *you're the Headmaster* at this school" he said with a sneer.

"I'm not telling you what to do" Harry replied kindly. "I merely think it's right to inform you that my son and his friends broke no rules. I had the very fortunate pleasure of meeting an old friend upon my entrance into this castle. Professor Longbottom insisted that he gave these children permission to be out on the grounds, and takes full responsibility for it. He told me to tell you that he will happily lose a month's salary for doing so."

The Headmaster looked as though he had been slapped. Before he could speak however, Harry continued. "Also, I have recently met with Miss Tunnel's parents, and I can assure you, had it not been for them, none of this would have happened. They pressured their daughter, forced her, and one might even say brainwashed her into doing this. I have no right to claim what becomes of your students Reginald, but I ask a favor of you. Please do not let this student suffer for her parent's mistakes."

Albus thought that his father may be pushing his luck. He couldn't possibly imagine a reason why the Headmaster would do him a favor, especially when he had made him look like a fool the entire conversation.

He was quite wrong though. The Headmaster's expression did not soften, but he said, in a slightly lighter voice, "Fine. As a favor, she will go unpunished. But her parents will be taken to Azkaban, surely?"

"Yes" his father replied. "They will serve one year in Azkaban."

Headmaster Ares gave a howl of rage. "One year! One year, for endangering the entire wizarding world? One year is preposterous! One year is -"

"-Twice as long as you served, if I remember correctly" Albus' father said darkly.

If the Headmaster looked as though he had been slapped before, now he looked as though he had been kicked in his face repeatedly. He flushed a dark red, his grey eyes bulged out of their sockets, and his mouth hung open as though he wanted to retaliate, but didn't know how.

Albus, completely taken aback by this sudden piece of news, turned to the Headmaster and, forgetting whom he was speaking to, asked "You were in Azkaban?"

The Headmaster continued to stare blankly at Albus' father, as though he had not heard Albus ask his question. "That is *not* the subject at hand!" he said coldly. It was the angriest that he had ever sounded, and yet, he had said it rather quietly.

Albus' father did not answer or respond to his sentence, but simply decided to change the topic. "Professor, would you mind if I could speak to my son alone for a moment?"

The Headmaster seemed to regain his composure after this question and shot out "Certainly, I daresay you'll find you have an entire castle to speak privately."

Albus' father smiled again. "I was hoping we could talk in here? I don't want to disturb anyone else this late at night. It will only take a moment."

The Headmaster stared at him with contempt. "Very well, I need to use the lavatory anyway. You have ten minutes, Potter." And with that, he strode to the door and left the room.

Albus watched as his father shifted in his seat and surveyed him. After a moment, Albus decided to ask something that he had been curious about. "Dad, how did you know about Mirra and her parents?"

His father gave a slight smile. "You really should have picked a different informant" he said. "Your Aunt Hermione told me months ago that you had asked her about Merlin and his dungeons. I didn't know why at the time, but it suddenly clicked after I received a certain letter."

Albus stared intently. What letter was his father talking about?

"Your cousin Rose sent me a letter earlier today, telling me that she was worried about her friend, Mirra. She mentioned the Dungeon that you read about in her diary, and told me that she seemed to think Mirra's parents were mistreating her. Your Aunt Hermione, bless her, knew at once what she had meant by 'Merlin's Mist', and told me how potentially dangerous it could be. As is Ministry protocol, I visited Miss Tunnel's parents to inquire what their daughter could possibly have to do with such a dungeon."

At this, his voice darkened, and his smile became thin, as though he was doing his best not to frown. "I learned that Mirra is very, very distantly related to Merlin, through her mother's side. To connect this through a family tree would be very hard, there are so many generations between them. They may not even be related, though I think that they are, as Mirra was given a key prior to the beginning of this school year."

Albus continued to listen intently. His father took a very slight pause before continuing.

"I discovered that her parents intended her to release the Mist out into the wizarding world. They had no desire to claim whatever artifact was hidden within it. Their plan was to have their daughter release the Mist into the sky, to rid the world of muggles, something that they believed Merlin would have wanted to happen."

"But didn't they realize that their daughter could get hurt?" Albus asked. "Or even die?"

This time, his father's frown could not be stopped. "Yes" he replied. "They did not care. Their only intention was to fulfill what they believed were Merlin's wishes. The location had been passed down through generations, as was the key. Mirra, the first to attend Hogwarts, was in a perfect position to complete what they deemed was a task meant to be completed. She has been told for years that to open this dungeon and release the Mist was her purpose, her only point in life. It is all that she grew up knowing. What became of her afterwards didn't matter to them."

Albus stared at him, mouth open, horrified. What parent could do that? What parent could care so little about their child? A boiling rage had erupted from within him. Suddenly... suddenly, he did not blame the Headmaster for being outraged at their abnormally short sentence.

"How could they?" he asked. "What parents would do that? That's terrible! Where will she go now?" he asked.

"It is terrible" his father said grimly. "I know very well what can happen when a child is not cared for by their parents. I even know of one wizard, who may have turned out very, very different if only he had a mother to love him. She will be sent to live with her grandparents, on her father's side, whom I'm sure will be very happy to take her. She will remain with them even after her parents are removed from Azkaban. I cannot, however, give them anymore than one year's time. There is no concrete proof that they truly understood what may have happened to their daughter; they may even be mentally disturbed."

"How did- how did you figure all of this out? They just told you?" he asked.

At this, his father's frown changed back to his very light smile. "No, they did not wish to tell me much of this information. They were quite rude to be honest, and needed to be subdued following my arrival. Thankfully, I had a fellow Ministry employee accompany me, a man named Sancticus, who is very well adept at legilimency."

"Legilawhat?" Albus asked.

"It's the magical ability to extract feelings and memories from someone. For all intents and purposes, it's a bit like mind reading" he said with a smile.

"So- so your ministry friend read their minds and figured this all out?" he asked.

"Yes, and immediately following, I sent a message to Professor Longbottom, asking him to check to see if you were okay. I knew from Rose that your friend Mirra had chosen to wander the grounds tonight. I had the very strange feeling that you would be involved somehow."

"And he sent an owl back?" Albus asked.

"No, not an owl. Me and some of my oldest friend have a much easier way of relaying messages. He told me that he had unfortunately let you out on the grounds with your friends. I responded back telling him I would be there shortly, and to check on Rose. I had planned on being here

much sooner, but your Headmaster had placed some *extremely* powerful protective charms around the castle. It took me much longer than I had expected to get in."

Albus let this information sink in for a moment. So Rose had sent a letter asking for help, and his father came a bit too late. This explained the events that had transpired this night. Or most of them...

"Albus, I am very curious about something. Would you mind telling me exactly what happened down in the dungeon? I don't quite understand how you managed to stay awake the entire time. I was under the impression that this particular Mist would have put you to sleep."

Albus explained briefly about the Assyrian Alert Seeds, and about how Scorpius and Morrison had fainted almost immediately. He could not, however, explain how he had managed to stay awake. This is what he himself had been most curious about, and he sincerely hoped that his father would be able to answer it.

"Dad... do *you* know why the Mist didn't affect me?" he asked.

His father leaned forward a bit and said "I can take what I hope is an accurate guess, Albus. But that's all. Let me ask you, did your friends want to rescue Miss Tunnels?"

Albus thought about it for a moment. He remembered what Scorpius had said just before fainting. *I can't do this!* And Morrison had agreed...

"Well...they wanted to help, but they didn't exactly want to risk getting hurt" he said.

"Very intelligent of them" his father replied. "And I can hardly blame them. Now let me ask you Albus, were you willing to risk your life to rescue her?"

He said it very dramatically, and Albus felt the color rise in his cheeks. "Yes" he said. "I thought about giving up, but realized I couldn't" he said.

"Then I think I know" his father said with a smile. "Many people assume that being 'unworthy' means being a muggle" he said. Albus nodded. That was what Scorpius had told him, anyway. "But I do not believe that is true. I do not know much about Merlin, but I know that he would not have been foolish enough to safeguard his relics from muggles and allow wizards to take them. He most likely judges the perpetrators of his dungeons by character, not by blood."

Albus tilted his head to the side slightly. He didn't completely understand. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, I know that if it were me, I wouldn't want someone who was selfish and cruel to obtain my relics, regardless of whether they were pureblood or not. The Mist was most likely meant to effect those who were not deserving of claiming the dungeon's contents, not because they were a muggle, but because they were unfit to wield power. The Mist would only affect someone who

had no place being there. Your friends, nice people though I'm sure they are, could not wait to get out of that dungeon, and were thus instantly affected by it. You however," he said with a broad smile "were selfless and courageous, willing to risk your own life to save someone else's. The Mist did not effect you because it had no reason to. You are exactly the kind of person that Merlin wanted in his dungeon."

Albus felt his cheeks go red at his father's compliment. The more that he thought about it, the more it made sense. And the more it made sense, the more proud of himself he became. He was not a coward after all.

Or was he? Was he not afraid to admit that he had read his cousin's diary? To tell the Headmaster the truth? The elated feeling that was in his chest vanished on the spot.

"Is something wrong?" his father asked him.

"What?" Albus said quickly. He had not even noticed the frown on his face.

"Albus, you seem uncomfortable. Is there something you want to tell me?"

"No" he said a bit too quickly. But it was not true. The fact remained that he still thought himself a coward. A coward, just like the Slytherins that had abandoned the man sitting right across from him when he needed them most. Charles Eckley's voice rang in his ears. *Don't deny it now, you coward!*

"Well...yes" he said after a moment. He looked up at his father. "I don't know if you know this, but there was this huge riot during the Quidditch final..."

"Oh yes, I know" his father said. "I received a letter home about it from James. Turns out he was quite proud of his participation in it."

"Right well...almost everyone joined in. And I didn't" he said flatly.

His father gave him an inquisitive look. "I don't understand. Why is that wrong? You should be proud that you weren't foolish enough to get in trouble."

"Yeah but, that's just the thing! I didn't have anything to do with it! My fellow housemates were all fighting, and I abandoned them! Just like they did you!" he shouted. "And I feel like a coward for it. Everyone says so! I used to think that maybe the Sorting Hat put me in the wrong house, but it didn't. I do belong in Slytherin. I am a coward" he finished.

He stared down at the ground and buried his face in his hands. It felt good to let it out, that which had plagued his mind for so long. But even as he said it, it hurt to think it. To know it was true. He looked up and saw his father staring at him intently.

"Albus" he said, in barely more than a whisper. "Do you know what the biggest differences are between Gryffindors and Slytherins?"

Albus shook his head.

"The colors of their Quidditch robes, and their heads of houses. Nothing more" he said.

"Then why are we even sorted?" Albus said. "Why even -"

"- divide us?" his father said. "Because only when we are divided, do we realize how important it is to be united. Yes, different house members may show different personalities, but that is because they are shaped by the house they belong to. Influenced by their environments. You showed courage worthy of a Gryffindor today, Albus. And loyalty to your friends worthy of a Hufflepuff. You figured out what needed to be done, as clever as a Ravenclaw, and you were willing to bend the rules to do it, like a member of your own house. Do not think for a single second that someone in a different house would have been unable to do these things. Someone once told me that 'It is our choices that show who we truly are, far more than our abilities'. I am happy to say that you proved that person right today, Albus."

Albus stared at him and let the words that he had spoken sink in. He was right. About all of it. When he did not speak, his father continued.

"As for your comment about Slytherin, I can *assure you* Albus, that not all Slytherins-

"- are cowards" finished an icy voice.

Albus spun around wildly, attempting to find who had completed his father's sentence. No one was in the room except for he and his father though. When he continued looking around in bewilderment, the voice spoke again.

"You won't find me there. I'm a portrait, Potter."

Albus looked above his father's head and saw that it was indeed a portrait that was talking. The person in it looked vaguely familiar...though Albus couldn't quite place where he had seen him before.

"Ahh, Albus, I would like to introduce you to Professor Snape!" his father said, beaming at the portrait.

Snape. He looked very unpleasant. His curtain of black hair hung over his face, past his dark eyes, and fell on either side of his hooked nose...

"You're the man from the tapestry!" Albus exclaimed.

The portrait rolled his eyes. "*Very good*, Potter" the man known as Snape said sarcastically. "I can clearly see that you have inherited your father's amazing abilities of perception."

Albus looked at his father, expecting to see him looking angrily at the portrait, but was very surprised to see a bright smile on his face. "Albus, Professor Snape taught me Potions back when I was in school."

But Albus had barely heard him. He was now thinking of the name inscribed underneath the tapestry. *S.S.* His last name was Snape...could his first name, perhaps, be...?

"I was sent from my other portrait to inform the Headmaster that a Mr. and Mrs. Tunnels are here to pick up their granddaughter." His dark eyes flashed around the room before he continued. "He is evidently not here. Inform him of what I said." He turned to leave, but was stopped by a loud voice.

"Professor Snape, don't you want to meet my son?" his father had asked.

The portrait of Snape turned around and stared back for a moment. "No" he said plainly.

"But it will only take a second" his father said brightly. "Albus, this is Professor Severus Snape. Professor Snape, this is my son, Albus *Severus* Potter."

So that was it. This very unpleasant man was the man whom Albus had been named after. This man was supposedly the "bravest man" that his father had ever met. He looked at the portrait of Severus Snape, who looked outraged.

"Do you mean to tell me," Snape said in small, angry voice, "that you gave my name to James Potter's grandson!"

He looked as though he were going to jump out of the portrait and strangle his father.

"No" his father replied simply. "I gave your name to *Lily* Potter's grandson."

Was it a smile? The moment that his father had finished saying this sentence, the lips on Severus Snape's face had curled upwards, as though his muscles were attempting to do something that they had not done for a very long time. The look of happiness, pure genuine happiness, transformed his face completely, but alas, it must have been a trick of the light. The next moment Albus saw that he was not smiling. His lips had curled themselves into a nasty sneer, though it did look as though Snape was fighting to keep it from changing to something more pleasant.

"Albus Severus" the portrait repeated. He paused for a moment before speaking again. "That hardly matches. You have a terrible taste in names, Potter."

And with that final insult, the portrait turned around and left the canvas blank, no doubt to venture to a different portrait throughout the wizarding world.

"You named me after him?" Albus asked incredulously. "He's kind of...bitter isn't he? And quiet too, I think he was listening that whole time."

His father smiled at him. "Professor Snape has lived a very hard life, Albus. He has a right to be quiet, and in a way, a right to be bitter. But did you hear what he said? About being a coward? Listen to me carefully Albus. If you *ever* start to think that you are a coward for being in Slytherin, you remember that man. You remember that he was a Slytherin, like you, and that he made a difference."

"But what did he do?" Albus asked.

"He sacrificed himself for the sake of the wizarding world. Not for fame, but because he was courageous enough to keep a promise that he made to himself. No coward could ever claim to do what he did."

He smiled at him once again, and Albus took the time to stare up at the blank canvas on the wall. He did not know for how long he stared at it, but eventually a sarcastic voice said "May I enter my office, please?"

It was Headmaster Ares.

"Reginald!" his father said brightly. "That was an awfully long bathroom break, wasn't it? Is your stomach feeling all right?"

"I can only assume that it will begin feeling better after you have left" the Headmaster replied curtly. "If it's okay with *you* I'd like to have a word in private. I daresay I've earned it."

"Of course, of course" his father smiled back. "Albus, I may not see you again for the rest of term, but as there's only a few weeks left anyway, I'll still be seeing you soon. Remember everything I said. Now please excuse me while I talk to the Headmaster. We have some, erm... unfinished business."

Albus did as he was told and hopped out of his chair, running to the door and closing it behind him. Immediately after doing so, he pressed his ear up to the door just in time to hear his father say "Away from the door, Albus."

And with that, he hurried out of the office and back to the common room.

Albus did not sleep the entire night, he was far too worried about his friends. The first thing that morning, he went to go visit them in the Hospital Wing to see if they were okay.

"You can have ten minutes, that's all. They'll both be out soon anyway" said Madam Clearwater, the nurse at Howarts.

"Albus!" Morrison yelled out when he had entered. He was holding an enormous tin of treacle fudge in his hands. "What happened? No one explained anything..."

Albus told his friends what had occurred the previous night, and even told them about the conversation that he had with his father. He left out the part about Snape though. For some reason, that seemed too personal.

"Wow...I don't even remember passing out" Morrison said. "But I've been sleeping for a while, just woke up an hour ago. Blimey, those seeds were a waste weren't they?" he said. "Fudge?" he added. "Hagrid sent some up to us."

"No thanks" he said. "Where's Mirra?"

Scorpius and Morrison exchanged glances from their hospital beds. "We heard that her grandparents came and got her" Scorpius said. "We don't know if she'll be coming back next year or not."

Albus gave a frown.

"But you did it though!" Morrison said brightly. "You rescued her and everything! And I don't even think she's in trouble!"

"Yeah...I guess" Albus said half-heartedly.

Hogwarts returned to normal after Scorpius and Morrison were released from the Hospital Wing. Their last two weeks of classes were mostly spent playing games instead of actually learning new material, and Albus spent a great deal of time at Hagrid's, listening to his stories about things that his father had done at Hogwarts while he laughed with Morrison and Scorpius at his side.

Telling Rose that he had read her diary went well enough. The first time she smacked him was so hard that he couldn't even feel the second or third one, which Scorpius assured him was fate's reward for doing the right thing. Afterwards, she seemed to think that he had gotten what he had deserved, and with Mirra gone, she too spent most of her days hanging out with Albus and his friends.

The feast at the end of the year was marvelous, with a rich assortment of food and celebration. Predictably, Gryffindor and Slytherin had come in third and fourth place, respectively, with Ravenclaw taking first and Hufflepuff getting runners up. It seemed as though no one in the entire school knew about the events that had transpired the night that the Dungeon was opened; the Headmaster had obviously done a very good job at keeping it quiet. All too soon, it was time to go.

Their bags packed, wands tucked away safely, and owls in cages, the students spent their last few minutes at the train stop saying good-byes to their friends, despite having an entire train ride to do so. Albus found a compartment aboard the scarlet Hogwarts Express with Morrison, Scorpius,

and Rose as they swapped chocolate frog cards and played exploding snap. The entire trip, Albus noticed, Morrison seemed slightly subdued.

"Everything okay?" Albus asked him as he carefully placed a card on the large stack in front of him

Morrison gave him a nervous look before saying. "I- I want to ask you something."

Rose and Scorpius exchanged bewildered looks. Their lack of concentration resulted in the entire card castle exploding. Through the fluttering cards, Morrison asked "Could you, maybe- I don't know- sometime this summer- get your mom's autograph for me?" he finished quickly.

Albus laughed, then gave him a pat on the shoulder. "Yeah mate, I think I can manage that."

And soon enough, they got off the train and exchanged their last good-byes for an entire summer.

"You have to write this summer" Scorpius told him as they walked through the gate to the muggle world. "There's my dad. Later, Al" he said.

Albus watched Scorpius high five Morrison and even receive a rather uncomfortable looking hug from Rose before walking over to his father, who was standing in the shade of a platform with his hands in his pockets.

Morrison was next to go, thumping Albus on the shoulder and hugging Rose before he left to meet a young looking witch whom Albus could only assume was his mother.

"That's us!" Rose said after a moment, pointing towards her father and Albus' mother, who were waving from the edge of the station. They walked towards them briskly, Rose giving her father a big hug upon meeting him.

"How was your first year Rosie?" he asked her, picking her up and putting her on his shoulders, something which, despite her seemingly mature nature, she had never grown out of.

"Fine daddy. Professor Flitwick told me I got a hundred and thirty percent on my charms test!" she said from above him.

"You did! Blimey, I knew you were smart, but wow. Was that a Malfoy I saw you hugging by the way?" he asked with a small smirk.

Rose blushed a little bit before saying "Might've been."

Albus began walking alongside his mother towards the black ministry car they would be taking home. "So how was your first year?" she asked.

Albus smiled. "Not bad...a few rough moments, but I think I'll come back next year" he said with a smile.

She wrapped her arm around him and quietly asked, "So how was it being a Slytherin?"

Albus shrugged his shoulders as they approached the car. "Not bad. Bit like being like everyone else, really" he said.

And with one last glance over his shoulder at the Hogwarts Express, he entered the car for the ride home to the Potter Mansion, already counting down the days for summer to end.

So that was the end! What did you guys think? Like it? Have a favorite scene or a character?

I hope you enjoyed my story, and please feel free to leave a comment or criticism! For those of you new readers, the sequel (and nearly all installments of the series) are posted and waiting!

Thanks for reading,

-Vekin87